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Review: Judith Bernstein Weaves Feminist Messages

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ART & DESIGN

Judith Bernstein's "Birth of the Universe #4." CreditCourtesy of the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Judith Bernstein's art has never taken any prisoners. In the early 1970s, she satirized male domination and its failings with wall-size drawings of round-headed screws. They were rendered in hefty strokes of charcoal that gave them both hair and rotary motion. They were unforgettable images — cartoonish one-liners perhaps, but expressing a fury that many women felt. They became an indelible part of the history of feminist art.

Some 40 years later, Ms. Bernstein has taken up oil and canvas, and is still pressing buttons. Now she mines the territory shared by Expressionist painting, political posters and graffiti. "Voyeur" — this show's title — implies turned tables.

While continuing her use of genitalia-based imagery, she now suggests that men are mere witnesses to the explosive ascendance of female ovoids and spheres. Rendered in loose, fast brushwork and hot pulsating fluorescents balanced by blacks and deep blues, these shapes usually number from two to four. Sometimes titled "Birth of the Universe," they recast Gustave Courbet's famous painting of a naked woman's pelvis — "The Origin of the World" (1866) — as a cataclysm of interplanetary proportions.

Female vulvas masquerade as flaming orbs and screaming triumphant faces, sometimes with sharp teeth. They are flanked and sometimes attacked by smaller penile forms that also double as eyes agog at what they see.

Scrawled vulgarities enhance the confrontational mood. Ms. Bernstein may be parodying Abstract Expressionism. More interesting: She seems to be melding the visual power of American modernists like Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe with a sideways glance at Charles Demuth's "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold." But most interesting by far: This artist is 72 and doing her best work yet, and she has lots of painterly talent to explore.

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