

# Sweating Blood

Painting  
By Cindy Rehm  
17 January 2013

Last weekend, a large crowd turned out for the opportunity to hear art luminaries, Barbara T. Smith, Carolee Schneemann, Judith Bernstein, Theo Altenburg (artist and long time friend of Otto Muehl) and Paul McCarthy speak on the topic of painting. The panel was presented in conjunction with the exhibit *Painting* and was moderated by Principal/Curator of The Box, Mara McCarthy.



Installation view of *Painting*, The Box 2012, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

The show *Painting* is an odd mix of works, many of which were created in the 70s. The show, conceived by Paul McCarthy and his curator daughter Mara sought to challenge traditional notions of painting and includes artists who have maintained intimate connections between their life and art practice despite the influences of “the art world”. The blurring of art and life brings to mind Fluxus art and the history of women's art made within and in reflection of domestic spaces. Artists like Schneemann, McCarthy and Muehl, used mundane and found materials like tin cans, broken glass, dirt, and ketchup in place of honored substances like oil paint. There is an immediacy to much of the work bore out of

insistent surfaces that threaten to fall apart before our eyes. Michael Henderson's *Castration* of 1968, is literally torn away from the stretchers. McCarthy explained that the two Henderson works included in the show are the only two pieces that survived a fire that consumed the artist's early work in 1985.



Michael Henderson's *Castration*, 1968, Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

As is often the case with panels comprised of a group of stellar artists, the dialogue was unfocused as each artist took the reins to discuss their own ideas. One of Mara's most interesting questions "what is the relationship between your painting practice and your work in performance?" went unanswered, but led to some compelling personal reflections around female sexuality and power dynamics.

Barbara T. Smith shared her continued dismay over the misinterpretations of her 1970s performance *Feed Me*. For the work, part of an evening-long performance event, Smith took up residence in the ladies' room. The space contained an oriental rug-covered mattress, a sink, incense, body oils, shawls, books and music, a taped loop played the words "Feed me." Smith was nude and accepted one person at a time into the private space. She said the work grew from her personal experiences of being continually harassed by men in public. She wanted to regain control and establish an exchange where the viewers (both men and women) had to ask permission for her attention. She was nude and seemingly vulnerable, but she held the power to affirm or deny the desires of her interlopers.



Barbara T. Smith, *Feed Me*, 1973

Smith's intentions got turned upside down when rumors spread that she was having sex with each visitor who entered the ladies' room. Her power was stolen as Smith was transformed from artist into whore. Smith was criticized by many of her fellow feminists for her supposedly obscene actions. The rumors around the performance took hold and were perpetuated in countless texts and art history books. It's distressing to consider how the impermanence of performance can allow for wildly inaccurate histories.



Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*, 16mm film, 18 minutes, 1965

Carolee Schneemann also shared troubling responses to her erotic work. Her 1965 film *Fuses* has been censored countless times and was even arrested in El Paso in 1985. *Fuses* is a masterpiece of experimental filmmaking that records Schneemann and her partner James Tenney making love. The work is anything but pornographic, as the film becomes the sensual surface that is cut, colored, and imprinted by desire. Schneemann mentioned that her most known work *Interior Scroll* has also been censored in recent years, revealing that female sexuality may still be taboo in proper culture.



Judith Bernstein. *Five Panel Vertical*, 1973.

Judith Bernstein discussed her on-going body of work that addresses power dynamics in art and culture. Her monumental gestural drawings portray phallus/screws that dominate and threaten to take over the space. She shared her passion for raw humor with a political edge and more than once let out a jibe about "size mattering". She has also been "marking her territory" with giant signature works that claim space as she boldly inserts herself into the ledgers of history. Like many women artists of her generation, Bernstein is a late bloomer in the museum world, her first solo museum show *Hard* is currently on view at the New Museum through January 20, 2013.



Judith Bernstein, recreation of *Signature Piece*, of 1986 for her solo show at the New Museum in 2012.

I didn't I gain any new insights about painting, but I was happy to hear the passion that still pulses in Smith, Schneemann, and Bernstein. All these women are over 70 and continue to engage in serious art practices. I am in awe of their strength and courage and inspired by their undying devotion to art making.

The exhibit *Painting* is on view at The Box until January 26.  
Read reviews of the show on Notes on Looking and at the LA Times.