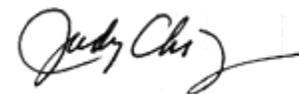


"I believe in art that is connected to real human feeling, that extends itself beyond the limits of the art world to embrace all people who are striving for alternatives in an increasingly dehumanized world. I am trying to make art that relates to the deepest and most mythic concerns of human kind and I believe that, at this moment of history, feminism is humanism."



SYNOPSIS

Judy Chicago was one of the pioneers of Feminist art in the 1970s, a movement that endeavored to reflect women's lives, call attention to women's roles as artists, and alter the conditions under which contemporary art was produced and received. In the process, Feminist art questioned the authority of the male-dominated Western canon and posed one of the most significant challenges to modernism, which was at the time wholly preoccupied with conditions of formalism as opposed to personal narrative and political activity. Seeking to redress women's traditional underrepresentation in the visual arts, Chicago focused on female subject matter, most famously in her work *The Dinner Party* (1979), which celebrates the achievements of women throughout history, scandalizing audiences with her frank use of vaginal imagery. In her work, Chicago employed the "feminine" arts long relegated to the lowest rungs of the artistic hierarchy, such as needlework and embroidery. Chicago articulated her feminist vision not only as an artist, but also as an educator and organizer, most notably, in co-founding of the Feminist Art Program at Cal State Fresno as well as the installation and performance space, Womanhouse.

KEY IDEAS

Inspired by the women's movement and rebelling against the male-dominated art scene of the 1960s, which lionized the Minimalist work of artists like Donald Judd, Chicago embraced explicitly female content. Creating works that recognized the achievements of major female historical figures or celebrated women's unique experiences, Chicago produced a rich body of work that sought to add women to the historic record and, more generally, to enhance their representation in the visual arts.

Just as she elevated explicitly female subject matter, Chicago embraced artistic media whose creators were exclusively or mainly women and (perhaps not coincidentally) dismissed by the high art world as merely "craft." Art forms such as needlework, ceramic decoration, and glass art are central to Chicago's work, often included alongside traditional high art media, such as painting. Works such as *The Dinner Party* helped validate the importance of crafts-based art forms and break down the boundaries separating them from their "high" art counterparts.

Along with fellow artist Miriam Schapiro, Chicago co-founded several pioneering ventures that sought to change the structure of women's artistic training, as well as broaden their access to, and visibility in, contemporary art. The women-only Feminist Art program, established at California Institute of Arts, centered on women's identity, experiences, and collaborative, discussion-based practices such as consciousness-raising. Womanhouse, co-founded by Chicago and Schapiro as an outgrowth of the Feminist Art program, was an installation and performance space dedicated to female creative expression.

JUDY CHICAGO BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Judy Chicago was born Judy Cohen in 1939 in Chicago, Illinois, in the last year of the Great Depression. She grew up in a liberal environment; unusual for the time, her intellectual Jewish parents both worked to support their children and openly articulated their left-wing politics. Chicago began drawing at the age of three and attending classes at the Institute of Chicago starting in 1947. In 1948, her father, Arthur Cohen, left his union job in the midst of the McCarthy blacklist and the controversy surrounding the family's "Communist" leanings. Two years later, he died from a massive stomach ulcer.

Early training

Having attended art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago throughout her teens, Chicago went on to train at UCLA, where she received her M.F.A. in 1964. Her early paintings were bold depictions of female sexual expression, but rejection from her peers soon persuaded Chicago to turn her attention to sculpture, creating casts strung with heavy ropes and large, clay forms in a less representational style. By the 1960s, Chicago—now married and with the last name of Gerowitz—began gaining recognition for these Minimalist, geometric works that suited 1960s art-world tastes. However, for Chicago, these works constituted an insipid version of her original vision, a suppression of her real concerns and forms of expression to fit in with a male-dominated aesthetic.

