

art agenda

by SABRINA TARASOFF
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Judith Bernstein's "Cock in the Box"

THE BOX, Los Angeles

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There is no image more prescient of modern displays of masculinity and status than Judith Bernstein's drawing *COCK IN THE BOX* (1966), inspired by a history of Vietnam-era bathroom-stall graffiti. Whether those lewd sketches were made to parody politics in wartime, as comic relief for those on the john, for camaraderie, or to alleviate boredom, the big boy's room provided a space to think patriotism through masculinity. Perhaps Lyndon B. Johnson's characterization of the penis as a tool to leverage force was an influence: one anecdote has the president, plagued by reporters asking why the United States was in Vietnam, unzipping his pants, pulling out his flaccid cock and saying: "This is why!" No more poignant example of power mislaid.

Such sentiments surely lingered on the mind of Judith Bernstein as she drew *COCK IN THE BOX* midway through Johnson's six years in power as US president. The charcoal and pastel drawing opens her exhibition at Los Angeles's appropriately named The Box, setting a tone of equivocation between politics and entertainment—a timely commentary considering the farcical climate of the United States's incipient despotism. The sketch is a smudged pastel of a sweetly pink dick sprung from a star-spangled jack-in-the-box. Beneath a trajectory of cum culminating in a congratulatory star are the scratchy words: "America's Number 1 Toy!" (Exclamation mark mine.) Bernstein hones in on the entertainment value of the phallus as a political subject, its sudden appearance—whether as punchline, hidden in the performative language of "small hands," or etched into a bathroom wall—stunning audience into laughter.

The modern equivalent and big picture "box" is the digital device, "America's Number 1 Toy." The television, smartphone, and internet pose the same stunned distance from actual politics by allowing us to indulge in fantasy, intrigue, and the performance of public affairs. Recent history is filled with men who have seen their dicks pop up in proverbial boxes: Bill Clinton, Eliot



Spitzer, Anthony Weiner, or anyone who has dabbled in the unsolicited “dick pic” and had the misfortune to see it mediated. The problem lies not only in the conflation of personal and public activities, but the continuation of the phallus as a point of reference for political commentary. The effect is to uphold a system of reproduction focused on masculinity, firstly by putting a guy’s cock in the news and secondly by allowing it to have a bearing on the sociopolitical situation.



Bernstein’s use of the helical language of the screw (women being screwed, screwing up a nation) drills into the fact of masculinity as a constituent of power. Her “Screw” drawings render the simple machines as characters posed in “stalls,” such as in *Hardware #1, #5, and #6* (all 1970) or *Screws* (1968.) These are almost jovial, the messy charcoal renderings alluding to both screws and dicks but never quite nailing either one. In these drawings, Bernstein lays out a study in dickness, being dick, dickhood. The various alignments—ordered in size, one singular, others in groupuscules of three or four—engage in witty rapport on the measures attached by men to their cocks. The existence of cocks and how they can be grouped, their *raison d’être*, hierarchies, and social relations are caricatured in a simple visual pun. It’s a dick ontology for dummies, but one that benefits from being instilled into the social consciousness.



As with Weiner, arguably Clinton, definitely Justin Bieber, the slip of the cock into a box and its consequent ejection into the public points to a narcissistic attachment to masculinity and social standing. The round canvas of *Circle Screw* (1970) is mostly blacked out by the top of a screw seen from above, procuring that fateful feeling of staring into a dick head-on and knowing you’ll be fucked. No doubt that view can incite mixed feelings.



On the opposite wall hangs Bernstein’s “Anthuriums” series (1981-84). These oil paintings are geometric abstractions of two arcing shapes, colorfully repeated eighteen times over. The forms are borrowed from anthurium plants and cacti, both genderless but suggestively shaped, with titles referring to their colors (such as *Anthurium Black Peach Yellow and Red*, 1981) in contrast to the stern blacks of the charcoals. The fluid and raucous vocabulary of the “Anthuriums” asks questions about gender and power, as does the adjacent painting *Birth of the Universe: The Voyeurs* (2014). Sprinkled in the cartoonish yellows, blues, and oranges of a big bang, it sports a centrifugal vagina surrounded by free-floating boners. It solicits sex whilst continuing the repartee of the “Anthuriums”: the female as center of social reproduction, the continuum of life.





Writing in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in 2013, Michelle Chihara considered the subject of dicks-in-boxes with reference to an episode of the HBO series “Game of Thrones.”⁽¹⁾ Having subjected nobleman Theon Greyjoy to a penectomy, the assaulter mails the severed body part to Greyjoy’s father as a gesture of power: the severance and its literal placement in a box prompts Greyjoy’s sister to mobilize her own army to rescue her emasculated sibling. This exhibition stimulates a similar response by considering the dick as a cultural force. In the socio-historical context of *COCK IN THE BOX* and Lyndon B. Johnson, we might say that the national obsession with the male member as symbol of status provoked a new wave of feminists into action. They demonstrated that the dick does not embody identity, self-worth, or—least of all—power.

(1) Michelle Chihara, “Being Theon Greyjoy, or Why This Dick in a Box Matters,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (October 2013):<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/being-theon-greyjoy-or-why-this-dick-in-a-box-matters/>

Sabrina Tarasoff is a curator and writer based in Los Angeles.

