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An Artist Keeps Her Cool



Photo: Marton Perlaki. Rita Ackermann says she wants to distance herself from her early fans.

By [RUTH LA FERLA](#)

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PERCHED on a stool at her studio in Williamsburg recently, Rita Ackermann was a picture of cool anonymity. She wore a battered fatigue jacket and frayed jeans, hanks of her corn-colored hair all but obscuring her features.

But her wide-set eyes seemed to be reflected in the half-dozen works in progress on her Brooklyn walls. Spectral looking, their details swam into view, then receded, almost as if Ms. Ackermann had been trying to erase herself.

In a sense she was. Her face, stripped of makeup, bore little trace of the feline glamour that captivated her admirers in the early 1990s when she arrived in New York from her native Budapest, fueled by a drive to make her name.

Critics were quick to respond to her paintings, images of fleshy nymphets in various states of undress, lounging, sulking, twirling hoops. Bordering on pedophilia, the subject matter titillated her fans, which suited her. “I immediately received a lot of attention,” she said in her faintly accented English. “But attention was what I wanted.”

She soon gained a following not just among art-world insiders but among the fashion tribes whose enthusiasm helped ensure her place among the rising indie artists and influencers of the day, like the filmmaker Larry Clark, the late photographer [Corinne Day](#) and the actress Chloë Sevigny.

No medium or showcase was too profane for Ms. Ackermann. “The first time I encountered her work was on a T-shirt, at a downtown boutique called Liquid Sky, linked to the rave scene,” the art critic John Kelsey wrote recently. “She practiced a small-scale viral art that got everywhere, into every medium, like songs.”

Over the years Ms. Ackermann collaborated on a variety of fashion projects, creating fabrics for United Bamboo, performing in a [simulated screen test](#) for the designer Adam Kimmel, gyrating in [a fashion video](#) for her friend Kai Kühne, and working on a series of projects with Olivier Zahm of Purple, the risqué fashion magazine. She has done windows for Macy’s and even designed a lingerie line.

But that was then. These days Ms. Ackermann, 44, is bent (so she says) on distancing herself from the scenesters, hipsters and rabid fashionistas who helped put her on the map. “I don’t need that kind of attention anymore,” she said brusquely. “I don’t feel that it takes my work anywhere. Fashion is not the world I’m striving for.”

But fashion, in the broadest sense, is not through with her. To borrow a phrase from the style lexicon, Ms. Ackermann seems to be having a moment. In the last six months, she showed some of her latest works at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery in Chelsea (in a joint show with Philip Guston); had [a major exhibition](#) at the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, where she grew up; and has [a mid-career retrospective](#) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, where it will hang through May 6.

Ms. Ackermann’s anarchic imagery — a combination of drawing and painting, collage and compulsive ballpoint doodles — is also the subject of a monograph published by Rizzoli, with accompanying essays by Bonnie Clearwater, the executive director and chief curator for the Museum of Contemporary Art; Mr. Kelsey; and the filmmaker Harmony Korine, with whom Ms. Ackermann collaborated two years ago on a series of collages.

But these days, there is nothing overtly seductive or chic about her work, which hovers unsettlingly between the figurative and the abstract, not much for style-struck fans to hold on to. Not that she would want them to. “In fashion,” she said, “everything has to be so well packaged and pretty. It gives the artist less chance to experiment.”

Experiment she does, swinging among painting, drawing, photography and collage. But those seemingly random shifts have only enhanced her stature with peers. To painters, “she is the real deal,” Ms. Clearwater said, “one of the few artists who can pull from the gut and make it work.” To artists like Tracey Emin and John Currin, who collect her work, she “is a rock star,” the curator said.

In recent years Ms. Ackermann’s politically and erotically charged works have included images of society divas portrayed as monsters, talons unsheathed. Other paintings refer obliquely to the sociocultural climate she found in her adoptive country, a climate she studied detachedly, as if she had trained her microscope on some especially virulent life-form. There are snippets of car crashes, beggars and lurkers, grimacing cowboys, and scenes of mass mayhem like the Oklahoma City bombing.

“She’s not judgmental, just fascinated by American extremism in all its guises,” Ms. Clearwater said.

The America Ms. Ackermann encountered when she first arrived was, in her phrase, “a snakes’ nest of very righteous Christians.” A similar religious and nationalist fervor has lately overtaken her native Hungary, a place that in her view “has become extremely religious and pro-family,” one where “racial and nationalist issues are on the table every day.”

If some of those concerns eventually find their way into her work, the message is apt to be as opaque or contradictory as Ms. Ackermann is herself. But then she seems to revel in inconsistency. Habitually dressed in black or scarlet, she projects allure but claims she has little use for the notion of glamour. “I would leave that to the actresses,” she said.

She maintains that she has turned her back on fashion, but was quick to appear earlier this month at [Acme](#), a new downtown hot spot, mingling with the likes of Ms. Seigny and Michael Stipe, and art stars like Nate Lowman and Terence Koh while images from her recent video series, “Warfilms,” flickered on the walls. Scenes from the party ran on [Vogue.com](#), in Women’s Wear Daily and on Page Six.

An insider’s insider in the underground scene, she nonetheless clings to her outsider status.

“It gives you a certain freedom,” she said, and yes, an air of mystery. “When you are enigmatic, you are untouchable.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 10, 2012

Because of an editing error, an article last Thursday about the artist Rita Ackermann misstated the title of her recent video series. It is “Warfilms,” not “Warfilm.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/03/fashion/rita-ackermann-keeps-her-cool.html?_r=0