In 1961, Chicago's husband died in a car accident. Her use of imagery in the aftermath of this tragedy became notably more expressive and personal, rooted in her feelings and grief. In work from this period, there is the re-emergence of the body as theme and inspiration—still in abstract form, but recognizable as the female unwillingly dominated by the male, a visual motif for the obstacles Chicago felt she faced in life. The subsequent years reflect Chicago's continuing attempt to reconcile her identity as a woman and an artist. Attending graduate and later auto-body school, she learned both sculptural and spray-painting techniques. Chicago began to take risks with her increasingly representational depiction of the vulva, demonstrating a stubborn refusal to succumb to the abstract aesthetic prevailing in the patriarchally defined art world. Her first solo exhibition, occurring in 1965, was largely Minimalist, but through the mid-1960s and 1970s, her work became increasingly dominated by explicitly feminist themes. In 1969, Chicago remarried, but this time she rejected the tradition of taking her husband's name, selecting instead a new surname—Chicago—as a statement of independence as well as a tribute to her hometown.



In 1970, Chicago pioneered a radical educational experiment fundamental to the emerging women's movement. Chicago, along with fellow artist Miriam Schapiro, ran a women-only art course at California State University in Fresno before moving it to the California Institute of Arts in Valencia. The course focused on the development of technique and expression through the process of "consciousness-raising," which recognized female identity and independence through the group's art practice, combining object-making, installation, and performance. From this experiment emerged Womanhouse, an art space created by Chicago and her students to provide a forum for teaching, performance, exhibition, discussion, and expression. Although successful, the project was frequently beset with tension over leadership within the group. Chicago resented the inequality of the educational institution within which the project was based, and felt the need to create an "alternative system" far from Cal Arts. In 1973, she founded the Feminist Studio workshop in an entirely separate location in Los Angeles. There, *Womanhouse* expanded to become the Woman's Building in a site among numerous other creative feminist organizations. The female arts community in Los Angeles was now firmly established, and has become a major symbol of the 1970s feminist movement.

In 1974, Chicago began her most significant and most controversial work. In her drive to reinstate women's stories into mainstream historic narrative, she was drawn to art-making techniques dismissed by the fine art world as craft, such as ceramic decoration and embroidery. Working collaboratively using the needlework and glass-based practices of artisans, Chicago created an installation that celebrated the forgotten women of Western civilization. *The Dinner Party* (1979) was a monumental thirty-nine place dinner table presented in a triangular form with a plate to mark each guest's place, many of which were inscribed with symbols of the vulva. *The Dinner Party* opened in March 1979 at the San Francisco Museum to over five thousand attendees and much discussion. Dismissed as "kitsch," "bad art," and "obscene" by Hilton Kramer and other art critics, the piece was famously dismantled and stored away, rejected by institutions throughout the country. Three decades of protest and controversy surrounding the piece followed until it was finally reinstalled in 2007 in a permanent exhibition space at the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art in Brooklyn, New York. Amid the development of feminist thought that has occurred since the time of its creation, the work's association of womanhood with the overt

physicality has most frequently provoked the criticism that Chicago essentializes women's experience as basic biological attributes, that being a woman can be reduced to simply having a vagina. *The Dinner Party* remains both an important symbol of the women's movement and a work of contention to this day.

Late Years

In her later years, Chicago's focus shifted gradually from a solely feminist perspective to a broader concern with the underrepresentation of female experience in visual media. After *The Dinner Party* came the *Birth Project*. From 1980 to 1985, Chicago was in contact with women throughout the globe to create needlework pieces in response to a perceived absence of birth imagery in both historic narratives and the visual arts in general. The artist then turned her attention to exploring the manifestations of masculinity in a series of large-scale paintings entitled *Powerplay*, and then moved on to explore her identity as a woman of the Jewish faith. Working with the photographer and her soon-to-be third husband Donald Woodman, Chicago directed an eight-year-long project dedicated to unearthing Holocaust imagery and culminating in a multimedia installation, *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light*. Like much her work, *The Holocaust Project* toured the U.S. to widespread acclaim and controversy.



Working again with experienced needleworkers, from 1994 to 2001 Chicago was occupied in creating *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time*, which reinvented traditional proverbs to promote lost social values for a contemporary multicultural society. In 1999, in partnership with Woodman, she returned to teaching, expanding her pedagogical approach significantly from the 1970s to incorporate a male influence. Chicago's three most recent projects have seen her documenting her cats in a humorous book, developing glass-blowing techniques, and engaging in a piece entitled *Atmospheres*, which recalls a project she began back in the 1970s. Using pyrotechnics, the latter work will be a smoke-and-firework piece that will be shown as part of *Pacific Standard Time*, an exhibition documenting and celebrating southern California art from 1945 to 1980, a period coinciding with Chicago's own activity.

