

## MEET THE ARTIST: KEVIN BERLIN

By GIOVANNI ROSSI

SOCIAL LIFE PRESENTS AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW  
WITH OUR ART EDITOR KEVIN BERLIN.

Kevin Berlin's works are found in the collections of Kim Basinger, Luciano Pavarotti, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Howard Lorber, and Henry Buhl. Berlin, a Yale University alumnus, studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Shanghai Daily*, BBC Radio and over 40 television stations across the United States. Kevin Berlin's recent solo exhibitions include shows in New York, London, and Brussels.

Kevin Berlin will be represented by Vogelsang Gallery at ArtHamptons July 2-5 and Art Southampton July 9-13. The artist is represented locally by Gallery Valentine in East Hampton.

Kevin Berlin lives and works in Southampton, New York, and Florence, Italy.

**Giovanni Rossi: Explain your fascination with Nutella.**

**Kevin Berlin:** I love painting Nutella. My kitchen is filled with it. I have towers of Nutella. Limited editions from all over the world, five kilo jars, even the mini Nutellas you get from an all you can eat buffet. I love Nutella because it is a cheerful image, which helps me find balance in a not always cheerful world. You can never get bored with Nutella. There



Kevin Berlin, In studio Florence, Italy, *Nutella 640 Grams, Tower of Nutella*, oil on canvas, 2015. Photo exclusive for Social Life by Marco Carvelli.



Kevin Berlin, *Nutella 640 Grams*, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 61 in., 2015.

Kevin Berlin, *Love At First Sight*, 41 x 46 in., oil on canvas, 2015.

are endless ways to paint it. I even recently painted a quasi-religious work called the *Madonna della Nutella*. There is something universal and very democratic about Nutella. It shows no interest in social class, economic class or education. The Nutella that you and I eat is the same that is eaten by the Queen of England.

**GR:** You are probably best known for oil paintings in black and white of cocktail parties and the ballet, what does this have to do with penguins?

**KB:** There are lots of penguins in my new series. I recently found a plastic figurine inside a chocolate egg and that's how I discovered the Penguins of Madagascar. I noticed immediately how well dressed they are and that they fit perfectly with my

palette; mostly black and white with a little bit of strong color. In this case their beaks are bright yellow. I prefer black and white because I often find color is a distraction from the story I am trying to tell. By eliminating most color, the color that I do include has greater meaning. Black and white is also very attractive, even elegant, as it reminds me of classic cinema. I can't imagine a need to see Greta Garbo in anything but black and white.

**GR:** Do all of your paintings tell a story?

**KB:** Yes. Whether it's a social scene, a snob, or a woman on a cellphone, they all tell a story. Though, often I only tell the beginning of a story. Or sometimes I start in the middle. The best narrative paintings tend to ask a question, but never

provide a correct answer. Renaissance painters such as Botticelli or Giotto were master storytellers and I like to follow in their tradition. These artists allowed the viewer to participate directly in the narrative. As the viewer changes over time so will their interpretation of the painting. It's like a mathematics problem where everyone can add his or her own solution.

**GR:** I understand that you travel a lot for inspiration.

**KB:** Yes. In fact, I just got back from the Galapagos Islands. Travel has always been a way for artists to refresh their outlook on life and recharge their creative batteries. Some scientists claim there is an ancient instinctual reason for this. 10,000 years ago, if you left your cave and traveled to a new

place you better pay attention because the new place is very unfamiliar and your prehistoric brain better be extra prepared for dangers. In the same way the modern brain when it is at a new place tends to be more aware and pay more attention. So, when you travel you are more likely to notice and appreciate even the most ordinary things. The British painter William Turner, in addition to traveling far and wide filling up his sketchbooks, he even tied himself to the mast of a ship during a storm to find inspiration for his seascapes.

