

Judith Bernstein

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View of "Judith Bernstein: Rising," 2014.

For the past five decades, New York artist Judith Bernstein has used painting as a vehicle for often shocking, sometimes erotic, always provocative satires of masculine, AbEx excess. The works in her "Fuck Vietnam" series turned graffiti from a men's bathroom into powerful antiwar statements. Now, with her latest "BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE" paintings, Bernstein places female genitalia at the center of giant Day-Glo canvases. "Judith Bernstein: Rising," which features newly commissioned variations on her signature themes, runs from July 5 to August 24, 2014 at Studio Voltaire in London.

STUDIO VOLTAIRE is a gallery repurposed from a traditional Protestant church. I couldn't ignore that fact when planning this show, which feels both spiritual and meditative. There's a beautiful, large alcove at the head of the chapel, where I will put a *BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE* painting, depicting the cosmic fluorescent cunt at the beginning of it all—including the double helix and the Big Bang. My images of active cunts have been likened to the iconic images of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the sense that they are

large, glowing, mystical presences. The cunt is the mother and the source of the universe—not unlike the Madonna figure. Along the sides of the chapel there are rafters that come down and divide the walls evenly—to perfectly house my large vertical phalluses, my screw drawings, like a procession, like marching soldiers going up to the altar.

I didn't realize how humorous my work was until I went back to the old antiwar pieces from the 1960s. The screws, the giant phallic charcoal drawings that I made starting in the early '70s, are a humorous idea, but the end result is extremely heavy—it doesn't have the humor and the lightness that some of my other work has. This latest work was wonderful because I went from a black and white palette to an explosion of colorful energy like the Big Bang. Adding color created an extraordinary explosion, and it was great to make that shift, very liberating. There's anger in my work, but there is also a lot of play in it, and raw humor. Humor and laughter are cathartic in the way that ejaculation is cathartic.

I'm interested in the vagina being the birth source. That needs to be supremely valued. The result has been this large body of work focusing on the origin of existence—our beginning and our journey. Existential contemplation is very much a part of that. In the *BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE* paintings, I'm making the connection between our relationships to space, time, and infinity. I've incorporated numbers that deal with the age of the universe as well as numbers that are personal to me. I put down 1942 because I was born in 1942; eighteen is kind of superstitious, Jewish people like it as good luck; fourteen, I was born on October 14, 1942; sixty-seven is when I graduated from Yale; seventy-one is how old I am now; and sixty-nine—well, that's an old standard, and it always works, by the way.

--- As told to Travis Diehl