LEGACY

Judy Chicago's work is significant for furthering the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and for the recognition and reinstatement of women's roles throughout history, as well as for her dedication to the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies of fine art and craft, her zeal for the rediscovery of forgotten or undervalued technique, and for her vision of collaborative art-making. Her commitment to female subject matter provided a critical example followed by several generations of contemporary artists, such as video and performance artist Martha Rosler, while Chicago's embrace of "female" art forms such as needlework and embroidery influenced many practitioners of textile art, including the contemporary textile artists Orly Kogan and Gillian Strong. Chicago's legacy is also felt in her role as teacher, writer, and moving force behind such ventures as Womanhouse and Through the Flower, dedicated to using art to prevent the erasure of women's achievements. Chicago has written eight major books documenting her and other female artists' work, including *Women and Art: Contested Territory*.

Original content written by Sarah Jenkins

JUDY CHICAGO QUOTES

"Women's history and women's art needs to become part of our cultural and intellectual heritage."

"I could no longer pretend in my art that being a woman had no meaning."

"There has to be more room for us as artists. We have to be able to be seen in our fullness in terms of our own artistic agency, and we're a long way from that."

"Because we are denied knowledge of our history, we are deprived of standing upon each other's shoulders and building upon each other's hard earned accomplishments. Instead we are condemned to repeat what others have done before us and thus we continually reinvent the wheel. The goal of *The Dinner Party* is to break this cycle."

INFLUENCES

ARTISTS



Louise Nevelson



Lee Bontecou



Frida Kahlo



Miriam Schapiro

FRIENDS



Anais Nin



Lucy Lippard



Allan Kaprow

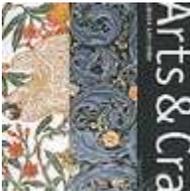
MOVEMENTS



Minimalism



Performance Art



Arts and Crafts Movement



Judy Chicago

Years Worked: 1964 - present



ARTISTS



Suzanne Lacy



Martha Rosler



Edward Lucie-Smith

FRIENDS



Lucy Lippard



Arlene Raven



Sheila de Bretteville

MOVEMENTS



Minimalism



Feminist Art



Performance Art



Postmodern Art

ARTWORKS



Title: *Domes* (1968)

Artwork Description & Analysis: Composed of three dome-like forms and using transparent material with spray-on plastic, this piece is rendered in the Minimalist style of Chicago's early work. Its use of repeated shapes and glossy, "industrial" media suggest the work of artists such as Donald Judd, though there is significant contrast to the hard, geometric forms of Judd and his contemporaries in the deployment of softer, rounded forms that suggest a kind of ambiguous femininity. Critic Susan Jenkins suggests that the work prefigures the "purely feminist idiom" that was to come: the three domes make up what came to be Chicago's signature stylistic motif, the triangle, closely associated with vaginal imagery in Chicago's oeuvre.

Sprayed acrylic lacquer inside clear acrylic - EDG, Exhibits Development Group



Title: *Through the Flower* (1973)

Artwork Description & Analysis: Created by the artist after Chicago's decade-long "struggl[e]... in a male-dominated art community," *Through the Flower* marks the artist's newfound embrace of less abstract and more accessible imagery: the female sexual organ, depicted here as a round element or opening. The painting's "trippy" opticality relates at least in part to the artist's experience with mood-altering drugs. The subject matter is radical: genitals were always demurely concealed or merely suggested in the tradition of the female nude, yet here the vaginal opening constitutes the focus of the work. *Through the Flower* is one of the landmark pieces of Chicago's early feminist phase. It serves as the title and cover of the artist's 1975 autobiography as well as the name of the non-profit feminist art organization she founded in 1978.

