

judith bernstein

INTERVIEW AND PORTRAITS BY OLIVIER ZAHM

The American artist who emerged in the '60s is more relevant than ever. Her punchy, direct paintings and drawings tell the truth, fight for the truth, and inspire change.



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JUDITH BERNSTEIN

JUDITH BERNSTEIN, *DREAM*,
1995, CHARCOAL ON PAPER,
47 1/2 X 63 INCHES



OLIVIER ZAHM — Your work has always challenged social and political conventions. Can you tell us about the origins of that impulse in your art?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — My first show was in New York in 1973, at A.I.R. (Artists in Residence) Gallery. It's the longest-running all-woman gallery in the country. And it wasn't only the first show for me but also the gallery's first solo show in New York on October 1st, 1973. In the beginning, they couldn't figure out what to name the gallery, so I suggested TWAT (Twenty Women Artists Together), but unfortunately this did not take. Too far ahead of my time. When I was a student at Yale, I did a lot of work inspired by graffiti — I'd go into the bathrooms for inspiration and leave with ideas to do scatological artworks, a lot of it against the Vietnam War. It was at Yale where I first did the *Fuck Vietnam* pieces. My work is basically autobiographical: it's about my dialogue with the subconscious.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Your drawings combine humor, aggression, sexuality, and politics. How did those elements come together in the penis/mis-sile series?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN —

I made the penises like missiles, and they were also my answer to feminism. Women don't have penises, but metaphorically, they do.

It's an image of power, and so it was not only a sexual and political statement, but also a feminist one: "Mine's bigger than yours."

OLIVIER ZAHM — The phallus is symbolic. It's not just an organ — it's a metaphor for power. And I also love the humor around this idea of being screwed.

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — Exactly. Screw, screwing, and being screwed. We're screwed by this obsession for power. We notice it so much more now, but it's been prevalent throughout history.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And how were these provocative works received at the time?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — At the time, people didn't know how to receive them. They weren't passed over, but they weren't embraced, either. There was an exhibition in 1974, titled "Women's Work — American Art in 1974" at the Philadelphia Civic Center, and it had 84 women artists with 170 works. It created a lot of brouhaha with the press, and they wanted to censor the work I had in the show, *Horizontal*, which was later acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2023. They thought it was obscene. And you say: "What?! Obscene?!" They don't know what obscene is.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What's actually obscene is the power you criticize. It's interesting that you draw a line between sexuality and male violence. Is sexuality, or male desire specifically, the source of all this violence?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — It's funny because at the time I was making these pieces, I thought things would be different if women ran the world. I don't feel that way anymore. I think women can be just as violent as men.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Does this new gender fluidity symbolize greater peace? Was it something that was already happening in the '60s?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — They didn't have that then; it was very much polarized between men and women. I think it's fascinating how quickly things have changed. I've lived through two centuries — I was born in 1942, and even in just that period of time, so much has happened, in everything.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But what's constant since the '60s is war and male violence, and the military-industrial complex. It doesn't seem to be slowing down — it's actually escalating. How would you explain that?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — Frankly, I think violence is part of our DNA, for both men and women. It's tragic in terms of war and destruction, of course. But in a certain way, violence can also make us competitive and can spur more things to happen in a positive direction.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The United States is the champion of that. From Nixon to Trump, American imperialism doesn't seem to be slowing down. You've always been fighting that, but aren't you a bit depressed about it right now?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — My whole life has been fighting this. I put in so much energy, so much time, so much work. What's interesting is that at the same time we know so much more about the universe and about the things that make up a human being. It's fascinating for me.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, your work is not only political or antiwar or feminist — it's also cosmological, especially with your new paintings. You decided to paint explosive vaginas. When did that start?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — In 2010, I expanded the focus of my criticism from only men to include women. I don't think women are saints. They've got their own shit. But it's interesting because there's a whole range of things that women have access to now, like their own sexuality, their own independence. They can develop their own culture. And not only that: things may change considerably in 20 or 100 years. We may look entirely different. There may be less sex, there may be more sex, there may be robots.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Your sense of humor is incredible. It's quite rare in the art world. There was so much humor in activism in the '60s and '70s, and that sort of slowly vanished. Why is that?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — I think it's so important. Laughter is like an ejaculation. I have to say that having sex is almost better than laughing. But nevertheless, it's still a part of it. So much stuff in the art world is heavy-handed, and it wants to make a point. And a work of art is more memorable when it makes you laugh because you remember it. It gets into the underlying psychology and into your mind and stays there much, much longer.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Where do you think this search for impact, especially when it comes to humor, came from?



