THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

INCONVERSATION

JUDITH BERNSTEIN with Corina Larkin

Time has caught up with Judith Bernstein's art. Trained in the early 1960s at Yale, Judith moved to New York and soon became a founding member of the A.I.R.Gallery. She was also active in other important movements such as the Guerrilla Girls. Her outsized, politicized, confrontational, and sexually graphic work did not find a commercial outlet, but she continued to work, maintaining an active dialogue with a set of issues that are more relevant today than ever. As she prepares for her upcoming show at Mary Boone, she took some time to talk about her new work with *Rail* Managing Art Editor Corina Larkin. Also present is Bernstein's assistant, John Reynolds.

Corina Larkin (Rail): So much has been said about your time at Yale. I want to briefly go back a little earlier to your undergraduate years. What did you study as an undergrad? I noticed you have a bachelor's of science.

Judith Bernstein: Yes, I went to Penn State and studied art education.

Rail: One of your parents was a teacher.

Bernstein: My father was a teacher. I came from a middle-class background. They could not believe any human being could ever make a living in this field. So, my father would not pay for or send me to

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Taylor Dafoe.

school—

Rail: Unless you studied something practical, which is not uncommon.

Bernstein: Not uncommon at all in my generation.

Rail: It's still not uncommon. At what point did you know that you wanted to be an artist?

Bernstein: I knew when I was a kid that I wanted to be an artist, actually, but that doesn't mean you know you can do it. And there was no understanding of it. My parents weren't in the business. They didn't know what an artist's life is about. And, I'll tell you frankly, I think that the school system fails you too. In undergraduate, as well as graduate programs, they give you a degree and say, "fuck you." How do you get from one school, from going to Penn State to Yale, to the outside world? How do you make a life of being an artist?

Rail: What drew you to Yale?

Bernstein: Well, first, I knew nothing. My friend Carrie Robbins was in costume and theater design at Yale and she encouraged me to go. I didn't know what to do after graduation, and I didn't want to return to living at home. I needed a couple more years. So I applied to Yale and was awarded a full scholarship and it worked out. I went so long ago that tuition was $175 a semester.

Rail: I find it so interesting that they admitted you and valued you enough to give you a scholarship, but didn't seem to really know what to do with you once you *were* there. The administration clearly had no intention of placing women in employment.

Bernstein: It wasn't only me. A lot of guys understood the value of making connections, etc. For me, it was a big leap to actually go to New York. I taught in high schools and part-time in universities, but I never worked full-time and never had the perks from that. But it was okay in the 1970s because New York City was a different place. You didn't need much money. When I first moved into this loft it was $175 a month.

At that time women had no place to show, no place to go. A group of women got together—Barbara Zucker, Dotty Attie, Mary Grigoriadis, and Sue Williams—and started A.I.R. It was a group of women who were already visually and aesthetically accomplished but had no opportunities. I used to joke about a suggestion for the name of the gallery, "TWAT"—"twenty women artists together." I didn't realize at the time what it foretold for me—that humor was a tool for me.

Rail: Are you saying that as time went on, you became more confident using humor?

Bernstein: Yes and no. I always had a good sense of humor as a child. And at Yale, I used humor. When I started doing the screw drawings, the idea was amusing. But the execution was brutal. So it wasn't funny. I didn't realize the humor went further back to the *Fuck Vietnam* series. And of course now it is coming out again.

Rail: So much has been written about your early work mocking the conflation of male sexuality and political power, and about being censored from the Philadelphia Civic Center show of women's art in 1974. After a very long period of time when it was difficult to gain critical or commercial attention, there is renewed interest in both your early work and your most recent paintings. But I know you must have been working hard all along. Some of that work is quite different from the big, hairy screws. There are smaller-scale drawings with botanical references to flowers and such, and there's a sensuality and a vulnerability to those drawings. There's a kind of yin-yang opposition to them.

Bernstein: That's absolutely true. It hasn't been a straight trajectory. There were a lot of tangents and a lot of different paths before I got to where I'm at now. The screws were very powerful, and those were extraordinary pieces. They were an amalgamation of sexuality, feminism, and warfare. But I couldn't figure out how to get to the female. I was spent!

In the '80s, I had a show at A.I.R., and I first did some charcoal pieces that were taken from botanical drawings. Some were screws. Some of them were hybrids, like a penis and a vagina.

Rail: [*Looking at photographs of the work*.] What was the scale of these?

Bernstein: They're about 30-by-40 inches each. They're slightly smaller because I did them with a grant from the National Endowment.

Rail: They're a bit vulva-like. [*Laughs*.] Is this the end of a penis and the beginning of a vagina? You couldn't get away with that today with the NEA, could you? [*Laughs*.] Those were the good old days. When you could do stuff like that.