Sprayed acrylic on canvas



Title: *The Dinner Party* (1979)

Artwork Description & Analysis: *The Dinner Party* is a monumental installation celebrating forgotten achievements in female history. Chicago described it as, "as a reinterpretation of *The Last Supper* from the point of view of women, who, throughout history, have prepared the meals and set the table." The central form is a forty-eight-foot triangular table with symbolic places set for thirty-nine "guests of honor"—remarkable women from different stages in Western civilization. Each guest has her own runner, embroidered on one side with her name and on the other with imagery illustrating her achievement. Each place setting includes a glass plate, decorated with a butterfly or floral motif symbolizing of the vulva. By incorporating elements of a contemporary social event with the status and appearance of a banquet, Chicago elevates her guests to the role of heroes, a traditionally male epithet. In essence, Chicago states, the work "takes us on a tour of Western civilization, a tour that bypasses what we have been taught to think of as the main road." The floor is inscribed with the names of 999 additional women worthy of recognition, while acknowledgment panels on the walls honor the 129 collaborators who worked with Chicago on the piece.

Regarded as an icon of twentieth-century art, *The Dinner Party* is arguably the most significant and recognized piece of feminist art ever made, notable in its incorporation of collaborative working process, political symbolism, the sheer scale of the media response, and the unprecedented worldwide grassroots movement it prompted in reaction to the work's condemnation. The piece's lasting importance lies in its defiance of fine-art tradition by representing a feminine history

suppressed by patriarchal society, as well as its celebration of the traditional "feminine" crafts: textile arts (weaving, embroidery, and sewing) and ceramic decoration. Featured in sixteen exhibitions in six different countries, *The Dinner Party* has now been seen by more than one million viewers.

Ceramic, porcelain, textile, glass - Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum



Title: *Hatching the Universal Egg* (1984)

Artwork Description & Analysis: After *The Dinner Party*, Chicago continued to address the underrepresentation of female experience, this time related to the lack of imagery in Western culture portraying the moment of birth. One of the images from Chicago's *Birth Project*, created between 1980 and 1985, *Hatching the Universal Egg* depicts a squatting woman giving birth to the egg of life, depicted in rich tones and a warm and translucent light flowing from her womb. The series was a major international collaboration, which involved working with 150 needleworkers to create a series of painted and embroidered images of birth, ranging from the humorous to the mythical. The Birth Project was another significant achievement by Chicago both in her campaign for the representation of womanhood and in the championing of a medium all but dismissed by the world of high art.

Embroidery on silk



Title: *Driving the World to Destruction* (1985)

Artwork Description & Analysis: Part of Chicago's *Powerplay*, a five-year-long project that occupied the artist from 1982 to 1987, *Driving the World to Destruction* portrays an exaggeratedly muscular male figure grasping a steering wheel—here a symbol of uncontrolled patriarchal power. In this series of drawings, paintings, cast paper reliefs, and bronze works inspired by the artist's 1982 trip to Rome, Chicago upends the tradition of the heroic nude. Rather than glorifying her subjects, depicted with the heightened musculature of Renaissance-era nudes, she critiques them, portraying them as almost cartoonish in their quest for domination. Seemingly stripped of skin, the figures are also curiously vulnerable. As with this piece here, the work's titles often include wordplay; another image is titled *Power Headache*. *Powerplay* overlapped with *The Birth Project*, though it marks a shift in subject matter as Chicago moved away from the female body as the sole repository of emotion.

Acrylic and oil on Belgian linen - ACA Galleries est 1932



Title: *Imbalance of Power* (1991)

Artwork Description & Analysis: Representing the "terrible imbalance of priorities in the world's treatment of children," *Imbalance of Power* includes a series of horrifying images, among them a Nazi soldier who appears to be pointing his gun at a Warsaw boy, depictions of starving children, and the famous photograph of a Vietnamese girl being burned by napalm. The work comes from *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness to Light* (1985–93), a multimedia installation composed of a tapestry, two stained-glass windows, and thirteen tableaux (including the work depicted here), incorporating elements of painting and photography in an innovative way. While exploring the manifestations of power in *Powerplay*, Chicago directly encountered issues surrounding the Holocaust, which highlighted her ignorance of her own Jewish heritage. As a result, Chicago, in collaboration with her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman, embarked on a major visual and intellectual research project into the history of the Holocaust. As in this piece, the project as a whole situates the Holocaust in the context of other historical catastrophes, such as the Native American genocide and the Vietnam War. The comparative approach to the subject—which some saw as diminishing the uniquely horrific nature of the Holocaust—made the work highly controversial in the Jewish community.

Sprayed acrylic, oil and photography on photolinen