

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editors,

The almost immediate discomfort I felt in the newly opened Jason Rhoades exhibition at Hauser & Wirth could only be channeled into a list of terms that I quickly jotted down into my notepad: *hyper-masculinity, masturbatory, gendered, violent, hetero-normative, etc.* Certainly I am aware of my own vulnerability, as first and foremost a woman. No, this does not mean that I want only safe spaces in art! Contested spaces are necessary to initiate conversations, questions, and potential answers.

In *The Black Pussy...and the Pagan Idol Workshop* (installation), Rhoades persistently attempts to reclaim the term *pussy* in 427 differently lit neon instances, untroubled by his positioning as a white heterosexual man and what that might mean or continue to perpetuate in the world circa 2005 (the year the work was made). Unfortunately, this does little more than add insult to injury to our particular current moment in American history, when the U.S. President feels little to no problem communicating the term *pussy*, as something he can use, abuse, and own. Of course, whether I was confronted by this work in 2005 or today would make little difference. Today, I am enraged. Today, I am a woman reclaiming my right to this word. I refuse to allow another man to use it with the cool ease of Trump, Jason Rhoades, or any other “All-American male” lurking on the internet in the darkness of a suburban basement interior, looking for pussy.

In the following gallery *The Creation Myth* (1998) implies a narrative and ownership to a fucked-up world through an, unsurprisingly, male narrative that at least half of us do not ascribe to, but are inevitably implicated in. This begs the question as to why the art world celebrates in the ejaculatory reaffirmation of the all-encompassing ever-powerful American male? Do we need to be reminded, through the traumatization of images viscerally and violently felt by anyone who is not a heterosexual man? It is important to recognize that characteristic in Rhoades’ work and the trauma it is capable of invoking upon bodies moving through the space of the gallery.

The Creation Myth begs us to find sympathy for *man*. I beg sympathy for women and for the oppressed in a way that does not reaffirm my oppression.

Ironically (and luckily) within a two-block radius from Hauser & Wirth, The Box was open with *COCK IN THE BOX*, a solo exhibition of Judith Bernstein’s work. Here one was able to see the infamous screw drawings of the 1970s, as well as more recent work. The proximity of this exhibition to the spectacle of Jason Rhoades provided an opportunity to understand the ways in which gender dynamics function within the infrastructure of art. Throughout the duration of *COCK IN THE BOX* (February 11–March 18), Angelenos, had the opportunity to spend time with the work of Jason Rhoades, who within the span of his career endured little to no criticism regardless of his violent and aimless misappropriation tactics. Judith Bernstein not only experienced criticism but also censorship of her work in 1973. This action is not dissimilar to the historical exclusion of women artists from institutions of art, or more direct forms of violence and censorship set against the context of rising feminism in America.

In retrospect, the juxtaposition of Judith Bernstein’s *COCK IN THE BOX* in simultaneity with the Rhoades exhibition offered a space of respite and a provocative engagement with the work. Again, the heterosexual white male artist (sigh) receives space, time, and acclaim for a largely inappropriate display of masculinity via modalities of art. It is our choice whether we want to participate in this masturbatory celebration or not.

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