Bernstein: The good old days when you could do this, and get a grant for it. Wow, wow! I used images of anthuriums, they are heart-shaped and the stamen comes out, and I also used cacti, and this cacti form becomes female. It's female but at the same time it looks like a penis, you know—

John Reynolds: It's a Venus.

Bernstein: It's a Venus penis.

Rail: What was your process?

Bernstein: Actually, I was drawing all these botanical things and as I drew, I sexualized them. They became male and female. Flowers have both sex organs within them, so I sexualized them in a more human way.

Rail: Your work from the 1980s hasn't been widely seen, but many of the drawings so acutely reflect the zeitgeist, especially the atmosphere here in the Lower East Side during the AIDS crisis—

Bernstein: I did some active figuration drawings—some were skeletons, and some were masturbating. They were directly dealing with AIDS and death.

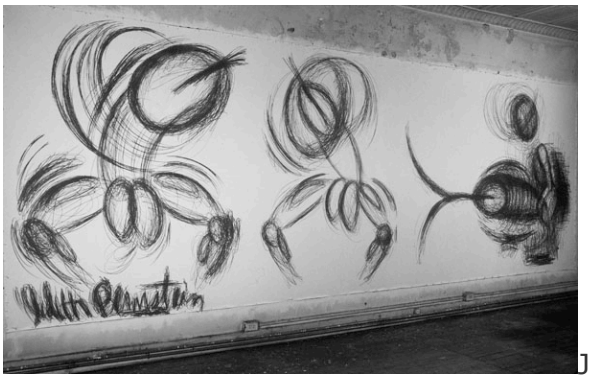
Reynolds: You've talked about sex becoming a solo action because of the fear—there was a fear of togetherness.

Bernstein: Exactly. It was a terrifying time. A terrifying time.

Rail: What about the ’90s?

Bernstein: In ’93 there was a big Matisse show at MoMA with two dance paintings. I actually was doing these masturbatory cocks and when I saw the show I realized that there were no phalluses on any of them. Where are the dicks? Right over here! [*Laughs*.]

Rail: So this is your response to Matisse?



Judith Bernstein, “The Dance (After Matisse)” (1992). 7.5 × 22′. Courtesy of the artist.

Bernstein: I did hundreds. I did so many of these drawings you wouldn’t believe it. It took a long time to move forward. I was doing these dick-in-the-heads that I began in the ’90s. I went from the graffiti, to the screw drawings of the late ’60s. All the combinations of a screw and a phallus. Making it very anatomical. Seeing what I could do with the size and the power of it.

There’s a whole long *Dick in a Head* series in pastel and charcoal that continues right up to the present. I found myself thinking about the power that’s in your head—the immense power in your head. And I thought: How can I do that with a vagina? I was sick of how the vagina is romanticized throughout art history and I wanted to show that there was so much more raw power and so much more strength to it. So I did some drawings with a magic marker and then a painting and I found myself working with the vagina! Thank God I did by the way. I found my way to the *Birth of the Universe* series, which was wonderful.

Rail: It was really a 20-plus year process?

Bernstein: A long time to get here. A long time.

Rail: Talk to me about your most recent paintings. Talk to me about *Cunt Faces*.

Bernstein: "Cunt face" is in the last bastion of words you can't say in public. So I had to put it right in front. With big signage. By using the phrase "cunt" over and over, it slowly takes away the negativism of it. After it's been used a while, it has less of an impact.

The works at Mary Boone will be new paintings. Some of the themes I've mined before resurface. I'm dealing with a psychological narrative. I'm actually going back to my own nuclear family, where the mother feels that "you owe me." A lot of women do that. Men don't do that as much. They have others issues. Nevertheless, women have a tendency to feel: "You owe me. I gave birth to you. You owe me."

Rail: It's hanging over you.

Bernstein: That's what the nooses are for. They hang over you. There's a certain amount of guilt that's like a strangulation.

Now there are other issues that are dealt with too—there's a dialogue between the phallus and the birth. Women are now in the front and center as they should be, because it is actually the birth of the universe, the most primal thing, complete with the big bang and all those references to the cunt.

The cunt faces and breasts are stylized. There's a vagina dentata with teeth, shark teeth by the way. Women have a lot of anger. I know that my mother had a lot of anger, and I have a lot of anger too. Don't misunderstand me, I'm right there. I'm with her. The issues are just different.

Rail: Let's talk about anger.

Bernstein: We want to talk about anger because it's complicated. I know. I was involved with a lot of women's groups and they also had an enormous amount of anger and rage. I had it too, but I put it in the work, which is where it should be.

Rail: Well, if you don't use humor to diffuse it, it will destroy you.

Bernstein: That is correct. But there is a lot of humor that I have from childhood. I got a lot of positive feedback from being humorous. People like people who are funny. With the painting, it's almost like being a comic, because laughing is like an explosive orgasm. That's what humor is about.

