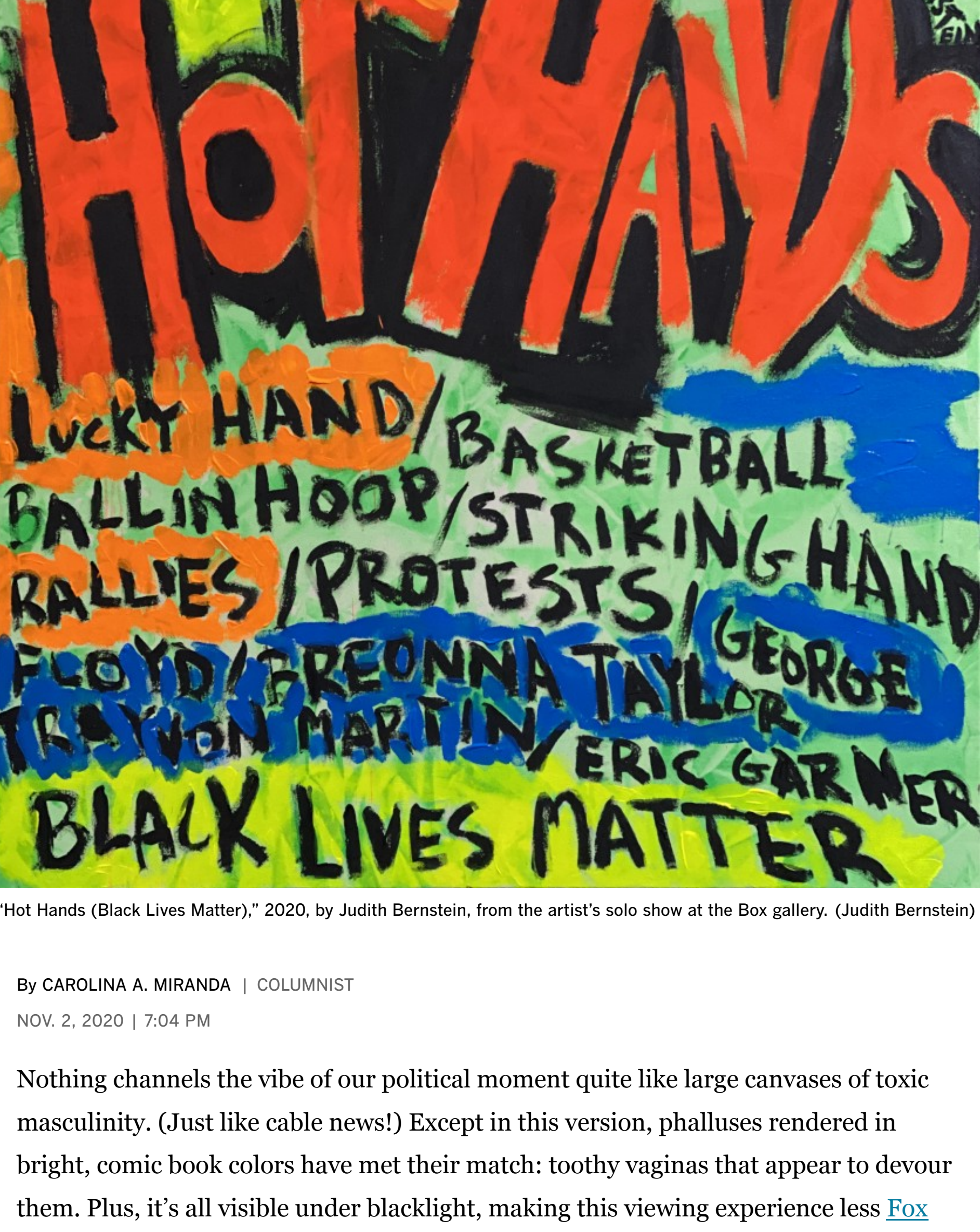


Column: Feeling Election 2020 anxiety? Tap into painter Judith Bernstein’s lady rage



"Hot Hands (Black Lives Matter)," 2020, by Judith Bernstein, from the artist's solo show at the Box gallery. (Judith Bernstein)

