

Big, Bigger, Biggest: Judith Bernstein Breaks Through



Installation view of "Judith Bernstein: Hard": "Horizontal Plus #3," (1975), charcoal on paper, 9 x 26 feet, courtesy the artist and The Box, Los Angeles; "Horizontal" (1973), charcoal on paper, 9 x 12.5 feet, courtesy the artist and The Box, Los Angeles; "Union Jack-Off Flag" (1967), charcoal and pastel on paper, 30 x 40 inches, courtesy the artist and The Box, Los Angeles; "Jack Off Policy" (1967), charcoal and pastel on paper, 26 x 40 inches, courtesy the artist and The Box, Los Angeles; "Fun-Gun" (1967), bullets and acrylic on distressed canvas, 57 x 60 inches, collection Karen and Paul McCarthy, Los Angeles. (All images courtesy the New Museum)

Is this Judith Bernstein's moment? With her work now on display in two New York museums, the art world is finally catching up with this uncompromising artist. And it's taken only four and a half decades.

Bernstein was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1942; her father was a schoolteacher and her mother worked as a bookkeeper. She went to Penn State, where she received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees (1964) and then to Yale, where she earned both a BFA and an MFA (1967). But unlike most of her male classmates, despite her auspicious credentials, after graduation she couldn't find a job.

In an [article](#) published in October on the *New York Observer's* Gallerist NY blog, she told Michael H. Miller:

The Connecticut College for Women offered me a salary that was \$1,000 less than a man. And they told me this! They said, "The only reason we'd interview a woman is because we want women in the class to model."

Bernstein ended up teaching part-time in high schools, moving to New York City's Lower East Side and joining the Art Workers Coalition. She also became a founding member of A.I.R., the groundbreaking women artists' cooperative gallery in SoHo.

Her lacerating drawings and collages based on men's bathroom graffiti ("Supercock," 1964-1967), which she started while at Yale as a protest against the Vietnam War, morphed in 1973 into her epic "Horizontal" scroll drawings.

One of these works, all of which feature gargantuan penis/screwdrivers rendered in a loose, gestural style that sends up both Pop Art and Action Painting, was censored from a Philadelphia show called *Women's Work—American Art 1974*. It was deemed "without redeeming social value," a.k.a. pornography.

Two charcoal "Horizontal" drawings ("Horizontal," 1973, 9 x 12.5 feet, and "Horizontal Plus #3," 1975, 9 x 26 feet) and two antiwar pieces ("Jack Off Policy" and "Union Jack-Off Flag," both 1967) take up an entire wall of the artist's solo turn at the New Museum, *Judith Bernstein: HARD*, her first one-person museum show. Two more Vietnam works are on display at the Whitney's *Sinister Pop* exhibition uptown.

These shows follow a 2008 exhibition at Mitchell Algus Gallery, *Judith Bernstein: Signature and Phallic Drawings: 1966-2008*, which was the artist's first New York gallery solo outing since the 1980s.

The Mitchell Algus show received a positive [review](#) in *The New York Times* from Holland Cotter, who noted Bernstein's relative obscurity with the sly observation:

Is Ms. Bernstein's work too funny to be fashionable? Too serious? Too political? Too sexy? Too forthright? And who is to say? When she encountered censorship in 1974, the art world protested; the names on a public letter issued in her defense were many and illustrious. Today the equivalent names flock to admire John Currin's pornography paintings. Mr. Currin's naughty pictures end up in the swankiest places; Ms. Bernstein can

barely get her foot in the art world's swinging door.

One influential insider who saw the Mitchell Albus show was the artist Paul McCarthy. According to the *Observer's* Michael H. Miller:

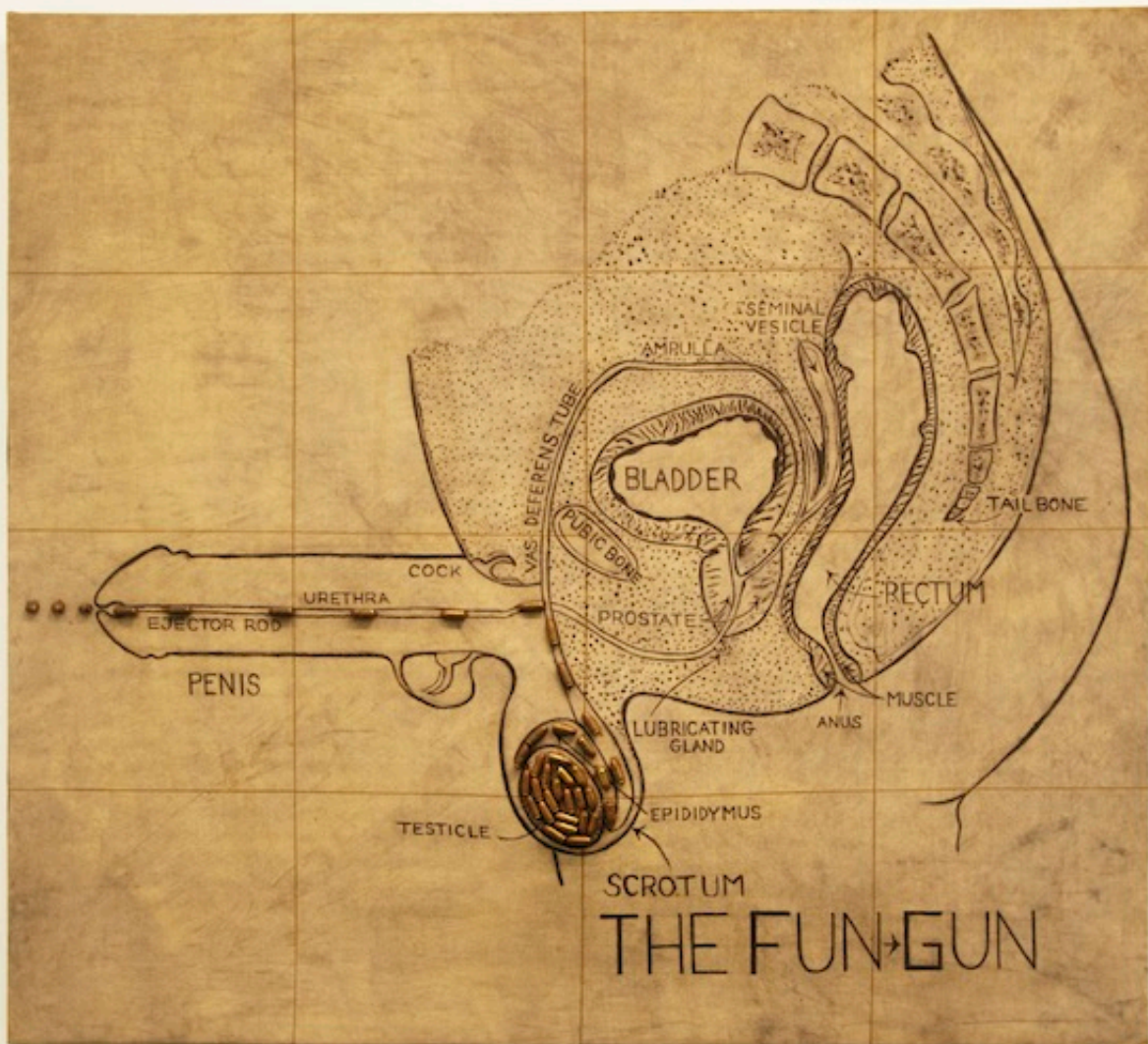
[McCarthy] showed the work to his daughter, Mara McCarthy, who runs the Box in L.A. Suddenly Ms. Bernstein, who had been absent from the mainstream for so long, had everyone's attention. Next came a show at Alex Zachary Gallery, in New York.

[...]

All of this has culminated in the mini-retrospective tucked away in the small gallery attached to the New Museum's ground floor, reintroducing the art world to one of the most frustratingly underappreciated artists—male or female, feminist or not—working today.

The New Museum show covers much of the same territory as Mitchell Albus in 2008, though updated with a raucous new painting, "Birth Of The Universe #4 (Space, Time, And Infinity)" (2012).

Bernstein has also [re-created](#) her "Signature Piece" of 1986 by painting her name in black acrylic on the glass wall separating her exhibition from the New Museum lobby, fourteen feet high and sixty-six feet across — the perfect riposte to the inflated work (and prices) of the swaggering male painters of the time.



Judith Bernstein, "Fun-Gun" (1967). Bullets and acrylic on distressed canvas, 57 x 60 inches. Collection Karen and Paul McCarthy, Los Angeles.

The showstopper, however, is "Fun-Gun" (1967), which was also in the 2008 exhibition (and lent to the retrospective from Paul McCarthy's collection). Using acrylic on bare canvas, Bernstein faithfully reproduces an anatomical drawing of the male pelvic region, but outfits the penis (erect, of course) with a hammer and trigger and a load of real ammo spiraling upward from the scrotum.

If you're looking for the last word on male aggression, I think you've found it.

Is a work like "Fun-Gun" too facetious? Too partisan? Too explicit? Too blunt? Yes, undoubtedly, and far too long on the sidelines.

Judith Bernstein: HARD continues at the New Museum (235 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through January 20, 2013.

On Friday, January 18, 2013, at 8:00 pm, the New Museum will host a *discussion* between Judith Bernstein and Paul McCarthy on the themes of violence and sexuality in their work.

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