Judith Bernstein, "A THROUGH V" (1981). Charcoal on paper, 120 × 120″. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: What is the significance of the numbers that appear throughout the work?

Bernstein: I like the aesthetic quite frankly. I love the numbers. This number is the age of the universe—13.82 by 10 (to the ninth). Here's the number 18, the Jews take that as good luck. The number 45—I live at 45 and I have a P.O. box 45—29 and 28 refer to John, he's part of my life.

Reynolds: That's my age right now.

Bernstein: And the old 69. It always works, by the way.

Rail: What kind of reactions do you get to the vagina dentata?

Bernstein: Well, people bring that up a lot. I like it because the dentata is an image of rage. Obviously there is no such thing in reality, but it's a metaphor.

Rail: You're also making fun of the stereotypes—vagina dentata as a projection of male fear and an image of female rage.

Bernstein: Absolutely. There's no question about it. It's a bit tongue in cheek. I'm making fun of things but there's some seriousness beneath it. It refers to a lot of myths and it raises a lot of questions about the psyche. It's also fun. I like the expression of it. It's wonderful.

Rail: These paintings are amazing. You manage to make references to van Gogh's "Starry Night," Munch's "Scream" and Courbet's "Origin of the World" all in one work. Yet your work has an energy that some people perceive as violence.

Bernstein: They feel uncomfortable with the frankness. It's more confrontational than past portrayals of femininity—as aestheticized, romanticized, idealized, as a turn-on, and mostly passive. Throughout art history, women have been portrayed predominently from the male point of view, as a sexual turn-on. My portrayal is more complex.

Rail: One of your new paintings is called "The Voyeurs."

Bernstein: I think of the fact that everyone has their eyes on me. But you also have the curiosity of the male. You have the curiosity of the female. They're all interested in the vagina and birth. The cocks turn out to be eyeballs.

Rail: The references to voyeurism go back to your Yale days, sneaking into the men's bathroom to read graffiti.

Bernstein: Oh, I can't tell you what a good time I had! It was so wonderful. I was so much more naïve when I was younger, it was just so much fun to be privy to all these male fantasies. I watched the guys and saw what they were about, and it was a lot of fun.

Judith Bernstein, "Crying Cuntface" (2014). Oil on Canvas, 84 × 84″. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: Again, you're making fun of it all, cocks turning into eyeballs and all that—

Bernstein: No question about it. [*Laughs.*] I think you can take it a lot of different ways. You're making fun of them, and you're observing what turns them on. It's all about observation. Of course, there are also a lot of things I didn't observe. I worked with what I saw, and I got a kick out of it. You can take it different ways. It's not just about being read one way.

I've said this many times: when you're on the toilet, and you're defecating, you're also fantasizing, going into your subconscious. So men just write whatever, and it's all anonymous. It's not something that's taken outside the bathroom, and no one signs it. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: Whatever you write on a bathroom wall, you're not taking responsibility for it.

Bernstein: I take responsibility.

Rail: You've coopted the act of graffiti and insist on talking about what nobody is really willing to talk about: the complexity of male power and violence and the complexity of female power, rage, anger, and strength.

Bernstein: There's a lot of the subconscious that I put right out there, right in your face. There's one painting called "Quadracunts." Little cunt faces with hair. And there's "Crying Cunt"—she's crying for humanity. Like a crying virgin.

Rail: Do you think you could have made these paintings in an earlier stage of your life? Without having gone through menopause and experiencing the full onslaught of hormonal rage? Or has it simply taken a lifetime to understand the complexity of female sexuality?

Bernstein: You know something, it took me this long to get to the vagina. I don't think it was a result of menopause, but I wanted to go somewhere else. I had explored aspects of male sexuality and I had done these giant pieces. They're like big railroad trains, just coming right over you. I wanted to express the rage and the complexity of women. And, I didn't

know where to start. So somehow I started with the idea of a black hole and the celestial inside.

Rail: The "black hole" is a great metaphor for anger.

Bernstein: Nothing gets out from the black hole. Not even light. But it's interesting—a scientist told me that numbers don't count if you're off earth; they have no meaning. Also, the black hole does actually go through. It doesn't stop. If the earth went in, it would be compressed to the size of a baseball. A lot of this stuff is so fantastic. And a lot of it is theoretical, and we don't know a lot. If it weren't scientists who were telling you this, you would think they're just bat shit. [*Laughing*.]

Judith Bernstein, "CUNTFACES" (2015). Oil on Canvas 84 × 84″. Courtesy of the artist.

I have an enormous respect and adulation for the complexity of the universe. I think it's the most extraordinary thing, and, also all the plants, all the flowers. It's a cliché in a lot of ways, but I *do* find it so extraordinary.