**GR:** With all this traveling how do you find time to paint?

**KB:** Well, the secret is you have to train everyday. An artist is a lot like an athlete, and you have to keep in shape. For

Kevin Berlin, *Mr. Right*, 41 x 46 in., oil on canvas, 2015.

example, I try and draw the nude figure at least twice a week. The figure is amongst the most challenging things to draw and if you neglect training you might lack that extra something required to succeed. Even Usain Bolt, one of the most talented athletes, with one of the best coaches in the world, wouldn't win without regular training. When starting a new series of paintings, I tend to develop the idea with sketches, then larger drawings on paper. Sometimes I take photographs for reference if the subject is something very fleeting like a moment of laughter, or in the case of *The Bastard I'll Kill Him*, the model

may be crying real tears. The large oil paintings take anywhere from a few hours to a few years. So for two or three months at a time I tend to lock myself in my studio, and try and finish 17 paintings at the same time. When the paintings are almost finished I turn them face against the wall and try not to look at them for a month or two. Often the most valuable time for a painter is when you are not painting.

**GR: You also work in sculpture and performance art.**

**KB: I have been sculpting as long as I have been painting.**



Kevin Berlin, *The Bastard I'll Kill Him*, 94 x 82 in., oil on canvas, 2001.



Kevin Berlin, *Synths*, 41 x 46 in., oil on canvas, 2006. Private collection, Maryland.

I find all mediums are closely linked. If I like the colors, or a mood, perhaps I'll paint it. If I like the form or how the subject interacts with gravity, I'll sculpt it. If I want a lot of people to see the work, bronze works well on a monumental scale. I once sculpted a 3,000 pound bronze sunflower for a garden here in the Hamptons. The head of the flower is over six feet tall and it has 89 individual petals.

**GR: And the performance art?**

**KB: I am not sure exactly why I do performance art, probably just for fun. When else do you have an excuse to body paint twelve models green, give them toy laser guns, and hang out with the Mayor at an art fair? Most of my performance art**

is created to bring attention to important social issues. I have tried to raise awareness and help save the tiger from extinction. In addition to the performances in New York, London, and Miami, I have given lectures on some strategies for tiger conservation.

**GR: You've been working with the classical ballet as a theme for more than 15 years.**

**KB: Yes. Actually my new series of paintings is called Bad Ballerinas. There are more than 20 canvases and four major sculptures in progress. I spent all of last December in Saint Petersburg, Russia working with classical dancers. When I say Bad Ballerinas I mean paintings that explore the hidden and**



Kevin Berlin, *The Lovers*, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in., 2009. Private collection, Washington D.C.

secret life of the dancers. I paint about all the things that dancers do in secret, such as drinking, or smoking. Things we all might do. I also paint about all the things that a ballerina might think about but would never do, such as jumping off a bridge, or killing her director! In 2003 I spent almost a year backstage in Russia with the legendary Kirov Ballet and gained a lot of insight into Russian culture and the story of ballet. Something that really attracted my attention was the fact that in both Russian Literature and the Ballet, nobody expects a 'happy ending.' In *Giselle*, for example, she is already in the cemetery before the first act is over. I don't have to tell you how things go for *Romeo and Juliet*. And yet, these unhappy endings seem to resonate with us all in a universal way.

**GR:** You are often seen wearing a top hat. What is the story behind the top hat?

**KB:** I got my first top hat when I was 18 years old. It was a gift from my mother and father in honor of my first major art exhibition, in the windows of Bonwit Teller on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 38th Street in New York City. I have been wearing a top hat ever since. In praise of top hats; they are always in style. They can dress you up and add a bit of Fred Astaire panache to even the most casual day. You would be amazed how many doors open if you are wearing a top hat. Even at the airport, you will never have to wait in line.

**GR:** Do you really paint with your top hat on?

**KB:** I have ruined many a fine top hat that way. I often wear a top hat when I'm home alone. They say, 'you are who you are, when nobody is looking.' I once went swimming with a top hat. Not a good idea.



Kevin Berlin, *Sleeping Beauty (Olaya Novikova)*, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in., 2006. Private Collection, Australia.