

ZÜRICH

JUDITH BERNSTEIN

Karma International

American artist Judith Bernstein (b. 1942) is now enjoying a much higher degree of visibility than she did during her early career. This solo exhibition was the second time her work has been seen in Zurich. The first was when Mara McCarthy (who directs The Box Gallery in Los Angeles) included two of the artist's pieces in the group exhibition "The Historical Box" (2011) at Hauser & Wirth.

One of those pieces, *HORIZONTAL* (1973), is an intense charcoal drawing, more than 12 feet long, depicting a screw that morphs into a penis. It left quite an impression; indeed, the same work had been removed from an exhibition at the Philadelphia Civic Center in 1974. Even though numerous high-profile artists, critics and curators loudly protested the act of censorship, Bernstein—an active feminist and founding member of the women's cooperative A.I.R. Gallery in New York—had difficulty exhibiting in the decades that followed.

This mini-survey at Karma International, which came on the heels of several Bernstein shows mounted in commercial and institutional spaces in New York, London and Los Angeles since 2010, presented Swiss viewers the happier side of the artist's recent work, especially her elaborations of sexual graffiti.

Turning a screw into a cock is a funny concept, but Bernstein's visual pun seems more imposing than humorous. At Karma, her charcoal *Signature Piece* (2013), which is larger still, is funnier. The looping letters the artist used to sign the gallery wall, covered with huge swaths of paper from floor to ceiling, make a statement of serious intent while still being cartoonish enough to elicit viewer smiles. Seeing the enormous moniker from outside, through Karma's storefront windows, reinforced a sense of name-branding parody.

Beyond the signature piece were two small 1967 oil-stick-and-charcoal works, their flags and penises fiercely mocking U.S. policy during the Vietnam War. Near the entrance hung four drawings from the literally titled series "Dick in a Head" (2014).

The most vibrant works, however, were the two large, square canvases, *Birth of the Universe: Gold Cunt* and *Birth of the Universe #2* (both 2013), which faced Bernstein's name wall. In these brightly colored oil paintings, the restroom iconography—the artist began using genital forms after examining the walls of the male restrooms while studying at Yale in the 1960s—turns celebratory. Vaginas don't just produce human life; they are the fountainhead of the universe itself.

Birth of the Universe #2 features two large doughnutlike (but unmistakably corporeal) orifices in a sky of black and blue. Both are agape. One of them, topped by a rudimentary crown, serves as the head of a figure whose breasts are two curved yellow lines with dots for nipples. The legend "THE CROWN JEWELS" is scrawled beside a smiley face positioned where the crotch would be. The other orifice is a floating ruddy face with two penises for eyes. Bernstein maintains the economy of her source material—cocks and vaginas are generally outlines—but she uses it to convey alternative messages.

Bernstein's feelings have always run high, but her newest works are more engaging and productive than those she made as a younger artist. Today, she does more than merely invert a male language; she transforms the kind of images intended to belittle into emblems of what she values.

—Aoife Rosenmeyer

Judith Bernstein:
Birth of the Universe: Gold Cunt, 2013, oil on canvas, 92¾ by 93¾ inches; at Karma International.

