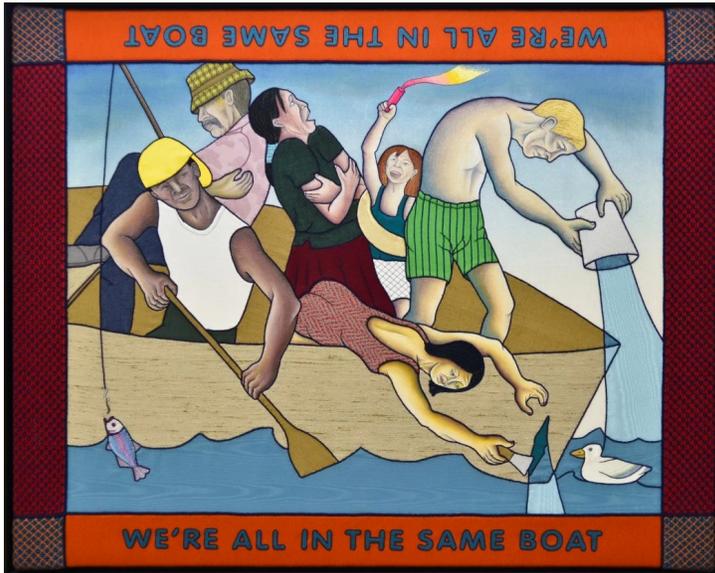




## **Feminist Mythmakers in the Age of Ambivalence: An Interview with Judy Chicago**

Written by Raina Benoit

April 11, 2016



*A black and white 1970's Art Forum advertisement of the artist Judy Chicago slumped back, hanging tough in a boxing ring corner serves as the backdrop promotional photo for Why Not Judy Chicago?, a traveling exhibit currently at the Musée d'art Contemporain de Bordeaux, France. In this version, the 76 year old artist poses in front of the backdrop, contrasting in her full color power stance, confident smile, rose tinted glasses and a red t-shirt that traces C.H.I.C.A.G.O. with rhinestones. When I first read the title of her show I immediately thought if*

*Judy Chicago's contribution to art history, known as the pioneer of second wave feminism, is at risk of being forgotten then we are in big trouble. Artists of all ages have struggled with hardships; debts, recognition, mental illness, slander, misunderstanding, or worse, the risk of being forgotten – Rembrandt, Mozart, Monet, Manet, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickenson, and Camille Claudel to name a few who died without knowing their impact. Fortunately, someone was paying attention and history has been kind to not erase them.*

*Chicago's thirty one year old self staring back at us reveals an exciting time of disobedience that would punch post-modernism into motion but also introduce a rising importance between the artist and their role in creating their own mythology. Artists Linda Benglis, Niki de Sainte Phalle, Hannah Wilke used similar advertisement tactics to poke fun, subvert, and/or challenge the all boys art world. The advertisements created waves of dialogue and showcased female artists as powerful players in the creation of the world's images and their own – as authors, as artists and as women. The business-as-usual selling of nude paintings of women with legs open and mouths closed would be no more. Or would it?*

*I have to admit my excitement when Judy Chicago agreed to meet for an interview. Her renown piece "The Dinner Party" (commemorating thirty-nine women of history) and other works coined as "Cunt Art," or, as Chicago has named it, "central core" imagery, places female role models in a world once devoid of positive feminine imagery. In preparation for our interview, I was interested in finding out*

*more about her role in writing her own history and how she maintained a career that was based on challenging systems of power? Most importantly, I was interested in her views of the shape of feminism has taken today. What I found in our meeting was more human and truth telling that left these questions largely untouched. The second wave of feminist artist understood the power of placing their bodies in the public eye through advertisement and the power of "disobedience," a word in combination with "deficits" used to describe Chicago's career. Perhaps it is the new generation of feminists' role to sift through and decipher the fragmentation and ambivalence of the female public body and learn from our foremothers how to disobey with dignity and calculatio*

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**Raina Benoit:** Your exhibition "Why not Judy Chicago?" curated by Xabier Arakistain at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux (CAPC), France (a former 19th century warehouse with interiors that resemble the nave of a church) covers the last fifty years of your career and eloquently describes your life's work in terms of "deficits" and "disobedience." How has the reception been by the French/European public?

