

# INTERVIEW!

## Judith Bernstein

Working since the '60s towards addressing the psychological amalgamation of warfare, sexual aggression and feminism, the American painter looks at the inherent rage of women.

by Hanne Mugaas

HM Your artist statement reads "Of course, my work is FEMINIST!!! My work is an extension of self. Critique the men; critique their work. Being OUTRAGEOUS/OUTSCALE. New York style. I want what the men want." Where are we at today when it comes to these issues?

JB My art addresses the psychological amalgamation of warfare, sexual aggression and feminism. I've committed over five decades to build a provocative yet nuanced body of work. And the fact that my work is embraced now highlights the ongoing need to confront gender inequality on the global level. Women are still struggling for equal opportunity, and the awareness of that resonates with the audience.

My new "Birth of the Universe" series explores current issues that women and men face. The oil and fluorescent paintings portray a literal dialogue between the cunt and phallus. Playful and vibrant colors accentuate the dynamic between the genders. I'm looking at the inherent rage of women. Scientific advancement and the expanding universe are analogous for ever-changing complexities of gender in the digital age. It takes the Big Bang to represent that kind of energy. There's vitality and resilience connected to survival—and sex and birth on the most primal level. I use a lot of outrageous humor in my work, which ultimately allows for both catharsis and fun!

HM Could you say something about the early years at Yale in the '60s, and your fascination with graffiti that you found in men's restrooms—as well as the fact that Yale had an all-male undergraduate program, and refused to hire any female professors?

JB As a graduate student at Yale in the '60s, I was surrounded by extreme gender inequality that threatened women's access to the system. The school didn't see the value in employing female professors. Studying in that patriarchal environment planted the seeds for my obsession with



feminism and political injustice. My art grew evermore confrontational and my voice screamed to be heard.

While at Yale, I became fascinated with scatological graffiti after reading an article in *The New York Times* (1963) about Edward Albee taking the title *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* directly from bathroom graffiti. Graffiti has psychological depth because when someone releases on the toilet, they also release from the subconscious. The graffiti I found was raw and poignant. I began to incorporate text like "this may not be heaven but Peter hangs out here" combined with crude images.

HM Your first major work was a series of anti-Vietnam graffiti paintings, one with the slogan "Baby the fuckin' you get ain't worth the fuckin' you take" flowing from a woman's vagina featuring an American flag. The feminist and political movements were closely linked at the time. How did this influence your work?

JB Scatological images influenced my "Fuck Vietnam" series (1966–68). I wanted my paintings to confront war and politics with very graphic, loud in-your-face words and images. I used stuffed phalluses, images of blood and cum juxtaposed with national imagery and US flags. Tremendous feelings of uncertainty culminated with the onset of the Vietnam War, intensified by the draft, the

Left: *Golden Birth of the Universe*, 2014; Below: Judith Bernstein  
Courtesy of the artist; Karma International, Zurich; and The Box, Los Angeles

Feminist Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. Lots of changes were happening in America and ideas of nationalism, gender and race were radically shifting. The "Fuck Vietnam" series embodied my call-to-action spirit and addressed the political climate.

HM Can you talk about your "screw" works? The first one was *Screw in the Box* (1969).

JB In 1969, I made the leap to drawing hardware screws that morphed into humongous charcoal phallic presences. SCREW IN THE BOX is a play-on-words. I love this kind of double entendre. These works symbolize oppression, reference the expression "being screwed," and evoke an ominous power. The series embodies themes that continue to characterize society, politics and human relationships (reaching 9 x 30 feet in scale). They appear markedly hairy.

HM You've said your paintings were meant to create a feeling among men of vulnerability, powerlessness, and intimidation. How is scale important in your work?

JB Scale has always been important to me. Mine is bigger than theirs! To take the phallus and embrace it as a symbol for feminism, I had to make it huge. The size infantilizes men. It overpowers the viewer, generates attention around issues that

have been unaddressed, socially disparaged and absent from the art world.

HM I'm very curious about A.I.R. Gallery—the first all female cooperative gallery in the United States, of which you were a founding member. What was the experience like, to open this gallery devoted to female artists in the '70s, at a time when works shown at commercial galleries in New York City were almost exclusively by male artists?

JB A.I.R. was the first gallery to solely exhibit work created by women. We had gone through graduate MFA programs at prestigious universities, yet didn't have the chance to exhibit our art. Barbara Zucker got the idea for a women's gallery and teamed up with Susan Williams, Dotty Attie, and Mary Grigoriadis. They handpicked sixteen additional artists to exhibit work and run the space. When it came to finding a name for the gallery, I suggested TWAT—Twenty Women Artists Together. But as usual, I was ahead of my time. ☺

**Hanne Mugaas is an art curator who is currently the Director of Kunsthall Stavanger in Stavanger, Norway.**

**Judith Bernstein (American, b. 1942) lives and works in New York.**

