ART AND CAKE

A Contemporary Art Magazine with a Focus on the Los Angeles Art Scene

CUNT at Venus Over Los Angeles

By Sydney Walters

CUNT at Venus Over Los Angeles. Photo Courtesy of Venus Over Los Angeles.

For those versed in feminist art history, Venus Over Los Angeles's show *CUNT*, is an intimate art collection from six key players of the feminist art movement. If you are unfamiliar with feminist art history, welcome to a crash course.

CUNT has plucked notable works from Judith Bernstein, VALIE EXPORT, Dorothy Iannone, Marilyn Minter, Carolee Schneemann and Betty Tompkins, all pioneers of the feminist sexual liberation front of the 1970s. True to its title, the *CUNT* exhibition has no shortage of vaginas. That said, Belen Piñeiro, gallery director for Venus Over Los Angeles, is adamant that *CUNT* is not an erotic show. "The context in which the female body has been traditionally depicted through art history has mainly been set on a paradigm such as to be in the service of the male gaze. And this exhibition definitely doesn't service that. Although the definition of eroticism and sexual mysticism can be discussed, this is not a sexy show."

Indeed, this show highlights artists devoted to vaginas that are at times humorous, other times violent, but most significantly a channel for female pleasure for the purpose of her own enjoyment. In other words, this is a show of self-proclaimed ownership.

On two long tables, thirty-four small drawings are displayed from Dorothy Iannone's expansive project *Lists IV: A Much More Detailed Than Requested Reconstruction*. A list of all the men she has had sex with is displayed alongside her primitive renderings of sexual ecstasy in psychedelic compositions. In *I Was Thinking Of You III*, she transposes her multicolored hieroglyphics onto a large rectangular box with a small, inset television screen which plays a looped video of her face as she masturbates. She appears stiff and immobile because while masturbating, she was intent on staying within the parameters of the screen. Therevore, the box becomes a vessel for a specific sexual experience. By adding Byzantine allusive décor, she intimates a transcendent, goddess existence.

Two charcoal drawings of a phallus with a screw shaft hang fifteen feet from the ceiling rafters. Judith Bernstein's *Vertical #1* and *Vertical #2* suggest entrance columns. While architectural columns are necessary to stabilize construction, these fabric columns destabilize the notion that the phallus (and therefore men) are necessary in propping up artistic institutions. In this instance, male dominance can easily be taken down, folded and put away.

Any millennial familiar with musician Miley Cyrus might recognize her in these steamy images as a muse for notable photographer Marilyn Minter. Minter has a distinct style when it comes to representing the female body. She masters the push and pull of information by posing her models behind steamy glass. The result is a sweaty, sexy configuration that slows down audience accessibility to her images from the all-too-readily availability of naked women in pornography.

Likewise, in the late 1960s, VALIE EXPORT publicly addressed the accessibility of the female body by shifting voyeurism into a tangible experience. In her avant-garde performance *Touch Cinema*, VALIE EXPORT fabricates a "movie theater" over her upper body and stood in the

street, inviting people to reach past the curtains covering the entrance of her personal "theater" and feel her breasts. It came as no surprise that the media and public responded to *Touch Cinema* in panic and fear.

Valie Export. CUNT at Venus Over Los Angeles. Photo Courtesy of Venus Over Los Angeles.