Rail: You clearly extend that spirit to your painting. You have an enormous respect for the complexity of male and female emotion. You poke fun at it, and you don't shy away from the ugliest parts of it.

Reynolds: Judith recognizes the mystery in life—the fact that you're acknowledging that the black hole is a mystery. It's analogous to or is a metaphor for female sexuality, this mystery of the vagina.

Bernstein: Yes, and it used to be very clear that there was only male and female. Now we see a big continuum in sexuality. We even see that animals are so much more complex than we ever thought. We were under the illusion that only people could actually use tools. I saw

birds use tools to eat insects. Everything is more complex than we previously realized. It's so mind blowing.

Rail: The Box in L.A. showed some of your large paintings under a black light. How did that come about?

Bernstein: It was Mitchell Algus. I was showing different people the show before it went to California, so he came for a visit. Mitchell Algus taught high school science—he's retired now. He said, "Have you ever seen this under black light?" I said, "Oh my god!" The light bulb went off! John immediately went to get a black light. And we only had some flashlights and a phone and we took a couple of photos. When we did this, I had no idea what it was going to look like. You know what happens with the black light—the oil paint fades and the fluorescent just kind of pops and it looks very calligraphic.

Rail: Will the new paintings be displayed with black light?

Bernstein: Yes and no. The gallery will have one or two black lights but there will also be ambient light so it's possible to see both.

Reynolds: It's like a hybrid between the two so you don't lose as much of the range of colors. The ambient light allows you to see a little bit more of the blues and reds.

Rail: You've mentioned Louise Bourgeois as an artistic influence. You share a similarity in approaches to art-making—mining personal experience and obsessively exploring a theme to express its complexities.

Bernstein: I knew Louise. She was a buddy. She was also incredibly fabulous. I didn't mine the same themes as her. I always mined my own life. It was amazing how her career expanded exponentially as she got older and how much farther she went, how it liberated her. It's funny because a lot of times she would talk about her father, and in one or two interviews she spoke about her mother. It was very interesting to me. She mined mostly her nuclear family and I mine that too, but I mostly mine my observations of men and women.

Rail: You also bring the political into your work.

Bernstein: With *Fuck Vietnam,* for example, I looked at the male, but tied it to war and feminism. I was blaming men for this atrocious war with so many people dying.

Rail: Tell me about the painting "Fuck by Numbers."

Bernstein: I just mentioned the painting, "Fuck by Number in Vietnam." But I did another one more recently, dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan, and it had numbers representing how many people have died, how many suffered from post traumatic stress and how many became refugees. All of these numbers are much more important than the price, but this war will cost something like $6 trillion by 2050. This is the scale of it. And it includes the phrase "moral injury." I was listening to the radio, which I do when I'm working, and someone used the term "moral injury." I love the term.

Also, I made a new painting called "Isis Gunk," which depicts ejaculations as a metaphor for humiliation.

Judith Bernstein, The Voyeurs (2015). Oil on Canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: Do you still think of yourself as an activist?

Bernstein: Yes I do. I used to go out there and do a lot. I was part ofA.I.R., the Guerrilla Girls, Art Worker's Coalition, We Fight Censorship, etc. There is still the rage in my belly, but now I go to very few things the way I did when I was younger. Now I just do my own stuff, and protest in my own way.

Rail: How do you think about or relate to an activist artist like Emma Sulkowitz, the mattress-carrying Columbia student? There are some parallels in the sources of your work,

even though the expressions are different—the clear rejection of shame, the rage, and the sheer persistence.

Bernstein: That's a performance piece. It's really great. People have to speak on their own terms and do what works for them. It's very clear what that's about—she's carrying that mattress like a lead weight. I think it's terrific that there's no shame brought on it—you know, "I was raped, I am too ashamed to talk about it."

Think of how long there has been shame in sexual imagery! Sex is actually part of life and if you think of it in terms of all life, that's the goal—to reproduce. Instead of taking that path, I chose to create my work. I'm reproducing in a metaphorical way. But sex should not be shameful. The media is all about getting turned on, erections and Viagra and all that, but sex is also extraordinary—sex is fabulous, by the way [*laughter*]. It's direct, it's primal and it's a wonderful experience—an extraordinary experience of life.

Rail: It strikes me that you have always expressed the zeitgeist of the time, but people have not always been capable of accepting it. The truth was too raw. Now, finally, the times have caught up with you.

Bernstein: In essence, yes. When I was younger, I still did the work, but none of this could be shown and seen and talked about. And now, it's right out there. People say "fuck" on *Saturday Night Live*. And you know something, it's a marvelous thing. I'm embraced by a lot of young people: by gay women, gay men, straight women, straight men, and a lot in between. Most of the people who are still taken aback by it are my own age. But fortunately not everyone.