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Oral history interview with Judith Bernstein,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Judith Bernstein on July 21, 2020. The interview took place at Bernstein's studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

**BEN GILLESPIE:** This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Judith Bernstein at her studio in New York City on July 21st, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Tell me what quarantine has been like for you.

**JUDITH BERNSTEIN:** Oh, my God. It's been absolutely surreal and totally insane. Uh, there is an enormous amount of anxiety that's always there, because you're addicted to the press and you're addicted to what's on TV. So, I find myself, um, seeing the *Times* where you have Paul Krugman, Charles Blow, and you also have, um, Judy Woodruff on TV, channel 13, um, Christiane Amanpour. And, um, it keeps going on and on, so, um, you somehow are so addicted to it, and yet um, you can't stop yourself. You're afraid that somehow something is going to come on that you don't know, and someone's going to pull you in the middle of the night, like yourself, and say, "What's happening?" And I'm going to say, "I don't know." [Laughs.] So, um, I would say that there's a low-grade anxiety because of the seriousness of the situation; there's no question about it. There is a serious, uh, situation in terms of medical and also economic. So, it's a—medical is much more severe, and I don't want to put them in the same category, but of course, there's also the economic. Yeah.

**BEN GILLESPIE:** Yeah, well, tell me a little bit about how your work has changed during this time and your studio time?

**JUDITH BERNSTEIN:** Well, you know, I'll tell you something, my work for over 60 years has been about the combination of the political and the sexual. And I started out when I was a student at Yale, a graduate student, a million years ago in 1966, that I was making these anti-Vietnam pieces called FUCK VIETNAM. And, um, I love these real strong terms, and they were *Union Jack-Off Flags*; they were, um, *Baby the fucking you get ain't worth the fucking you take*, those kind of things.

And then I, one, went into Screw Drawings, and these Screw Drawings were done in 1969, the '70s. And they were all about, um, uh, sexuality, they were about anti-war, and they were also about feminism, mine's bigger than yours. And then, after that, I went to, uh, Signature Piece, and the signature pieces was putting women at the center, was literally my signature. And they were also about male posturing, about stardom, and about, um, all my own stuff, too, which is about my—about fame and also about, um, my ego, so I don't leave myself out on terms of that either.

And then—and those pieces were done in 1986. And I did a humongous piece at the Hillwood Art Museum that was 16 by 45 feet, so that was a big mother signature. And then I had—then I, later on in 2010, I started with these Birth of the Universe pieces, and I equated natural birth in terms of birth of the universe. And I use—and, uh, those pieces were quite impactful, and they were they were very vaginal, and they were—and they had cocks in it, too. So, all the work has to do with sexuality, but they're all political. And after I was doing these Birth Universe pieces, I was also—I was considering, later on because of Donald Trump, as soon as he was—even before he was elected, I started out doing these *Cabinet of Horrors*. I had a show at the Drawing Center in Manhattan, and I called it *Cabinet of Horrors* and then all about—all about Donald Trump and *Trumpenschlong* and Kim Jong-un, as well as *Putinschlong*.

So I had all these—all these names and all these pieces and, um, also with the—with the—I also did a show at Paul Kasmin called Money Shot, which is a very crude, uh, term for, uh, for sexuality, and Donald Trump being the recipient of the cum all over him, uh, be—and so I—it's funny because people said, "Oh, she's gone too far." But as things turned out, I had not gone too

far. I had not gone even far enough to this horror. So, that was in 2016 and 2017. And then I, I did—I started Death Universe. Now, Death Universe, I always had in mind doing because I did Birth Universe, I had in mind doing Death Universe. And originally, it had to do with the fact that Donald Trump was so insane and egging on Kim Jong-un, there could be World War III and also, uh, blackholes eating each other, that was also a factor. But now it is really—it's seen in the light of the pandemic with Death Universe.

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And it's what's also interesting is that nothing remains the same. What I meant is it's always in a different context. As time goes on, things happen different, so that it's very relevant now. And I also—I did those pieces in um 2018, which is not that far away [laughs]. And, um, then I did a series that were called BLUE BALLS, and blue balls is—it was—it's the term that you think it is. And it's—there is so much explosive energy, by the way, waiting to pop, by the way. So that was, that was BLUE BALLS in 2019.

And I—then I went to another thing that I thought was interesting was GASLIGHTING and gaslighting—a term people may know, but nevertheless it's an abusive term. And it's from a movie that was with, um, Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer, and in this movie he tries to make her think that she's going insane. So, it's a form of abuse. It erases the reality of the other person, and this kind of thing Donald Trump did, but nevertheless, people do it all the time. Men do it to men; women do it to women; women do it to kids. It's all—it's all part of that.

And now HOT HANDS is what I've been focusing on right at this moment. I'm using this term, this term is a term that basketball uses. Because it's someone who is always getting the basket; they want to give the ball to that person because it's the myth that if they've gotten the basket a couple times, that they have more of a chance of getting the basket again. Statistically, it's not true, but it is the myth. So I've used the blue—hot hands, but I—and I have a tendency to do stream of consciousness. So therefore, when I start in with all this, um, in the HOT HANDS, it actually travels. So therefore, it could be about the stock market; it could be about abuse; it could be—it could be about many, many other kinds of things with the HOT HANDS.