And speaking of fear, one of the most significant decisions for the show was of course its provocative title. Belen Piñeiro comments: "The name was one of the most difficult aspects in the construction of the show. It is highly connotative and constitutes one of the last
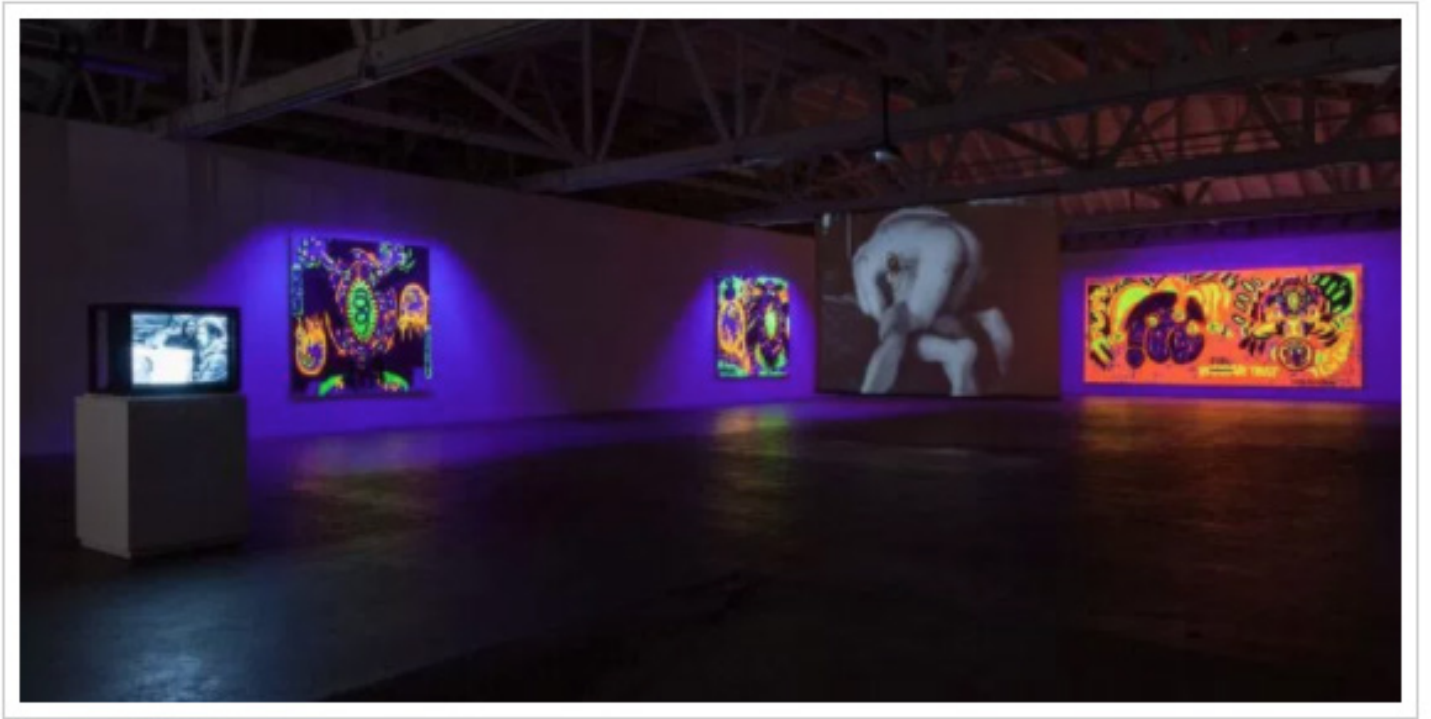
taboos in the English language. The idea behind this exhibition is to transgress comfort zones through the work of major artists that have dedicated their entire practice to challenge these. The choice of displaying works focusing on the depiction of the vagina and allowing it to be at the center of the show concentrates the attention towards a heavily charged imagery. Nevertheless through repetition and letting the eye accommodate, the image is both de-activated and yet empowered rightfully as the universal form that it is. The "CUNT" title is destabilized in the same way – by introducing it in the show's narrative and giving permission to the public to use it, the word is discharged. It's a way to reclaim the word and the body."

An artist unabashedly embracing "cunt" verbiage is Judith Bernstein. As previously mentioned, her phallic banners are in the main gallery, but in the second gallery, large paintings erupt under UV light as acrid green and orange add to the chaotic drama of these violent paintings. Their graffiti-like quickness crafts voracious scenes of screaming, toothed vaginas in retaliation against erect penises. In *Cuntface Red*, a fiery vagina is in place of a person's head while flaccid penises fearfully skirt the edges of the canvas. In *In Evil We Trust*, the United States emblem drops like an atomic bomb and an angry vagina is expelled in the plume. The addition of "Trumpistan" and "Trumpery" written the corners, helps place the painting in 2017.

One element missing in *CUNT* is women of color. Some black contemporaries such as Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold and Maren Hassinger were more preoccupied with etching complex black narratives than the vagina as subject. But black bodies have been just as effected, if not more so considering slavery, by the male gaze as white artists. Therefore, *CUNT* is indeed an important, though not entirely inclusive cannon of the of 1960s and 1970s artists whose practice is just as vivacious today as it was fifty years ago.

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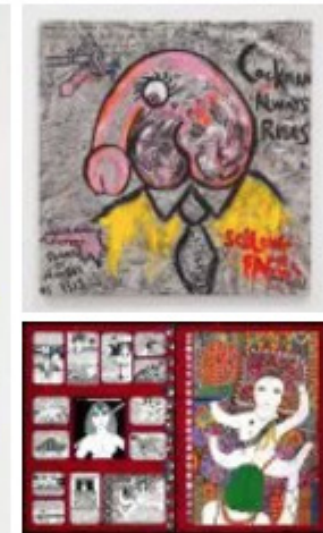MANHATTAN   LOS ANGELES