

Judith Bernstein Envisions Trump's Political Demise

At The Box, Los Angeles, the artist presents a series of paintings that reflect on the last four years and sees President Trump being devoured by a troupe of vagina-dentata figures

IN BY [NATALIE HADDAD](#) IN [REVIEWS](#) | 04 NOV 20



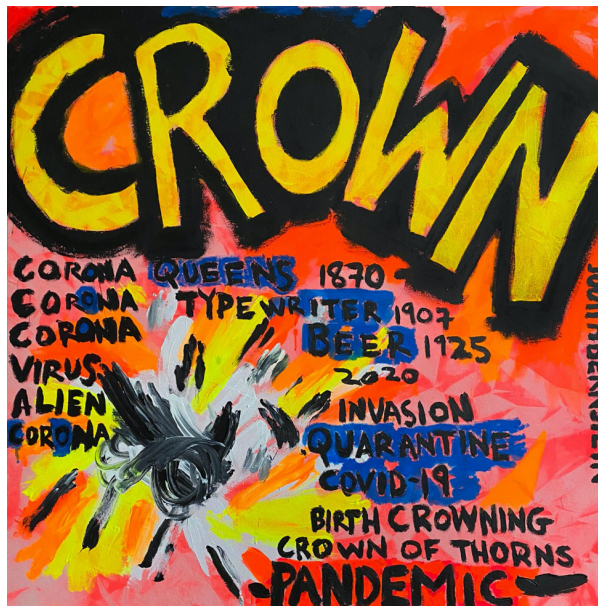
Judith Bernstein's 'Hot Hands' at The Box, Los Angeles, is an anti-Trump, anti-fascist *tour de force*. Since the 1970s, Bernstein has tackled political issues in her art but, with the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, her message has assumed a greater urgency and her imagery greater bombast befitting her subject matter. The exhibition comprises 15 large-scale paintings, dating from 2016 to 2020. The corruption and depravity of the Trump administration permeates the atmosphere like a noxious gas, reified in an anthropomorphized cartoon phallus that Bernstein calls 'Cockman', which battles with raging vagina-dentata figures. In many works, the character 'Schlong Face' – an amoebic penis and scrotum, flecked with black hairs and peering with one eye – is topped with a Trumpian coif and, as in *Cabinet of Horrors* (2017), surrounded by swastikas and dollar signs: shorthand for the president's egregious brand of racism and capitalist greed.



Judith Bernstein, *Cabinet of Horrors*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 228 x 226.7 cm. Courtesy: the artist and The Box, Los Angeles.

'Hot Hands' has all of Bernstein's usual vitriol, but several more recent works signal a departure from topical content and, instead, refer to her painting series 'Birth of the Universe' (2010–ongoing), which reimagines the Big Bang through women's rage. The monumental two-panel painting *Death of the Universe #1* (2018) is an army of seething vaginas, the two largest shooting dark-blue rays from their mouths. While *Death of the Universe #1* is not explicitly political, the painting's apocalyptic tenor is resonant. The mythological vagina dentata, with its shark-like teeth, has always summoned unruly feminine energies for Bernstein but, in *Death of the Universe #1*, the raging mothers of the cosmos wage a battle to the death against unseen forces.

Bernstein amplifies the intensity of her paintings with ultraviolet pigment. Acid yellows, greens, pinks and oranges emanate a toxic glow under black light. In *Gaslighting (Red)* (2019), the artist crams the titular text in all-caps and neon yellow into the top third of the canvas, above a fist fight between three 'Cockmen' and two 'Cunt Faces', the former almost subdued next to the killer teeth and fiery red mouths of the latter. While the title refers to one of Trump's favourite political tactics, the battle resembles a comic-book action sequence, a showdown between two rival enemies. What could be crude sexual humour in 'Hot Hands' is focused into a strategic sensory assault through the collision of lurid colours and dynamic compositions. Bernstein skillfully establishes a tension between chaos and control. In *Blue Balls #1* and *#2* (both 2018), peopled by blindly flailing 'Cock Cunt' hybrids, the effect works to evoke random aggression without slipping into visual disorder.



Judith Bernstein, *Crown*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 122 cm. Courtesy: the artist and The Box, Los Angeles.

Two recent canvases mark another shift from the spectacular debacle of Trump to the devastation wrought by COVID-19 and the racial unrest of 2020. In *Crown* and *Hot Hands* (*Black Lives Matter*) (both 2020), the artist eschews imagery for dissociative texts (e.g. *Crown*'s 'Birth Crowning/Crown of Thorns/Pandemic') or addresses the systemic police violence against Black bodies in the US, referring to the recent murder of George Floyd and subsequent uprisings. These works are as visceral as the others: a black and white starburst flares into fierce strokes of yellow and orange in *Crown*. Yet, they are more contemplative; the acerbic humour that infiltrates the Trump works is replaced by the social and economic realities of 2020, captured here in stream-of-consciousness texts. At the same time, the Trump administration's gross abuses of power loom large. Though as audacious and cheeky as ever, in 'Hot Hands' Bernstein couples her fury with mourning for a disarming poignancy that only strengthens her defiance.

Judith Bernstein's 'Hot Hands' at The Box, Los Angeles, runs until 19 December 2020.

Main image: Judith Bernstein, Death of the Universe #1, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 381 x 426.7 cm. Courtesy: the artist and The Box, Los Angeles.

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