



JUDITH BERNSTEIN

The unrelenting, rhythmic energy and the unequivocal dynamism with which Judith Bernstein invested her canvases in the decade of the '70s has been newly reaffirmed in her recent one-person show at A.I.R. Then the preeminent goddess of the Olympian screw, that fetishistic emblem of primal power, Bernstein now enters the '80s a gracious matriarch who nurtures her images with a more subtle and still more sensual vocabulary of artistic allusions. The ominous, driving force unleashed in her phallic effigies has been tamed. The ragged edge of a once raw and aggressive sexuality is now soothed and refined. This is not to say that the graphic thrust or potency of her visual evocations have diminished; on the contrary, their strength and vitality have endured. What we are witnessing here is a period of regeneration, when the discovery of new sources brings forth new ideas and new attitudes.

For example, Bernstein's present images, which deal with sexuality on many levels, are free from the raucous overtones of previous work. Her first graffiti drawings in the mid '60s represented a phase when bold, calligraphic gesture was combined with sexually and politically motivated themes. Caustic anti-war

pieces followed, heavily phallic pictorial images that crudely elucidated the implicit relation between war, violence, and male aggression. Such visual/semantic double-entendres let loose a natural watershed of sexual imagery that ultimately evolved into Bernstein's artistic "signature," that seemingly innocuous item called the screw. At first very mechanically conceived, these charcoal screws gradually metamorphosed into hairy projectiles - visual equations of phallic power, an image whose massive energy became the icon of a sexually controversial age.

Bernstein's dialogue with sexuality and power has carried over in her recent work. New visual metaphors arouse more ambivalent connotations as they move away from an explicitly sexual (male) referent. More subtle, more abstract and psychologically complex, they have been modified into symbols derived from organic rather than inorganic sources. In her highly effective installation, "Metaphorical Series," the expressive, more lyrical handling of plant and human forms makes new visual allusions to sexual themes in the world of nature. *Anthurium Thru Venus, A Thru V*, a composite work consisting of 12 of the original drawings for the series, stands as a reservoir for

this appealing and very sensuous imagery. The anthurium, that spiky flower of dubious gender, along with the equivocal cacti, reappears in many sexual guises. 'Venus' greets us as an androgynous being embodying female as well as male genitalia.

Within this "architectural environment of the mind," these metaphorical images assert their ambivalent characters. Bernstein's large charcoal canvases explore the interplay between sexual and organic, male and female, and literal and abstract expression. Their thick, black, lustrous lines set up a rhythmic tension that unites them with the hotly colored, graphically bold anthurium border above. Another large piece, *Anthurium Cluster*, gracefully drawn on a sensuous surface of silk and linen, investigates notions of energy in a free-flowing, sketchy way. *Mirror Anthurium* provokes more blatant, sexual images with its fully saturated expressionistic color, although the painting is overtly concerned with patterns, shapes, and vibrant hues.

The *Venus Triptych*, however, a unit of three charcoal drawings and nine oils, makes the strongest metaphorical statement concerning the relation of power and sexuality. Contained within this work is the andro-

gynous Venus figure (center), flanked left and right by male and female elements. Almost like African art, these images are endowed with primordial feeling and described by strong gestural movement. The male forms seem to reappear as the head of a phallus/screw, abstracted and globular; the female, a flower form, seems to acquire a gaping genital character. Venus, who merges male with female, expresses the duality in metaphorical terms. An embodiment of the transition of roles so prevalent in contemporary culture, the image manifests a sexual self-awareness on the part of women, and the power that men have which they eventually must share.

Such an image is a primordial idea or Archetype, which refers to symbolic expressions of psychic images eternally present in the collective unconscious. These symbols are manifested in the figure of the Great Mother, whether it be the ancient Venus of Willendorf or the Venus of Bernstein. Though the latter image heavily alludes to phallic form, both examples reveal the central symbol of the rounded vessel: belly and breasts, the primary region of bearing and nurturing; posterior and genitals, symbols of fertility and sexuality. This equation of woman/body/vessel reinforces notions of the Earth Mother as "life-vessel," from whom all things are born, and to whom all things return.

A more perfect metaphor for this archetypal image cannot be found anywhere but in Bernstein's *Landscape*. There, flowing in the contours of the hills and valleys we detect her calligraphic signature. In the naming, she becomes Mother Earth herself. A 'male' presence occupies the sky, an expression of a current patriarchal world view which determines the position of man and woman in the sexual act.

Like Bernstein's Venus, the archetypal Goddess also manifests the human experience in both feminine and masculine terms, but in the contemporary image any specific sexual references more often remain in the realm of suggestion. At this point Bernstein is freed from the jurisdiction of "female" art. She's an artist who just happens to be a woman. (A.I.R., April 24-May 12)

Susan Stanyon