So, that's where I'm working now. But it's been an extraordinary time for me to work, um in lockdown. But, you know, I'm always—I live alone, with a cat [laughs]. That doesn't completely count. But nevertheless—but I do take care of her [laughs], but nevertheless, um, I'm alone and, in a way, it's a gift in terms of working, because it also focuses your time and focuses your energy on something that you really—that is your passion. So it's been a—it's been great in that respect, but it's been a horror because of the outside world and the pandemic, you know. And of course, um, I'm an older person and thought about, if there was a pandemic—and there is a pandemic, of course—but what if I've got—if I get it, and I'm also someone who has other medical issues, that I don't know if I could survive it. So, there's also that and there's also the fear of the economics that are happening, so it's an extraordinary time.

But I will tell you that it's a gift to—being an artist and be able to focus in on these issues. And it's been a continuum for me. And I love, I love the titles of things, because it makes it—it's not only that it makes it more fun, but it's memorable. But it's also—it also nails what it's about. And, um, and, of course, with me, everything is a double and triple entendre. [Laughs.] So nevertheless—I nailed it, by the way, with the HOT HANDS. And I'm going to have a show at The Box LA. It's my fifth show there, and the gallery is owned by Paul McCarthy. And I will have—it's called *HOT HANDS*, and I will have kind of an anthology of the zeitgeist of this timeframe.

And the zeitgeist will include, um, Death Universe, Birth Universe, BLUE BALLS, GASLIGHTING, and HOT HANDS. And it's called *HOT HANDS*. And I like *HOT HANDS* because there is a mystery to it and yet there's a big directness to it. So, I'm on—I'm on my way, by the way. But, you know, it's wonderful to be able to constantly, uh, work and use your energy to zero in on the zeitgeist of the timeframe which is, which is here. And it's a pandemic that we have never had, and it's—and, um, none of us remember, obviously, yellow fever or typhoid or any of those other kinds of things, so it's—uh, it's been quite a lot.

[00:10:37]

And I'll tell you what's also very interesting, the George Floyd, uh, issue. And that has been extraordinary. I've used HOT HANDS in relationship to that, too. But, um, the joy—I was so impressed with the worldwide response, which has been extraordinary beyond belief. And, um, it's so, um—it's so fabulous that, worldwide, this has caught on, and the inequities of the system

and civil rights and human rights have been—um, that people can relate to in terms of their own life, not only—not only people of color, but all—but many—but races and ethnicities and many other things. So, I hope, at this time, that more can come and, uh, be part of it. And also, hopefully, Donald Trump will not be re-elected. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: So, do—um, I guess I'm hearing a little bit about the low-grade anxiety that's going on all the time.

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: That's right. And I know that a lot of times it's a high-grade anxiety. I have to try to keep it low grade. [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: Right. Do you find that working, um, and planning ahead for your show at Box LA, does that help you to put that anxiety to the side or is it always there?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: [inaudible] something—it's kind of like a lead weight. You know what—it's like being in a dentist's office when you have that—when they're taking an X-ray and you have it on your chest, it's kind of like always there. It's like the big elephant in the room, and so it's always there. But when you—when I'm working on my work, I do zero in, like with blinders, and just zero in on the work. But there's no question that there's an underlying anxiety that's always there. Yeah. Sometimes that can help you in terms of the work. But nevertheless, um, it's—I don't know that if it's good for your health in the long run [laughs]. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: And being a long time New York artist, um, how have you felt the energy change in the city while you're working in quarantine?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: Well, I live in Chinatown and, um, I go—I went out—I have to go out a drop—with mask and gloves, obviously—and to the post office, to the bank, to a bodega on the corner, things like that, a couple—a couple of things. Um, and [laughs] they also have—they also have the, uh, liquor stores open. I don't drink, by the way, but anyway, there's a liquor store open in terms of all that, too. I think—and the—Chinatown, many times, has had a lot of people out all the time; there's a lot of street traffic; there's a lot of cars. You go out and there was like no one there, just no one. It's almost like those sci-fi movies in the '50s where they've had—and this—in those cases, it had to do with an A-bomb or an H-bomb. But nevertheless, no one is there. And it's eerie; it's absolutely eerie. So—and as things opened up slightly, you know, you can get takeout and stuff like that, uh, but everyone in Chinatown is very—is wearing masks. Even the homeless are wearing mask and gloves. So, uh, maybe not gloves as much, but they—I don't see anyone on the street without masks. And of course, as it's opened up, there are more people here. The social distancing has not been quite as good, but there's no question that people are very concerned, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Is there anything in particular you're looking forward to later this year? I mean, do you have a sense of when some galleries might reopen? Although—

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: Yes.

BEN GILLESPIE: —granted, the first wave still feels like it's carrying on.

