

Judith Bernstein

Studio Voltaire

The cross, held Adolf Loos in his 1908 essay ‘Ornament and Crime’, is ‘erotic in origin’: its horizontal dash ‘the prone woman’; its vertical ‘the man penetrating her’. As if in riposte, in the main gallery of Studio Voltaire – a former Methodist chapel – Judith Bernstein erected an alternate altarpiece. At the heart of *Golden Birth of the Universe* (all works 2014) are meaty pink and brown labia stretched into a wide mouth, lined with shark’s teeth, into which two turgid penises slide from either side, their tips forming eyes. Below, a beard of fibrous strokes flow towards a neck and shoulders encrusted as if barnacled, either side of which two smaller faces composed of hairy cock-and-balls float sub-aquatically, like cartoon jellyfish. Behind, a field of gold is broken by patches of celestial blue, studded with Day-Glo stars. In one corner, the image is scratchily labelled ‘CUNTFACE’.

Here, then, is the Big Bang reimagined as *bukkake* – a primordial soup of bodily fluids, the universe awash with fecund cosmic gunk. While Bernstein has been playing since the 1960s with the articulation of faces through anatomy, like a slapdash Archimboldo, this theme arose specifically in the paintings shown at LA’s The Box last year under the title the ‘Birth of the Universe’. Alluding, perhaps, to Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World, 1866), the series eschewed that work’s romanticism in favour of agitated confrontations between cockmen and cuntfaces, the pulsing energy of their lines attempting to convey the vertigo of the metrically expanding universe. (The same concept was conveyed by the title of the Studio Voltaire exhibition: ‘Rising’.)

Numbers are doodled about *Golden Birth* and, while making references both personal (Bernstein’s age) and arcane (the numeric value of the Hebrew letters that spell *chai*, ‘life’), they nod towards the arbitrariness of measurement systems in the face of galactic vastness. In the group show ‘Keep Your Timber Limber’ at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts last year, Bernstein paired a giant drawing of a phallus with the numbers of US casualties from the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Compared to the chilling concreteness of those

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By *Matthew McLean*



Judith Bernstein, ‘Rising’, 2014, installation view

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sums, the equation for the age of the universe given here is vague, incomprehensible. The number painted largest is a giant 69, coiling between the jaws of the 'CUNTFACE' like an unspooled ouroboros. In a recent interview, Bernstein called 69 a number that 'always works': rather than the active/passive dichotomy of Loos's cross, it seems to symbolize a particularly egalitarian form of carnal union, a sexual position that involves a mirroring of roles.

It makes sense, then, that despite the distended flesh and the mythical, man-baiting vagina dentata, the tone of this work is not one of rousing antagonism but of mystical tranquillity. In part, this results from the artist's technique: though occasionally animated with passages worked anxiously by hand, there is broad calm surety in the way in which the surface of the painting (some 30 square metres) is divided up and filled with hypnotic, throbbing colour – most eye-catchingly, the bands of fluorescent orange and yellow within the mouth which shift, with each look, from lurid to exquisite and back again.

The five austere monochrome vertical Screws in charcoal and chalk on linen, which hung in alcoves along the chapel walls in a kind of obeisant procession to *Golden Birth*, are iterations of Bernstein's best-known motif. These have largely been read as burlesques of a male fantasy of genital power, yet at Studio Voltaire they looked neither parodic nor threatening. Instead, with their unruly clumps of hair (evoking, oddly, Bernstein's own famously frizzy locks) they convey a wild beauty – the shaggy nobility of an Old Testament prophet, clad in sheepskin.

This seems a far remove from the overtly feminist antipathy of Bernstein's earlier tropes – say, the phallus-as-firearm *Fun-Gun* (1967). Indeed, for an artist whose political acuity, as well as influence, is undeniable there seems pointedly little manifesto to 'Rising'. (Bernstein was a founding member of New York's A.I.R. Gallery and a Guerrilla Girls-collaborator; in 1974 her work was censored from the exhibition 'FOCUS – Women's work – American Art' at the Museum of the Philadelphia Civic Center on account of its explicit content.) Despite, or perhaps because of, its suck-it-and-see-syncretism – astrophysics alongside the Virgin of Guadalupe – Bernstein's cult of the 'active cunt' seems, ultimately, something to be felt, rather than figured out.

Providing an exercise in comparative cosmology, the week that 'Rising' opened also saw the London premiere of Matthew Barney's operatic film *RIVER OF FUNDAMENT* (2014). In Barney's re-casting of ancient Egyptian myth, the goddesses Isis and Nephthys (in the form of two naked

attractive pregnant women) magically resurrect their brother Osiris by way of a make-out session involving a sex act with a faeces-clad cigar. Compared to Barney's impenetrable drama, the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am literalism of Bernstein's mythologizing will never, for all the fluency of her handling, fully avoid the charge of unsophistication. She is, after all, an artist who took early inspiration from graffiti in the Yale toilets. Loos wrote in 1908 that, 'a culture can be assessed by the extent to which its lavatory walls are smeared'; between Barney and Bernstein, I know which symbols I'd rather see scrawled in public.

Matthew McLean

Frieze

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270