

# *TRUTH & CHAOS*

## Judith Bernstein

22 March – 15 June 2024

Emalin is pleased to present *TRUTH AND CHAOS*, Judith Bernstein's first exhibition in London in over a decade. The exhibition comprises works spanning thirty years of Bernstein's practice. Direct and confrontational, they are inspired by outrage and violence, the American military industrial complex and the private scribbles of the Yale University men's bathroom stalls. The exhibition presents historical works from her 1990s 'word drawings' series alongside the maximalist phallic screw drawings that Bernstein has been making since 1969 and that initiated her complicated relationship with censorship and popular recognition amidst 1970s second-wave feminism.

Judith Bernstein is concerned with watching the psyche of men and whatever men may stand for. She observes the scribbles and cartoons they leave behind in bathroom stalls, their furious impotence and possessiveness, the overpowering penetration of their violence and its statistics in war. Most of all, she watches their self-involvement: there is nothing beyond the raging ego, no depth to their own picture-plane. Detaching the symbol of an erect penis from any personhood and mounting it as a standalone totem of military violence and industrial extraction, she hacks with charcoal and oil paint at the abuse of power she witnesses. Symbols of American capitalism scratch their way into the work: guns are dicks, dicks are screws, screws are missiles, missiles are Mickey Mouse and the artist's signature is an ejaculation. Words and forms are disgorged onto paper – Bernstein's own subjectivity ejects mark-making.

In the stairwell of the gallery hangs *SCREW 5* (2014), a large vertical phallic 'screw drawing'. It unravels in charcoal from a roll of linen canvas and erects from the artist's exaggerated signature. Its size was cut to the towering height of the converted Methodist church that is now Studio Voltaire in South London in 2014, where Bernstein was in residency at the time and where she had her last exhibition in the UK. She first began working with the motif of 'screw drawings' – the colossal threaded phalluses in charcoal or acrylic – in 1969. It started with wordplay: a pun about screwing us, screwing up the world.

Following along in this long tradition of Bernstein's wordplay, the exhibition's title is drawn from *Truth and Chaos* – the two 1995 drawings at the centre of the exhibition at Emalin. *TRUTH AND CHAOS* alludes to the grand titles of classics such as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or even more imperially, *Crime and Punishment* or *War and Peace*. Words have been appearing in Bernstein's work as early as the 1960s, when the artist, then a graduate student at the nearly all-male Yale School of Art, would mimic the expressive – "scatological" as she calls it – style of scribbles found in the university men's restroom. These prompted her to think about how the discarded writing channels something abject of the American society's psyche. Their aggressive, gestural spewing made its way first into her anti-war paintings, and then into her performative acts of mark-making itself.

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1 Holywell Lane  
London EC2A 3ET  
[www.emalin.co.uk](http://www.emalin.co.uk)

The blown-up words are generated in a flurry of gestural markings. Originally, Bernstein's first works of this type evolved out of the phallic 'screw drawings' – harnessing the same performative gesture of spinning charcoal. Using words culled from the content of news streams, they evolved conceptually from the criticism of the same structures. When taken in the context of current day, these historic works refer to the relentless news cycle, blurriness of populist politics and dissolution of trust in authorities that pervades much of today's media – but, betraying this contemporaneity, Bernstein begun the first of her word pieces almost three decades ago in the 1990s. The news she was responding to at the time was delivering the US government's crimes of the AIDS epidemic and the various moral fallouts of the post-Reagan era, and to her stood for the entrenchment of the neoliberal psyche. Like the doors of bathroom stalls, the television news crawler and the printed newspaper headline become a slurred stream of the American consciousness.

