

Los Angeles Times

Review: Judith Bernstein's 'Birth of the Universe' a potent force

By Sharon Mizota

September 24, 2013 12:30 p.m.



Judith Bernstein's installation at the Box. (Fredrik Nilsen / The Box)

Judith Bernstein's latest paintings at the Box are like a scream that reverberates throughout the universe. That will sound like hyperbole until you see them. The septuagenarian painter, who has spent the bulk of her prolific career making searing, critical images of penises, now turns her full attention to their female counterparts, with bombastic, terrific effect.

The 18 paintings in "Birth of the Universe" all feature large, aggressive, interstellar vaginas, gnashing their teeth and enclosing (or expelling?) taut, electric blue coils. Executed with furious strokes in an eye-bending palette of hot reds, oranges and neon yellow, they tear through a miasma of stars, planets and solar flares, attended by smaller, penis-shaped craft.

The show's title may be a nod to Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting, "The Origin of the World," a then-shockingly frank portrait of female genitalia. Bernstein's paintings do the same demystifying work, but go several steps further, presenting the vagina not as a passive conduit, but as an active agent of procreative fury.

Still, the show sustains an undercurrent of ambivalence. Some images feature nooses, and there is a liberal use of a generally derogatory, four-letter term for the female genitals. The paintings are not a straightforward celebration but an acknowledgment of messy, chaotic forces.

Still, they effect a powerful reversal. In Bernstein's view, the energy driving the universe is not thrusting and phallic but devouring, revealing, actively open.