**Judy Chicago:** The CAPC exhibition is my first solo show in France so it will be interesting to see what happens here. So far, it has been very positive as it was in Spain where this show premiered (in Bilbao, at the Azkuna Center). In the last few years, I've been in a number of exhibitions in Europe; London, Liverpool, Warsaw, Milan, Bilbao and now Bordeaux. One thing that has been very heartening is the incredible response to my work. I've been particularly happy with the responses to this show as it deals with many different subjects in a variety of media. It is always difficult to communicate across culture, language and geography. Perhaps it is due to Xabier Arakistain's abilities as a curator that in both Bilbao and Bordeaux, many people have understood my images. That is very gratifying.

**RB:** Although the body of work is quite expansive and shows the range of your career, there were many reproductions and the much desired "Dinner Party" that is on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum is missing. Do you consider this show to be a retrospective?

**JC:** No, it's not a retrospective. I have produced so much on such large scale that it would require a major museum like the Tate Modern, Pompidou or the Museum of Modern Art to organize a retrospective. And to date, I have not had one. The CAPC show is, as the curator Xabier Arakistain describes it, a visual narrative of my career.

**RB:** During the late 1960's and early 70's your work was about asserting and inserting the female perspective into the male hegemonic art world. Can you describe the eureka moment when realized that you were "self censoring"?

**JC:** I don't think I had a 'eureka' moment exactly. I was still in graduate school at UCLA and my male professors hated my imagery, accusing it of being nothing but 'wombs and breasts' as if there was something unseemly about those body references. (I doubt that they would have had the same reaction to phallic forms.)

I then began exhibiting in my work in the nascent L.A. male-dominated art scene. The male artists and critics who basically controlled that scene also reacted negatively to my imagery. As a result, I began to, as you call it, 'self-censor' because I wanted to be accepted as an artist. Despite my efforts, I watched my male peers receive recognition for their work even though, many years later, critics and historians acknowledged how important my early work was.

If I had a 'eureka' moment it was because women were writing about experiences similar to my own. By then, I had met the writer Anais Nin, who became my mentor and encouraged me to write. This gave me courage to begin to speak out about 'my struggle as a woman artist' which eventually resulted in my first book, *Through the Flower*. It was common then for people to say that 'women had no history' and that 'there had never been any great women artists,' – contentions that I discovered were lies. Learning my history as a woman changed my life and empowered me. That is why I created "The Dinner Party."

**RB:** The second wave feminists have been dismissed by popular culture as angry men haters. Your work questions the dominant exclusionary power structures and yet your work is very inclusive in its process and message – for example, the collaborative needlework proverb artworks which are largely about the valuing and honoring of traditional woman's work, history, and overall contribution to society. What was your process in terms of seeking out collaborators? What was their role in the process?

**JC:** The idea of feminists as angry man haters has been promulgated by the media which is not always truthful, especially those journalists who (consciously or unconsciously) support the patriarchal paradigm. My life would probably have been easier if I had been a man hater as I wouldn't have tried to relate to them, but that's not the case. I've learned a lot from men, from male artists and from male art history. I don't hate men. I just want them to make space for women's points of view.

In the first decade of my professional practice, I organized a number of collaborations with men and there were always ego struggles. It was not until "The Dinner Party" studio that I was able to create a collaborative environment that was easier to manage. Although there were some men in the studio, they were in the minority and they had to play by 'women's rules.' When I collaborate, I always implement feminist practises – particularly the belief that every voice is important.

In "Resolutions: A Stitch in Time" (the project you refer to that involves proverbs), I worked with the most skilled needle workers I knew. Most of them had already worked with me on earlier projects. I began with research. Then I held a meeting with the needle workers in which I discussed my ideas for a series based on traditional proverbs. Over the course of six years, we created 20 pieces based on proverbs we all found. I then created the image with the skills of particular needle workers in mind.

Since I learned so much from male art, I always believed that men could learn from feminist art. Why not? When I was first formulating a feminist art practice in the early 1970's, my audience was primarily women though over the years that has changed now. Both men and women come to my shows and lectures – which was my goal. As the years went by, although I never veered from the base of feminist philosophy (which dates back 500 years to the French writer Christine de Pisan who instigated the first feminist arguments in Europe), my perspective widened and became increasingly more inclusive as I began to understand women's oppression in a wider global structure of injustice and oppression. I believe that feminism has a great deal to offer both art and the larger world.

*In the words of curator and feminist Xabier Arakistain "Why has one of the legendary pioneers of feminist art, and one of the most popular living artists in the USA, still not received recognition from hegemonic art institutions?" We will see if the "visual narrative" will be picked up by the cultural institutions in the States. In the meantime, "Why not Judy Chicago?" continues until September 4, 2016 at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux.*