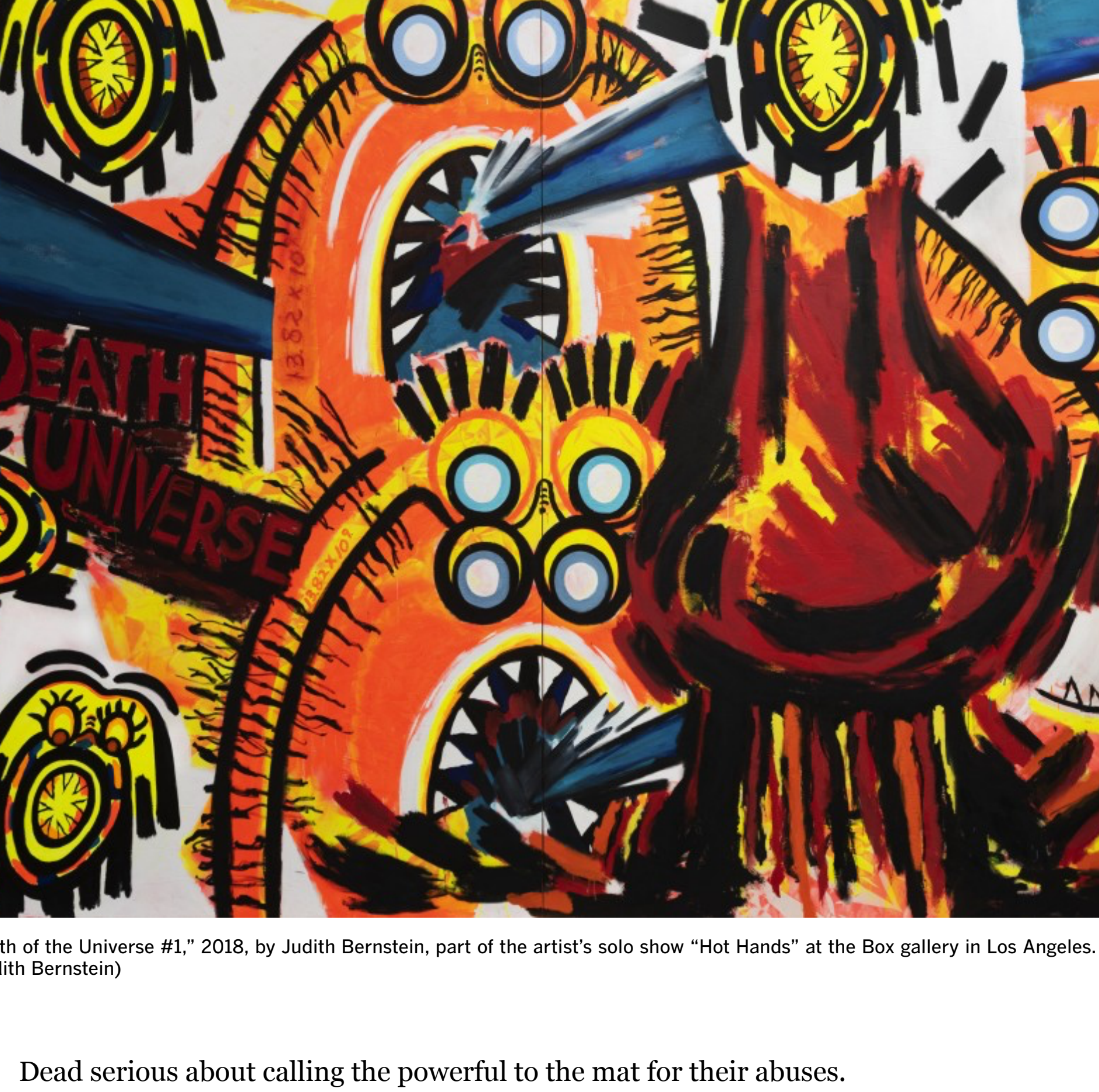
By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA | COLUMNIST
NOV. 2, 2020 | 7:04 PM

Nothing channels the vibe of our political moment quite like large canvases of toxic masculinity. (Just like cable news!) Except in this version, phalluses rendered in bright, comic book colors have met their match: toothy vaginas that appear to devour them. Plus, it's all visible under blacklight, making this viewing experience less [Fox News](#) and more vertiginous funhouse of pesky dong.

