

Judith Bernstein: Rising



Judith Bernstein 'Rising' 2014. A Studio Voltaire Commission, courtesy of the artist and The Box, Los Angeles. Photo: Andy Keate

Judith Bernstein: Rising *Review by Rye Holmboe*

On the far wall of Studio Voltaire's main exhibition space hangs 'Golden Birth of the Universe' (2014), a large-scale painting by the American artist Judith Bernstein (b.1942). Blood red labia stretch open to reveal a fluorescent yellow cavity and a bright blue spiral. Two white penises ejaculate into the orifice, and it is out of this colourful admixture that the entire universe is born.

The reference here is to Gustave Courbet's 'The Origin of the World' (1866), a painting that provoked a scandal in its own time because of its refusal to idealise the female form. For Courbet, humanity was a thoroughly maculate conception. Bernstein's own interpretation takes on cosmic dimensions and is both more menacing and more humorous. The labia have sharp teeth, while the ejaculating penises double up as a pair of eyes. It quickly becomes apparent that 'Golden Birth of the Universe' is a portrait of sorts, and if any doubt remains, a caption on the left hand side of the canvas reads: "cuntface". Instead of Courbet's naturalistic vision of the world,

moreover, in Bernstein's work one encounters a visually arresting combination of vulgarity, spiritualism and psychedelia, the last two qualities probably owing their existence to the dubious New Age philosophies prevalent today.

Hung on the two sides of the room are five large-scale charcoal drawings. Rendered in an expressionistic style, each depicts an oversized black penis in the shape of a screw (an amusing visual pun as subtle as the caption mentioned above). Under Studio Voltaire's vaulted ceiling, they come to resemble the iconic images encountered in a church, there to venerate the 'Golden Birth of the Universe', like you, the unwitting spectator. These charcoal drawings look back to notorious works Bernstein produced in the 1970s when the artist, a feminist activist and then member of the Guerrilla Girls, set out to explore the iconography of the phallus and its symbolic function. At the time Abstract Expressionism was in full swing, and it is difficult not to see Bernstein's expressive, gestural style as a parodic response to the masculinist discourse associated with this artistic movement, where violent splatters of paint came to be synonymous with male ejaculation.

Yet it is perhaps for this reason that Bernstein's drawings have lost some of their spunk, so to speak. An exhausted symbol has been rehashed and, today, hangs limp. It is certainly true that patriarchy has not left us, yet to reduce the entire universe to one basic question is hardly illuminating, let alone critical. That similar works were censored in 1974 only adds to the sense of their present ineffectiveness. The charcoal drawings displayed at Studio Voltaire simply remind us that the controversies of yesterday's artworld are the boon of today's.

The same could be said for 'Golden Birth of the Universe', were it not for the fact that this last work cannot be understood as a simplistic celebration of femininity, or indeed of the role of female genitalia. Like the only other painting in the show, which deploys a comparable iconography, with the difference that the fluorescent paint shines brightly because the work has been displayed in a darkened room, 'Golden Birth of the Universe' casts the position of woman and the feminine into doubt. In Bernstein's own words, the paintings in this series embody "the big bang of the feminine", yet they are also representations of "the angry cunt, the rage of the woman (...), rage at the growing power of women, rage in general." It is the ambiguity of this rage that Bernstein's paintings capture so powerfully. Whether it is subversive or impotent remains, to my mind, a moot point.

