studio international

Judy Chicago: "I'll leave it to others to change the world"
Written by Anna McNay
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In 1968, Judy Chicago (born Judith Sylvia Cohen, 1939) chose not to participate in the California Women in the Arts exhibition at the Lytton Center because she didn't want to show in any group defined as "women", "Jewish" or "California". A couple of years later, however, she coined the term "feminist art" and she then went on to become known worldwide for her epic $250,000 installation, The Dinner Party (1979) – a large triangular table, measuring 48ft by 43ft by 36ft (14.6 metres by 13 metres by 11 metres), with 39 place settings, each commemorating a historical or mythical female figure. Throughout her career, Chicago has been an outspoken advocate for female artists and has written, taught and co-founded educational establishments in a bid to put an end to what she terms the "institutional failure in our universities and museums to teach the history of feminist art".

In 2011, the Pacific Standard Time project at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, brought attention to a lot of Chicago's early work and reminded people that there is more to her than her iconic place settings. The following year, she had a show at Riflemaker in London, and the year after that, she was included in the Spotlight section – a section for artists whom the curator deems to have been overlooked and deserving of re-evaluation – of Frieze Masters, also in London.

Chicago spoke to Studio International on the dawn of two big shows in London and numerous more around Europe.

Anna McNay: Shall we start by talking a bit about your forthcoming exhibitions in London? You are having a solo show at Riflemaker and are also participating in The World Goes Pop at Tate Modern. Your Riflemaker show is being billed as including some of your great unseen archival works. Are there many of these remaining?

Judy Chicago: Yes, because I made a huge amount of art and am still producing work. For a long time, even though I was very grateful for all the attention The Dinner Party brought me, it also blocked out all the rest of my work. That didn't begin to change until 2011 with Pacific Standard Time at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, which brought attention to a lot of my early work. When I was young and making a lot of that work, I was having a terrible time as a woman artist on the LA art scene, which was very inhospitable to women. Even if I got my work seen, nothing happened. I was struggling. I destroyed a lot of it and put a lot of it into storage, with the idea that, one day, people might be interested in it.

What happened in the early-21st century was a case of what goes around, comes around. It was inconceivable for the Getty curators not to have any women in their shows and, since I was one of

the women working at that time who was taken seriously, I was suddenly in maybe eight museum shows and I had three solo shows. All that early work, which nobody remembered, suddenly got to be seen. That opened the way for a kind of explosion. Last year, I turned 75, and there were all these exhibitions and events around the country, celebrating my birthday. Suddenly I have a lot of art that is finally being seen and that is now coming to Europe. I would have liked to have shown some of my more recent work here, but Riflemaker feels – and I agree – that many people are still not familiar with my earlier work, apart from The Dinner Party, so there's work from the 60s and 70s in the show. There are Dinner Party test plates and some drawings that relate to the place settings. Riflemaker only has a small space, so they can't show any of my big major works, but they are showing one major work, called The Butterfly Test Plates (1973-74), which comprises five plates that chronicle my studying china painting in preparation for The Dinner Party. I think they're kind of nice and they've never been seen in Europe. I think it will be interesting for people to see.

AMc: So the work on show will be recognisably Judy Chicago, for those people who do still only really know The Dinner Party, but it will also exhibit some of your other early works too?

JC: Yes. But I do think that things have changed and people know more about my work already. I had a show, Deflowered, at Riflemaker in 2012 and then I showed at Frieze Masters in 2013. So people got to see some of that early work, including the Car Hoods (1964). In fact, I'm thrilled that all four of my Car Hoods will be back together again at Tate Modern in The World Goes Pop. I sold the first one many years ago and then it got sold at auction to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and it hasn't been with its sisters for a long time.

AMc: It's interesting that you're being included in that exhibition. Do you identify as belonging to the pop art tradition?