Welcome to "Hot Hands," Judith Bernstein's bawdy, funny, righteously exasperated solo exhibition at the Box gallery in downtown Los Angeles. It's all the steroid madness of our political system, but captured through a lens of acidic lady rage.

And in the middle of an election that has left me despondent (seriously, how much cash should I be stockpiling for [the downfall of democracy?](#)), it feels like a call to arms — one that involves plenty of angrily scrawled genitals and buckets of bathroom humor. When our looming conflict erupts, I will fight in the Army of Judith Bernstein.

As Bernstein told the New York Times Style Magazine during [a studio visit](#) in 2017: "My work is sexual. My work is political. And my work is feminist. It has visual impact. It's fun. But it's dead serious."

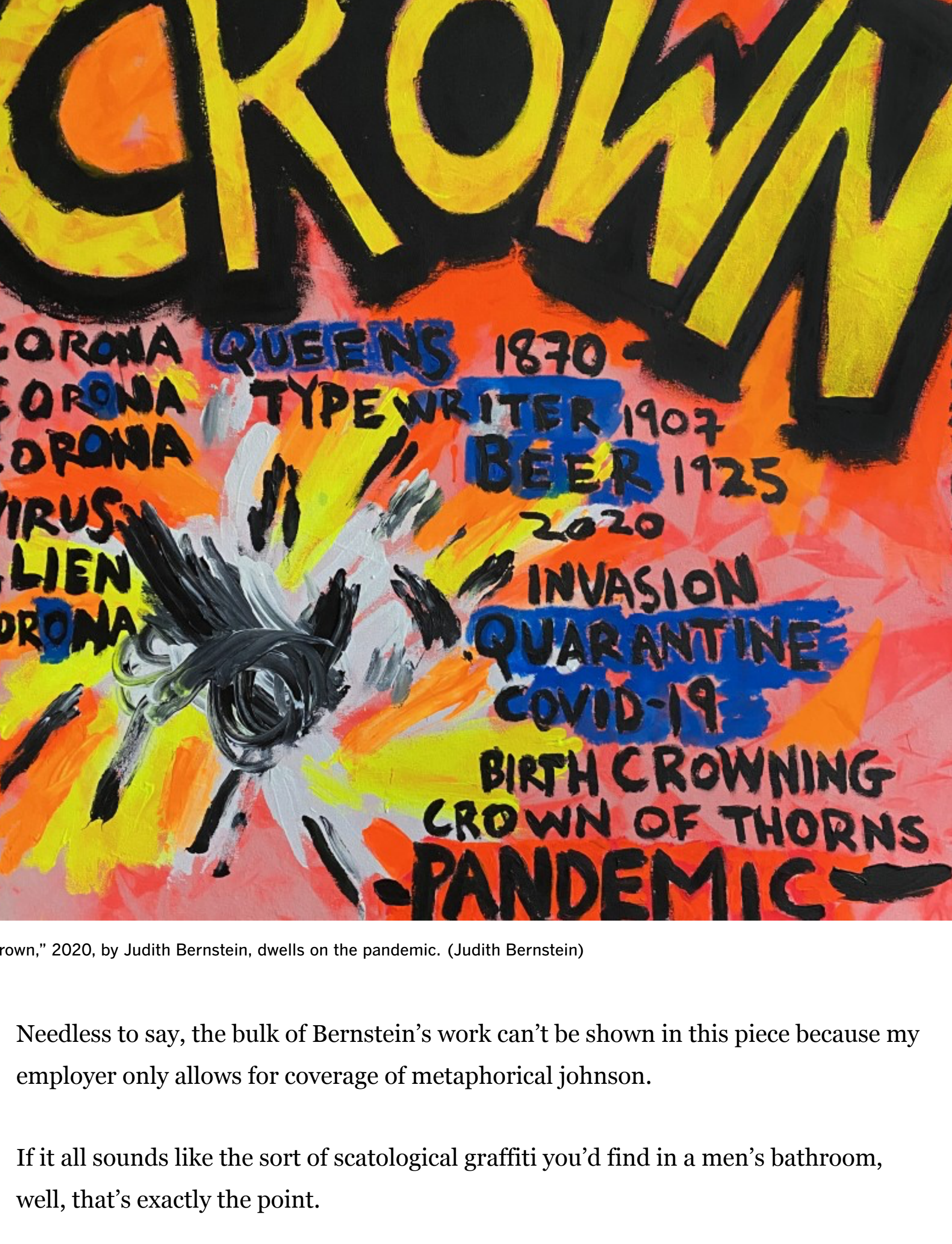


"Death of the Universe #1," 2018, by Judith Bernstein, part of the artist's solo show "Hot Hands" at the Box gallery in Los Angeles. (Judith Bernstein)

Dead serious about calling the powerful to the mat for their abuses.

"Hot Hands" brings together recent works from various series by the artist, including [her anti-Donald Trump paintings](#), made in the first few years of the Trump administration, which feature a presidential figure called "Trumpenschlong" made out of male genitalia, at times in penile one-upmanship with Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un.

There is new work too. Such as a painting that features a field of battling pudenda in screaming shades of crimson red, blue and orange under the word "GASLIGHTING" rendered with fluorescent yellow paint in all caps. Another canvas, "Crown," painted this year, features various plays on the word "crown" and the related "corona." It's the visual equivalent of a panicked Cardi B shouting ["Coronavirus! S— is real!"](#)



"Crown," 2020, by Judith Bernstein, dwells on the pandemic. (Judith Bernstein)

Needless to say, the bulk of Bernstein's work can't be shown in this piece because my employer only allows for coverage of metaphorical johnson.

If it all sounds like the sort of scatological graffiti you'd find in a men's bathroom, well, that's exactly the point.

Bernstein, who was born in New Jersey but has lived in New York's Chinatown for more than half a century, became inspired by the possibility of bathroom graffiti as a student at Yale University in the 1960s. In 1967, she read [a story](#) in the New York Times that noted that the title of Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" came from a phrase he found on the walls of a pub bathroom.