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: Right? Well, you know, it's funny. The first thing I want to do, I want to go to a restaurant. I want to eat [laughs]. I want to eat good food. I want to sit down. So, I'll tell you something, I'm actually most concerned with that. But I do want to go to museums, galleries and the—and some movies, so it's not, by the way, that I'm—not interested in that. But I have to say, my first thought is restaurants because my—I'm not a cook and I've been eating—don't even go there, by the way, terrible stuff, by the way, just enough to quench the appetite. So, I can't wait to get a good meal at a restaurant. [Laughs.]

[00:15:15]

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. Well—and, um, so, what's the schedule for the show at The Box LA?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: Well, the schedule is—it's wonderful, because it's going to start in September, and it will run through December. Now, that's a very long show, but now they've closed down again, in LA, at The Box LA, and so it may be, you know, people have to call first or find out what it's like and—at that time. So, I imagine that—I imagine it may be a little difficult and, if there is too much closed down, it may go to January, stuff like that. But it will be a show that will have a lot of work. And it will have, um, I would say I cherrypicked four years of work and they're large, they're impactful, and they will be under fluorescent light, most of it. And it'll

be a killer. Yes, yes [laughs]. Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, that's something we can all look forward to, um, on the other side of this. So, I mean, looking forward, the kind of sort of work you're making now, what lessons feel the most important coming out of COVID-19, out of George Floyd's murder, um, moving into, you know, 2021 and, hopefully, safer waters?

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: Yeah, well, um, you know, I'll tell you something. I'm interested in the political work. And I do think that the Black Lives Matter, the, um, the work that was done on the streets with the stencils is a killer. That is just fabulous, by the way. And I think that was extremely impactful. I'm looking forward, at this time of the pandemic, to have more galleries and museums showing political work. Political work, it—you know, people think that that's something that is, uh—always gets coverage, but that is not true. The reason is, is that it doesn't—many times, it doesn't sell as much and, um, it's more—it's more problematic. And even with—when I had the Donald Trump show, there were—that was hard to get a gallery to show my work because many times the backers of galleries and the collectors may be for Donald Trump. So, I think that, at this point in time, the politics are really in the forefront and that's what should be shown. So, I think that that's really what it's about at this point in time, because it's the zeitgeist of the times, and it also has filtered into the zeitgeist of the art world.

BEN GILLESPIE: And do you have any sense of what your next catchy title will be after—

[They laugh.]

—I mean, BLUE BALLS, HOT HANDS? I mean—

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: You know something? There's never enough hot titles. And, you know, it's funny—and, you know, it's really funny. When I had this *FUCK VIETNAM* show, you know, people said, "Oh, that's so crude." Well, I want to tell you something, you can't be as crude as war. You can't be as crude as a pandemic. You can't be as crude as so many people dying. 135,000 people dying in the United States. You can't be as crude as that, by the way. And when—when you have, um, a word that is crude, it nails what it's about, and it doesn't—it doesn't pussyfoot, so to speak [laughs], um, you know, lightly on issues that are very, very horrendous at this time, by the way. And not only that, we're not over this. There are—it looks like there will be some vaccines that are coming out. But that is very problematic, that it will get to Africa, South America, and all over the world at a very fast pace. And there'll be a few million people who will probably die. And it's just a horrendous kind of thing. And Donald Trump has—he should be—he should be a war criminal, by the way, in terms of how he's treated this and everything else.

Uh, so hopefully, um, you know, things will get better. It will obviously get better. It is not something that'll be forever. They do think that there will be other pandemics because of climate issues and all that, and I'm sure that that will be the case. But nevertheless, the fact that they will probably have a vaccine so soon is extremely, um, energizing and wonderful and extraordinary. So, um, I'm looking forward—I'm looking forward to that, obviously, and I'm looking forward to going out. It will never be the same. People say it'll return to normal. That will never happen. It—you can only move forward. It never returns; it never goes back; it always goes forward. So, there'll be, um—there'll be issues that we have to deal with constantly. And I imagine, then, I'll be wearing the mask for at least, uh, until next year, if not longer, maybe to 2022. But um, I don't have any inside information about the vaccines or anything else. It's just my interpretation of what's out there. And—but I think that it's really terrific that it's on the news so much, and so many people are listening to things that are fake news.

[00:20:39]

Fake news is propaganda. There's no such thing as fake new—rather, fake facts, it is propaganda. So, um, hopefully uh, the president will be out of office in January and hopefully the election will go well. I, uh—in the show that I had at the Drawing Center, *Cabinet of Horrors*, I had a big button that said "Judith Bernstein 2020" [laughs]. I don't intend to run; it's a joke. But nevertheless, um, it was fun for me to have these wonderful big buttons that *Trumpenschlong* and *Cabinet of Horrors* and other things that related to work outside the art world as well as within, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I think "Judith Bernstein 2020" is an amazing place to end this interview.

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: [Laughs.] Right

BEN GILLESPIE: Thank you very much for joining me today. And—

JUDITH BERNSTEIN: Yes! And thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure.

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