JUDITH BERNSTEIN, *BIRTH OF THE UNIVERSE #4 (SPACE, TIME, AND INFINITY)*, 2012, OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 96 X 96 INCHES



JUDITH BERNSTEIN, *INFINITY #4*, 2026, OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 85 X 81 INCHES



JUDITH BERNSTEIN, *TRUTH*,
1995, CHARCOAL ON PAPER,
47 1/2 X 63 INCHES

JUDITH BERNSTEIN — I was always interested in comedians, and I’m naturally a funny person, even when I’m not trying to be funny. I’m part of a certain kind of humor that’s from a different era. And when I was young, my parents were always arguing and screaming at each other, and it was hard to be heard, so I had to scream the hardest. And I’m still screaming. I’m still fighting.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You also seem to have retained a sense of joy. JUDITH BERNSTEIN — I still have an enormous amount of joy, mainly in the hope that things will change. There are so many bad things happening at this moment, and over the last century. Even in my lifetime, we had World War II, the Holocaust, the Korean War, the McCarthy era. And it’s horrible because of how extremely valuable life is. The chances of you being born are infinitesimal. And even in birth, there is a violence that makes it possible. Life is an extraordinary thing, and it’s incredible to be part of the miracle of life.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you never lost your sense of innocence in the face of this miracle. And maybe, as a female artist and an activist for women’s art, you are more sensitive to how making art is a kind of giving birth. JUDITH BERNSTEIN — Right. Birth is an art form. And it’s astonishing how everything has evolved and how we’re all part of the universe and the universe is part of us.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In Catholicism, a virgin gives birth, and it’s almost analogous to the way an artist births something, solely out of themselves. And Catholicism is a religion that’s phallocratic, yet they put the Virgin Mary at the center of it. JUDITH BERNSTEIN — Exactly. Where she should be! It’s a paradox. And she didn’t need a man. [Laughs] She needed God. God is a substitute for man.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you sometimes feel alone in this fight? Because there’s not much political art these

days. It doesn’t mean that the younger generation isn’t political, but the art feels less so. JUDITH BERNSTEIN — I had a lot of problems trying to get my anti-Trump “Money Shot” show in a gallery because many collectors are pro-Trump, so naturally many gallerists were opposed to exhibiting my work. In general, political and sexual art garners less sales than the norm. So, Jesus Christ, I got two whammies. But that didn’t stop me. It reminds me of a wonderful 1940s film, *Gaslight*, starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. The term “gaslighting” came from this film because it’s basically about how Boyer undermined Bergman’s sanity and made her think she was crazy. Many people tend to undermine their own reality this way, and it’s very insidious.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why do you think that the younger generations aren’t engaged as much with political art? It seems to me that your generation used art, music, and cinema as tools to express themselves politically. Maybe the younger generation expresses themselves more easily through their phones, and it absorbs the energy of self-expression. JUDITH BERNSTEIN — I think they’re in a bubble. But it could be that the values have changed. There was a major protest against the Vietnam War because there was the draft. It touched Americans directly. At that time, many more Americans were able to access the American dream and therefore demanded more. Now this access is not available, which creates an enormous amount of rage. I understand how we got to this point.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You seem to not care for current tastes. You approach the canvas, and you just go for it. JUDITH BERNSTEIN — When I was young, I was more concerned with what people thought. Today, I couldn’t care less. I do whatever I want. If it works, it works; if it doesn’t, it doesn’t. I spend a lot of time by myself, sitting in the silence of my studio. The biggest connection in my life is my

dialogue with my subconscious. I go into myself by way of my preconscious and subconscious, and I come up with whatever emerges, with concrete images, words, humor, and visual impact.

