VULTURE
DEVOURING CULTURE

Judith Bernstein, an Art Star at Last at 72, Has Never Been Afraid of Dirty Words

By **Julie L. Belcove**

In a fifth-floor Chinatown walk-up, where the landlord evidently doesn't believe in replacing burned-out lightbulbs in the staircase, the artist Judith Bernstein has been resolutely doing her thing since 1967. On a cool spring day, the 72-year-old Bernstein, clad all in black, her hair in a messy ponytail, looks like she could be your slightly madcap New Jersey nana. But then she opens her mouth and starts reminiscing about her days at Yale in the '60s, where playwright John Guare and other male friends from the drama program schooled her in the English language's rich array of vulgarities.

"They would tell me dick, prick, cock. Let me tell you, it was an eye-opener," she says, punctuating every sentence with a cacklelike laugh. The vocabulary lesson was followed by a visual one: The guys stood guard while she checked out the men's room's crude graffiti. "I had to do research. I felt that while you're defecating, you're also going into your subconscious. I thought it was an interesting connection — to defecate and then to just write something that comes to your head."

Her own artwork — which, she says, had always revealed her "need to scream what I wanted to say so people would hear" — was soon strewn with phalluses and dirty language. At the intersection of Pop, feminism, and protest art, the in-your-face work was aimed primarily at U.S. policy in Vietnam. "Baby the fucking you get ain't worth the fucking you take," read one canvas, while a 1967 drawing of an American flag with two crossed phalluses over the stars was titled *Union Jack-Off Flag*. Kodak refused to reproduce her slides; a piece was censored from a New Haven exhibit.

By the early ’70s, she was making 15-foot-tall “very hairy and fetishy” charcoal hybrids of penises and screws, a play on “screwing,” as in fornication, and “getting screwed,” as in being mistreated. “The idea is funny, but the execution was very raw,” she says. “They were very warlike and missilelike and ominous.”

The New York art world was hard to crack for any woman, let alone a smart-mouth like Bernstein. “I don’t know how seriously they took you, but they didn’t laugh in your face,” she says. “I think they weren’t open to my own aesthetic. They weren’t open to women, frankly. At that time, you had Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson — I’ll have to think about others. They were much more conservative. They were with the guys. The aesthetic was a variant on the men.”

Bernstein joined with several other women to found the feminist A.I.R. Gallery and had a solo show there in 1973. The following year, though, one of her “Screw” drawings, *Horizontal*, was compared to pornography and pulled from a Philadelphia group show featuring women artists. Bernstein’s career took 35 years to fully recover. She wasn’t even able to land a tenured faculty post — “My personality was really too explosive,” she says — and subsisted instead on adjunct jobs, at one point teaching five courses at four schools. Still, she refused to tame her art; she continued to paint and draw daily, stashing her output to the point of hoarding in the studio she shares with two cats.

But since 2008, when the risk-taking gallerist Mitchell Algus gave her a solo show, Bernstein has emerged from art-world exile to revel in a glowing reconsideration of her fiercely feminist, outrageously comical oeuvre. The New Museum gave her a mini-retrospective in 2012, for which she scrawled her name on a glass wall from floor to ceiling. “It’s about ego, male posturing, and also my own ego,” she says. The new Whitney Museum of American Art put *Vietnam Garden*, a 1967 antiwar drawing of phalluses as tombstones, with steel wool for pubic hair and American flags sticking out of the tips, in its acclaimed inaugural exhibition, now on view. Bernstein also has a slew of upcoming projects, including Art Basel’s Feature curated sector in June. And, for the first time, there’s a market for her work: One prominent collector-dealer couple snapped up every painting in a recent show except one, which the artist Paul McCarthy bought for himself.

In her latest solo turn, opening at Mary Boone Gallery on Fifth Avenue May 7, Bernstein unleashes towering fluorescent and oil paintings of vaginas in garish hues, whimsically caricatured as faces with wide-open, pointy-teeth-filled mouths and “cockeyes,” as she calls the protruding ocular penises. (The Box L.A. will show her at Frieze New York next week, too.) She howls with laughter at the thought of the scores of other “Judith Bernsteins” out there who Google “themselves” only to find her raunchy depictions of dancing phalluses and screaming vaginas.

Bernstein spoke to SEEN about irate vaginas, hanging on through the lean years, and the last word that cannot be spoken.