To Bernstein, her work has always been a subjective, emotive response to the psyche of her current time, to the dominating ego and society's zeitgeist. While the work's aesthetics, symbols and slogans are confrontational, their subtlety and radicalism remain in the inversion of the origin of crudeness of the symbols used; they do not generate simplicity, but instead point out how reactionary and simplistic the imaginary of men in power can be. Meanwhile, in her own treatment of the phallic symbol, it becomes generative, fluid, dangerous. By the twisting motion of the screw, across the decades, the phallus has sometimes morphed into ocular, yonic, vortex-like shapes, sometimes exploding and transcending itself. Working in public and in private, for periods of fame and through times without recognition, she developed images from the phallic screws to penis guns, through to those she called 'dick-in-the-head' – to make the point that the sex, the ego, the abjection, is in the head.

The grievances of Bernstein's practice with American power dynamics are almost ironically replayed in the trajectory of her artistic career across the past five decades. She rose to fame between the 1960s and 1970s for the uninhibited drawings and paintings of anti-war mockery of American machoism that paved the way for many future forms of expression for feminist rage. But the radicalism had its consequences – the edge of her criticism was confirmed by the censorship of her work from the large-scale exhibition *FOCUS: Women's Work – American Art* that took place across various museums in Philadelphia in 1974 with the ambition of presenting a definitive survey of American women artists of the time. Despite public outrage about the censorship of her drawing – and public letters of support coming from the most institutionally compelling names of the era, including Clement Greenberg, Linda Nochlin, Lucy Lippard, or Louise Bourgeois – the work was still removed by the reactionary council of a city museum.

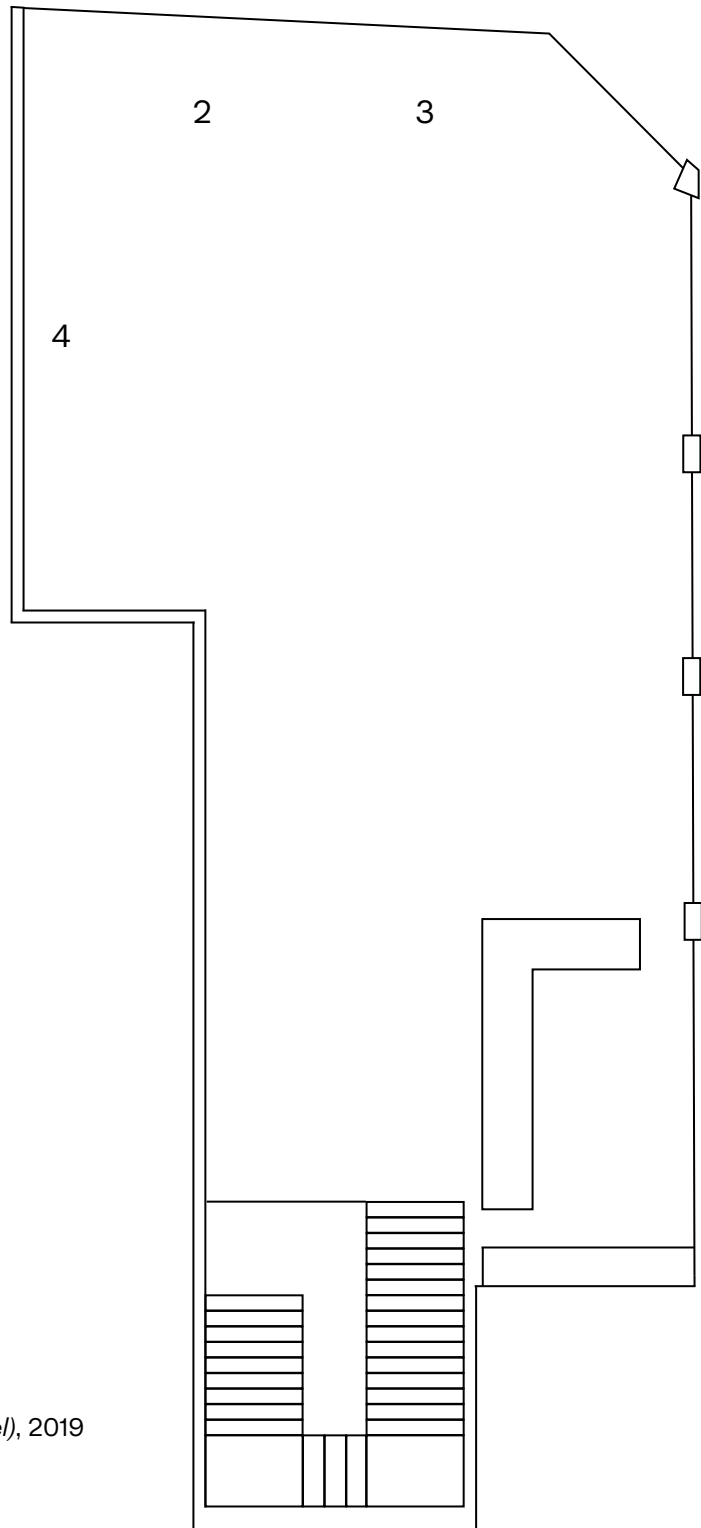
Following the controversial censorship, Bernstein was sidelined in the art world and did not participate in nearly any exhibitions for 25 years. This period came to an end in the 2010s when she experienced the canonical moment of "rediscovery" and held her first major institutional retrospective at the New Museum in New York. With Bernstein in her eighties today – and in a final turn of the American canon – the very work that was censored in 1974 has now entered the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Judith Bernstein (b. 1942 in Newark, New Jersey) has lived and worked in New York City since 1967. She received an MFA from Yale University School of Art in 1967. Bernstein was a founding member of A.I.R. Gallery – the first all-female artists gallery in the United States – as well as an early member of many art and activist organizations including Guerrilla Girls, Art Workers' Coalition and Fight Censorship.

