

ARTFORUM

Judith Bernstein

THE BOX

977 Chung King Road

April 2–May 21

Judith Bernstein paints dirty. Dating from her graduate work at Yale in 1966–67, her canvases in this exhibition, featuring saturated red and yellow slogans protesting the American invasion of Southeast Asia, carry forward a little-explored pathway in postwar art. *Vietnam Salute*, 1967, is a case in point.

Emblazoned along the right half of the canvas is the phrase **BABY THE FUCKIN YOU GET AINT WORTH THE FUCKIN YOU TAKE**, while the opposite half includes a Brillo-wire wreath threaded with a strand of functional multicolor Christmas lights, all of which encircles a dense patch of globular fabric soaked in pink paint. Leg-shaped brown stains of paint extend out from either side.

Partly a vagina dentata for male-gendered military aggression and partly anticipating, in dark inversion, the famous closing to the Beatles' "The End" on *Abbey Road* ("And in the end / the love you take . . .") a couple years later, Bernstein's multimedia painting takes on the corporeal sensuousness of fluid painterly application and presses it to its limits.

More politically pointed and sexually explicit than Robert Rauschenberg's Combines, Bernstein's works have no direct analogues in the canon of post-AbEx American painting. Her use of the graffiti shares something with that of Cy Twombly, but Bernstein's scrawled phrases tend to be quoted directly from the walls of mens' rooms and consistently give the lie to gendered sexual stereotypes through grotesque quips and rhymes. I am reminded instead of the condition of painting in Western Europe after World War II for figures such as Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, and Asger Jorn, artists whose works speak to being seduced by paint but disgusted by its abuses. Bernstein's paintings similarly draw us in, close to the surface, close enough to feel the warmth being emitted by glowing lightbulbs "celebrating" Christmas in Vietnam. It is here that her message is most potent.

— James Nisbet



Judith Bernstein, *Vietnam Salute*, 1967, mixed media on canvas, 96 x 72".