You're best known for painting penises. Why did you turn to the vagina, or, as you call it, the "angry cunt"?
I had hit a brick wall to some extent with the "Screw" drawings. I wasn't really sure how I could get into doing the vagina. I thought that many times it's too passive for my own energy and sensibility and my own rage and quirkiness. I was always thinking that women as well as men romanticize the female genitalia, and really, women have a lot of anger and a lot of rage. I know my mother had a lot of anger and a lot of rage, and a lot of the feminist groups I was involved with had a lot of anger and a lot of rage. I used that. I didn't want to sentimentalize it. I also liked the metaphor of the black hole and using the universe as a metaphor for the relationship between men and women, and the birth as big bang. I just love the explosive energy — it's almost like an ejaculation. Humor and laughter is like an ejaculation, too.

You call these paintings "Cuntfaces." The C-word feels like the last taboo of sexual slang.
That's why I like to use it. I like to rub it in. You actually take the rawness away by using it a lot. There are so many words we couldn't use years ago. Now no one shrinks when you say *fuck*. You have it as general conversation.

You've used a lot of numbers in these paintings.
Most of the time, I use the age of the universe, which is 13.82 times 10 to the 9th. A lot of them are 18, which is good luck for Jews, and I use 69, which always works, and the year I was born, which is 1942. I like the way the numbers look visually, and they're like clocks. I'm also thinking of my own mortality, in terms of the clock. Now I'm 72, so I have 72 in them. I haven't been hiding my age.

What else are you showing at Mary Boone?
The "Dick in the Heads." These are drawings that I love. They all have these great faces — they look surprised or whatever. They have a phallus coming out of their head.

Because men think with their penises?
Exactly. Well, also, your sexuality is in your head.

Your use of the phallus seems to be as much or more about testosterone-fueled militarism than about sex or the male gaze.
Absolutely, 100 percent. It was definitely about war and observing the guys. When you see the work, you really think of the aggression and the horror of war.

Tell me about making *Fun-Gun*, your 1967 anatomical image of a penis that doubles as a pistol shooting bullets.
I want to tell you something: I was absolutely crazy. I went down the street to an ammunition place. I said, "I need bullets about this size [holding up her fingers]." He said, "Well what kind of gun do you have?" I said, "I don't have a gun. I need it for a painting." He said, "Do you do flowers?"

I actually hammered bullets — 45 caliber — to flatten them on one side so I could epoxy them to the canvas. But I could have lost my hand! It's live ammunition — it could have exploded! I did actually think that was a possibility. I'm just fearless with my own work. I was crazy, that's what I'm saying.

What's great about it is that it's shaped like a penis, then it has a trigger. It has an ejaculation — I put in the scrotum all these bullets. It has reverberations about fun and war and masculinity. Everyone loves that painting. Paul McCarthy owns it.

How was your work received at Yale?
I think that they were kind of flummoxed. They thought it was interesting but didn't really know how to take it. I remember Jack Tworkov, who was the head of the department at that time [and a noted Abstract Expressionist], he said, "I don't really understand. All the other students, they use art from the period that we're in right now" — it was like Frank Stella and Abstract Expressionists — "and move from there. But you just go out on your own." But he said it in a way that was very negative. It wasn't positive that you could find your own voice at a younger time and be able to keep mining that. I always did what I wanted. I didn't always get what I wanted as a result, but I was independent.

There's a 21-year gap between solo exhibitions on your CV. I assume you weren't selling much work?
I did two drawings on the wall for [artist] Bill Copley, who paid me, and he gave me a bonus. I think I asked him for $2,500 for both of them, and he gave me $3,000 because he couldn't believe how much work I was putting into them. I was not selling. I would sell one piece in five years. Also, the prices were so low. I sold a print to the Modern, a flocked cock, by the way, and the price was $125 and they wanted a discount. I said, "How much do you usually get?" She said, "10 or 20 percent." I said, "I'll just give 10."

I got enough from teaching, but not really enough. I have very low rent. I didn't feel deprived, to be honest. I was living the life I wanted — I wanted to be in New York. I had some feminist support, not completely, because there were a lot of feminists who did not like my work because they felt it was not self-referential, which they felt was the feminist way to go.

Did you get discouraged?
Oh God, oh God. I was depressed. I was never resentful of my friends getting things, never, because I felt they deserved it. I just felt I was very much overlooked. And somehow, I thought there would be some equity in this system, but then after a while I thought, *Maybe I'm delusional.* My fear was that I would die and everything would be thrown out — your life is erased.

In those fallow years, did you think about doing something else?
Can I tell you something? I was thinking about doing stand-up comedy. I'm serious. I'm not kidding. I have a natural sense of humor. You could wake me up in the middle of the night and I'd be funny. Do you know Mo Rocca? I did a couple of things with him. One video is "Cats on Drugs" and the other is "Cat Lady of the Month." He just came down and fed me lines and I said whatever I wanted.

Do you feel vindicated now?
I do. I am liberated. Now when I do something, I can get it shown. It doesn't go into storage. I am so thrilled. And if it's unseemly, the hell with that. I have no shame, by the way.