A solo exhibition of Bernstein's work is upcoming at Kunsthaus Zurich, Switzerland in 2025. Her past solo exhibitions include Karma International, Zurich, Switzerland (2022); Kasmin Gallery, New York (2021); The Drawing Center, New York (2017); The Box, Los Angeles (2017); Kunsthall Stavanger, Norway (2016); Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York (2014); Studio Voltaire, London (2014); New Museum, New York (2012); and A.I.R. Gallery, New York (1984).

Bernstein's work has been included in group exhibitions at Halle für Kunst Steiermark, Graz, Austria (2023); Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, Switzerland (2023); Kunsthaus Zurich, Switzerland (2022); The Jewish Museum, New York (2022); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2020); Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington (2019); Bonner Kunstverein, Germany (2019); Studio Museum Harlem, New York (2019); mumok, Vienna (2017); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2015); ICA, London (2013); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (1996); MOMA PS1, New York (1979); and the 38th Venice Biennale, Italy (1978).

Some of the permanent collections that include Bernstein's work are the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Deste Foundation, Athens; the Brooklyn Museum, New York; Smithsonian Institute, Washington; The Jewish Museum, New York; Kunsthaus Zurich; Migros Museum, Zurich; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Hirshhorn Museum, Washington; Art Institute of Chicago; Sammlung Verbund, Vienna; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. She was the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship in 2016.



**LIST OF WORKS**

1. Judith Bernstein  
*SCREW 5*, 2014  
charcoal on linen  
350 × 216 cm  
137 ¾ × 85 inches
2. Judith Bernstein  
*Truth*, 1995  
charcoal on paper  
132 × 171 × 5 cm (framed)  
52 × 67 ⅜ × 2 inches
3. Judith Bernstein  
*Chaos*, 1995  
charcoal on paper  
132 × 171 × 5 cm (framed)  
52 × 67 ⅜ × 2 inches
4. Judith Bernstein  
*Horizontal Acrylic #4 (3 Panel)*, 2019  
acrylic on paper  
131 × 254 × 5.5 cm (framed)  
51 ⅝ × 100 × 2 ⅛ inches

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