"Graffiti, you think, by the way, is actually very superficial — it's not," Bernstein once told [Artforum](#). "It comes from a subtext. It comes from the inner subconscious."

Graffiti also serves as an important voice for those who may not have access to official platforms. (For example: How do scholars know what women in ancient Rome may have been thinking about their condition? The answer partly lies in [graffiti](#).)

For Bernstein, the ethos of graffiti, with its immediacy and its crude declarations, often in shouty capital letters and featuring coarse drawings of male members, became fundamental to her work.

A series of anti-Vietnam War paintings from the 1960s feature male members amid inappropriate-to-print graffiti critiquing Uncle Sam and the war. She created a figure of a penis-headed businessman she dubbed "Cockman," who served as a stand-in for corporate and political power. She began signing her name in large, hastily scrawled letters — in the same unstylized way you might carve your name into a bathroom stall. (Some of these early works were [shown at the Box](#) in 2011)

In the 1970s, Bernstein followed up with a series of expressionistic [charcoal drawings of screws](#) that sexualized, in aggressive ways, that common piece of household hardware. The now-defunct Boyle Heights gallery [Venus](#) featured a massive mural of one of these on the exterior of its building in a 2017 show whose name I can't reprint (unless, perhaps, Trump is caught on tape saying it).

At a time in which our political system has been relentlessly debased by a president who has used his position to [sustain his hotel properties](#), whose children [have made millions overseas](#) as he attacks the business ethics of his opponent's son, and who for weeks has been actively working to [undermine the democratic process](#), Bernstein's paintings feel like the needed counter.

They are an artistic middle finger, a deep-throated laugh in the face of authoritarian power grabs and ultimately a rallying cry — that come what may, we ain't going quietly.

Judith Bernstein — "Hot Hands"

Where: The Box, 805 Traction Ave., Los Angeles

When: Through Dec. 19, timed visits are by appointment via the website

Info: [theboxla.com](#)

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Carolina A. Miranda is a Los Angeles Times columnist covering culture, with a focus on art and architecture.