JC: It is indeed interesting because a lot of people are now looking back at that period and discovering all these artists and movements that were going on tangentially to pop art. I looked at the list of artists to be included in The World Goes Pop and there are 65 – 25 of them are women, which is a good percentage – but I look at the work of some of these artists and it seems the curators have consumed rather a lot of feminist art, including me. When they asked me to be in the show, they sent me this questionnaire to fill out, and one of the questions was: Do you see yourself as a pop artist? My immediate answer was no, but then, when I thought about it, I realised that I was certainly influenced by the imagery of popular culture. I have a piece called Mother Superette (1963), that's even earlier than the Car Hoods, and that's going to be in my show in Bilbao this autumn. It was influenced by a church around the corner from where I was living, called Mother Superette. This was before I'd discovered goddess worshipping and begun all my research for The Dinner Party, and I just thought it was really interesting that there was a female-centred church and it had a neon sign that impacted on my imagery at the time. I was looking for imagery related to women. So I guess you could say that edges up against pop. There was certainly a pop culture in Los Angeles, even though it was very macho. I just never thought of myself as being a pop artist.

AMc: You've just mentioned that the Tate show is going to subsume a lot of feminist art. Do you still think that is a category that should be kept separate?

JC: When Elizabeth Sackler founded the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum [in 2007], where The Dinner Party is now on display, I had this joke with her. I said: "Elizabeth, there's suddenly going to be all these *women* artists who are going to announce that they're *feminist* artists in order to be in your museum!" Mind you, I don't think only women can make feminist art, because it's just a way of seeing the world with a gender lens. There's a show on now in New York of younger women

artists called Who's Afraid of Feminism? Do I think it's important to recognise a philosophical attitude or underpinning in work around the world? Yes, I do. Feminism is opposed to the prevailing patriarchal structure on this planet. Do I think it's important to say: "This comes out of a different paradigm"? Yes, I do. The underlying purpose of feminist art, to challenge the patriarchy, becomes elegant.

AMc: You've just said that not all women artists are necessarily feminist artists ...

JC: ... Absolutely not!

AMc: Do you get upset when women artists deny being, or say they're not, feminist artists?

JC: Oh, you mean like Tracey Emin?

AMc: Yes, for example.

JC: Even though her work clearly was greatly influenced by feminist art. I mean, Tracey Emin – I like her early work quite a lot. I saw a show of hers on one of my trips to London. What I found aggravating was that she acted as if her work came out of the blue, as if there had not already been two decades of feminist art making its way into the world. However, in terms of your question, I remember myself when I was a young woman. I didn't want to be identified as a woman artist, because, from my point of view, it was like saying: "Hey, she's just a woman!" My work would be reduced or somehow marginalised. I thought, at the beginning, that if I didn't use the label, nobody would notice I was a woman. I had a certain amount of gender consciousness, because I was raised in a political household and my parents believed in equal rights for women, and I knew some of the problems I would face on the LA art scene with the men saying things like: "You can't be a woman and an artist too!" I thought if I tried to point it out, they would say: "What are you, some kind of suffragette?" and I'd be like: "No, no, no!" These days it's changed to: "What are you, some kind of feminist artist?" and, again, the response is: "No, no, no!" It took me a decade to realise that even if I didn't want to identify as a woman, the world saw me as a woman, and the various responses in the art world were definitely shaped by the world's attitudes towards women. I learned it was a better strategy to accept reality rather than to try to deny it.

AMc: Does it ever feel as if your work is being pigeonholed in this category of feminist art, rather than being seen in the context of art as a whole?

JC: I can't make that happen. I struggled with that for years. But now my art is being seen through a pop lens! I'll tell you something: this morning I got an email from a young male artist in Germany who said he had, quite by chance, found a copy of my first autobiography, Through the Flower (1975), which was published in German. He bought it and read it in one day. He told me the story of how he then went to visit a woman artist friend and brought up that he'd just read it. He said: "My friends and I have just spent several days discussing how cool you are." So I guess the fact that I'm a feminist artist has not deterred them from discovering my work. Then he said that he had tried to do something likeWomanhouse [a feminist art installation and performance space organised by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at the California Institute of the Arts in 1972], but from a different point of view, and that he and a friend were about to organise a banquet and had then discovered The Dinner Party. So it is pretty cool, right?

AMc: Are you saying that he was coming up with those ideas before knowing about your having already done them? Talking about Emin again, when I saw your workAutobiography of a Year (1993–94) at Ben Uri, The London Jewish Museum of Art in 2012, I was struck by the similarities between some of your drawings and some of her work on show alongside them – both in theme and style. Obviously yours came first, but do you think there is inevitable overlap when coming from the female artist standpoint and dealing with female subject matter?