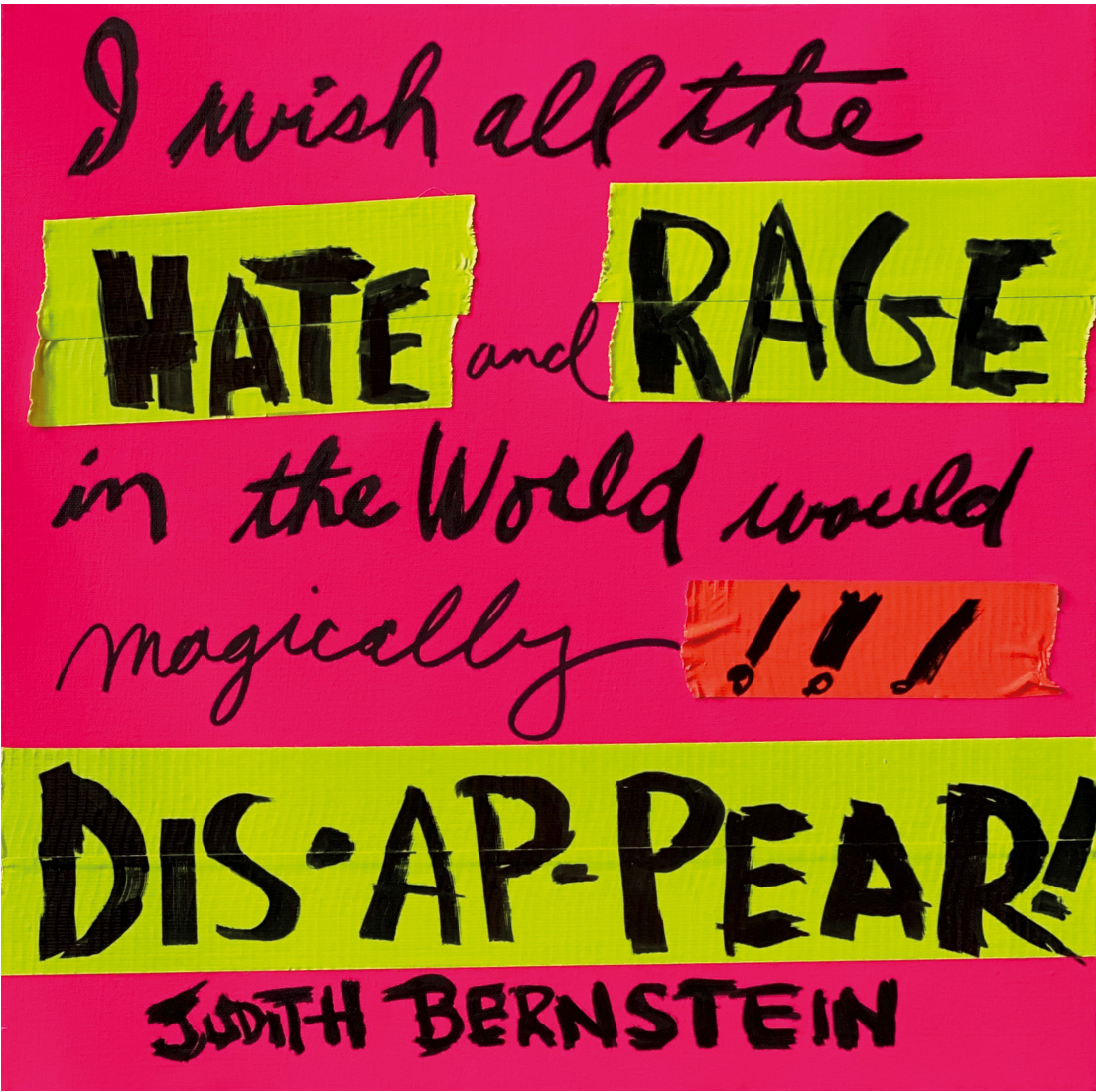
OLIVIER ZAHM — Were you influenced at all by Pop Art? JUDITH BERNSTEIN — Frankly, you can’t help but be influenced by all the work that came before you. It’s like a slideshow in your brain that you’re always aware of, from Lascaux all the way till now.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Looking at all of your drawings, photographs, and your extensive archives, you’re so productive. Do you think your art has more resonance now? JUDITH BERNSTEIN — Absolutely. I work all the time, and I feel this is the best time of my life. I’m not kidding. I’m an old lady, but I don’t give a fuck. Now, I’m appreciated. People want to hear what I have to say. I think my work is getting more impactful with time. You never know when you’re making a work how it will be received, because art has a different impact at every timeframe.

OLIVIER ZAHM — As an artist, is telling the truth the mission for art? JUDITH BERNSTEIN —

For me, truth is a flag! It’s important for me to have a sense of the truth. We have so many lies and so much confusion now. It’s a sad time, but we’ll get out of it. It’s a dark time, but I have the humor and the energy to face it. And I do feel that this time will pass, and truth will win out!

END



JUDITH BERNSTEIN, *HATE AND RAGE*, 2021, MARKER AND TAPE ON CANVAS, 18 X 18 INCHES