JC: I think it's inevitable because of the institutional failure in our universities and museums to teach the history of feminist art. When I did The Dinner Party, it was with the naivety of youth, because I discovered this story of erasure – all these women who'd made contributions that had been basically erased from history – and I thought I could overcome that alone with my paintbrush. The hubris of youth! That was one of my motivations in doing The Dinner Party. You go to art school, you learn about the history of impressionism, for example, and then, when you're an artist, you think: "Well, I'm not going to be a pointillist like Georges Seurat, because he's already done that." If you don't learn about the history of feminist art, then when you're a young – let's say, woman – artist struggling with issues of identity, sexuality, body image, all the things young women struggle with, you're going to make work about that without knowing that there's – at this point – 40 years of work behind you that you could build on, rather than making the same work. So the story of erasure is going on because the history of feminist art is not integrated into our museums and universities and into the curriculum. So yes, it's inevitable that young women are going to waste a lot of time reiterating the same work that has been done before – and sometimes better – until that institutional change happens.

AMc: Are there any young artists out there today whose work you are particularly impressed by?

JC: There are so many artists working around the world now, so I can't imagine that some of the work wouldn't interest me, but, I have to say, because of this institutional failure, there's a lot of work by young people that bores me because I've seen it all before. My last book was called Institutional Time (2014), a critique of studio art education. Because of what's happened in studio art education, where young artists are commenting on work that's commenting on earlier work – a lot of it being Dada – and because there's no emphasis on finding your own voice as an artist, so much of it is so derivative and it's so uninteresting to me.

AMc: So what would your advice be to a young artist out there now?

JC: I would say to stay out of the market until you are sure you have found your own voice and your own compass that defines who your audience is and why you're making art. I never thought I'd make money out of my art – that's not why I started making it. I made art because I had a burning desire to communicate, express, share and make art. I just had to – that's how I've always seen it: I have to. Nowadays the motivations are so different: I want to be famous; I want to make a lot of money; I want to be like Damien Hirst. The hardest thing for an artist now is to have the long, sustained career that I and others of my generation have had, because they're plucked out of graduate school – sometimes even undergraduate school – by some collector and they're hot for five minutes and then you never hear of them again. An art career for a young artist is very perilous now. Young artists today aren't able to do what I did when I was young: work 60 hours a week in my studio. They have to have full-time jobs, they have to support themselves, and they have to pay off their debt. When I was working on Institutional Time, I read a lot of articles about young artists working in New York who said they basically didn't have time to make art apart from in their two-week vacation. I would kill myself! I would have killed myself when I was young if I couldn't have worked in my studio all the time.

AMc: A lot of your works have been large-scale collaborative projects.

JC: Actually, I've gone back and forth from working alone to working with other people and I've done various types of collaborations. Some collaborations are not actually called collaborations – making lithographs, for example, or working in glass, which I've been doing for the past 10 years. So I've had my formal collaborations, which are not recognised as collaborations; and then I've had my own kind of collaborations, where I've created a project such as The Dinner Party or The Birth Project (1985); then I've had smaller collaborations with my husband [Donald Woodman] such as The Holocaust Project (1992). For me, there's no great distinction. It's all making art. It's just a question of whether it requires more than my own hand.

AMc: You just mentioned The Holocaust Project. You embarked on this in the 80s, as a way of exploring your Jewish history in your work. What led to this?

JC: I had already become interested in the subject of the Holocaust when Donald and I met and fell madly in love and got married in the space of just three months. My previous series, Power Play, was an investigation of the construct of masculinity at a time before the word "gender" applied to man. If you think back even to my work before that, I was interested in the history of women's powerlessness, which is what led me to do all that research that became the underpinnings of The Dinner Party. With The Birth Project, I was interested in women's fertile power. Over the summer before I met Donald, I was starting to look at the Holocaust for a couple of reasons, including the basic fact that the idea of powerlessness had probably, at that point, never been seen in such a grotesque manner. The horrific genocide and mass ethnic cleansing we now see all over the world has its roots in the Holocaust. I was interested in why I knew so little about it. I was in my 40s, I grew up in a political household, and even though my parents were secular Jews, still I came from a Jewish background – so why did I not know anything about the Holocaust?

I was starting to think about that when Donald and I met. The film Shoah by Claude Lanzmann was about to premier in New York – an epic nine-hour film that really opened up the subject of the Holocaust in America. I said to Donald: "I want to go to New York and see this film. Do you want to go with me?" I'd known him maybe three weeks at the time. He said yes. So we flew to New York in the fall of 1985. Donald also came from a secular background and both of us were just completely overwhelmed by our own ignorance. I always knew that being Jewish had shaped me and my work in certain ways, so the subtext of The Holocaust Project, as well as exploring the subject, was what does it mean to be Jewish in a post-Holocaust world – which has become more complicated by Middle East politics.

AMc: You say that being Jewish influenced you and also that your upbringing influenced you. Was art a large part of your upbringing? I know you went to classes from a young age.

JC: My father was an intellectual and he wasn't really interested in art. My mother was a dancer and so, when I was four and my pre-school teacher told her that I was talented, like a good, middle-class Jewish mother, who had an interest in art, she sent me to the Art Institute. So I started painting when I was five.

AMc: Were you happy to be at those classes?

JC: I discovered where I belonged, actually. And throughout my life, my art life has been more real than my real life. When Gail Levin was writing my biography [Becoming Judy: A Biography of the

Artist] and interviewing goodness knows who from my past, she would call me up and say: "Judy! I just interviewed so-and-so and he remembers you really well and says you went here and you went there and you did this ..." and I'm like: "Really?" I didn't remember any of that, but I could have told you exactly what I was working on in the studio.

AMc: Obviously you're an artist, and you've talked about working long hours in your studio when you were younger, but you're also an educator and a published writer.

JC: I've published 14 books! I can't believe I've published 14 books.

AMc: Do you consider that to be an extension of being an artist, or is it separate? Part of your real life?

JC: I started writing because of my mentor, Anaïs Nin, the diarist. Anaïs had read an essay I wrote right at the beginning of the 70s about my struggle as a woman artist. She said: "You can really write, Judy. You should write." I had never really thought about it at all until then, but I was struggling because the advent of the women's movement had opened up choices that had not been available when I was younger. I could think about being a movie director, for example. I was thinking about whether I should not just focus on painting and sculpture, but maybe do performance or video art. Anaïs told me something really wise. She said: "You can't live out every choice but you can write your way through it." So then I wrote Through the Flower, my first book. That was a revelation to me and what was so amazing was that it brought my art to all these new audiences. Through the Flower was published in America, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Japan, Taiwan – all over the world. Even today, I still get letters from young people who find their way to my work through my first book.

Then, when I was working on The Dinner Party, I found way too much material to fit it all into the artwork and so I thought I'd also do a book. Of course, at that time, nobody was writing about my work and so when I discovered I could write and bring these ideas to a whole other audience, I thought I'd just do it for myself. Then, in the 90s, I started thinking about whether I could bring together my art life and my writing life by doing books such as Kitty City [published 2005], where I both wrote it and illustrated it. I was also invited to write books. Edward Lucie-Smith invited me to write Women and Art: Contested Territory (1999) and then I was invited to work on a book about Frida Kahlo, which I did with the art historian Frances Borzello [Frida Kahlo: Face to Face, published 2010]. It's all been interesting. But now I feel like I've written enough – I'm not going to write any more. My big priority now is just working in the studio.

For 10 years, I've been working with glass: cast glass, used and etched and painted glass. When I was working with china painting, I knew a lot of china painters who also painted on glass, in a way that is little known. So now I'm working on a series of glass paintings. It's a really challenging series and I've been working on it since 2012 and probably won't be done before 2017. It takes a long time because there are multiple fires. By and large I'm working alone now, just like I did when I was young. And I'm going very contrary to the direction of the art world. Is that a surprise? As art becomes about ever bigger production studios with more and more people producing objects that the artists never touch with their own hands, to fill up these huge galleries, I'm all by myself, in my studio, with my paintbrush, working small.

If you know much about my early life, you'll know that people kept dying all the time: my father, my first husband, my uncle ... So, unlike a lot of my friends, who assumed they were going to live to 80, I never thought I'd live this long. Now the way I feel about it is that every day is a miracle. With what time I've got left, I want to do what makes me happy. I'll leave it to others to change the world.