

Feminist art icon Judy Chicago returns to S.F. with 'Pussies' exhibit

By Laura Paull

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Trailblazing artist Judy Chicago is coming to town for events at JCCSF and an exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery.

The problem with drawing cats, artist Judy Chicago confides, is that "Cats. Don't. Pose." It took her five years to complete a series of watercolors for her 2005 book, "Kitty City: A Book of Feline Hours," during which time she would often wake up at 2 a.m. to sketch her seven cats when they were still.

The series became the starting point for an exhibit opening Friday, Sept. 8 at the Jessica Silverman Gallery in the Tenderloin titled "Judy Chicago's Pussies." The display of paintings, drawings, prints and ceramic plates, some well known and others never before seen, will be her first solo show in San Francisco since her career-making feminist installation, "The Dinner Party," debuted at the Museum of Modern Art in 1979.

"The Dinner Party," following earlier abstract work that referenced female sexual organs, established Chicago's reputation as "a pioneer in the development of feminism as an artist movement," according to the Brooklyn Museum, where the massive work is now permanently installed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. It features a triangle-shaped banquet table on which uniquely crafted place settings commemorate 39 mythical or historical women, from "Primordial Goddess" to Sacajawea to Virginia Woolf, and their achievements in the arts, science or history. The names of 999 additional women of note are inscribed on the floor.

The Brooklyn Museum calls it "One of the most important artworks of the 20th century," noting that upon its public debut "it immediately became an icon of feminist art." The New York Times noted that it "was seen by more than a million people in the years following its completion."

Chicago herself – born Judith Cohen 78 years ago in the city of Chicago – is an icon as well, routinely described as "feminist art pioneer" (by the Huffington Post and others) and as someone who "has been challenging the male-dominated art world since the 1970s ... [and seeking] to elevate women from the margins of society and history" (artsy.net).

Her new show attempts to bring together a retrospective of Chicago's work that, whether abstract or

representational, feline or female, presents subjects that share the colloquial nomenclature “pussy.” But what is the conceptual relationship between female genitalia and, well, pussy cats?

“Jessica Silverman happens to really like cats and was interested in that body of work,” Chicago explained last week by phone from Belen, New Mexico, where she lives with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman. “The problem was that for most people in San Francisco, their only association with me was with ‘The Dinner Party.’ ”



Judy Chicago's cat Rosebud with one of her sculptures (Photo/Donald Woodman)

Looking through Chicago's archive, Silverman and the artist discovered that “dating back to the 1970s there had been an overlap between my central core imagery and my love of cats,” Chicago said. These are lovingly observant paintings of felines in a domestic setting: napping on the bed or couch, looking out windows, eating or just being watchful, as cats generally are. The show the two women curated goes back and forth between Chicago's imagery of cats, her abstract, woman-focused imagery, and some imagery that crosses over.

It's impossible to consider such a show without an awareness of how Western social morés around the female body and female sexuality have evolved these past few decades: The new cultural willingness to display the female body without coyness and to stop whispering the word “vagina” are signs of more important changes.

But though we may recognize Chicago's butterflies and her triangular, circular and flower-like images for what they reference – what she calls “yonic forms” – they are not about female anatomy, but rather “female agency,” Chicago explained.

"There has been such a huge change since I was a young woman artist in the 1960s," she recalled, "when it was impossible to openly express female gender in your work, and the biggest compliment you could get was, 'You paint like a man.' Can you imagine that?"

Chicago compared the social bias of those times with the work that some young women artists post on Instagram, often including, she enthused, "openly vaginal forms."

She also noted the popularization of the phrase "pussy power" and the "pussy hats" symbolically worn by thousands of women at the historic women's marches following the inauguration of President Donald Trump.

Asked whether she had participated in the marches, she responded, "I've been marching for women my entire life – in my studio. That's where I march."

In its description of the new exhibit, the Silverman Gallery states: "Chicago's work has long been associated with images of pussy power as a visual metaphor for female agency even before the term was widely accepted. What is less well known are her images of cats. This exhibition is the first to trace the long and fascinating overlap between her broad ranging, beautiful 'central core' imagery and her eccentric feline iconography."

Born Judith Sylvia Cohen on July 20, 1939, Chicago legally changed her surname from Gerowitz to the name of her hometown after the death of her first husband, Jerry Gerowitz, in a car accident when she was 23. Her aim was to call herself by a name independent of a father or spouse.

Several years after earning her bachelor's and master's degrees at UCLA, she was hired as an assistant professor at Fresno State, where, in 1970, she developed the first feminist art program in the United States. She founded another such program at the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia, with artist Miriam Schapiro, and the two were influential in seeding the concept of woman-centered art among a new generation of artists.

In the mid-1980s Chicago began to investigate the theme of masculine power and powerlessness in the context of the Holocaust. She and Woodman, her photographer husband, toured Israel and the sites of former concentration camps in Europe, connecting with Jews and non-Jews of many nationalities to explore their experiences of oppression, victimization, injustice and human cruelty.

The result was a collaborative piece, "The Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light," which premiered in 1993 at the Spertus Museum in Chicago. The variety of mediums in the 16 large-scale works included tapestry, stained glass, metal work, wood work, photography, painting and sewing. It ended with a piece that showed a Jewish couple at Sabbath.

The experimentation with many mediums, and with mixed media pieces, was consistent with Chicago's wide-ranging art practice, as was her interest in collaborating with other artists, artisans and even volunteers.

Chicago, who had been raised by intellectual, left-wing Jewish parents, continued to work on other projects with an emphasis on Jewish tradition, including "Voices from the Song of Songs" (1997), where she introduced feminism and female sexuality into her representation of women figures from the Hebrew Scriptures.

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In 2010, because of this and other Jewish-themed work that she had been showing in a gallery at Hebrew Union College's New York campus since the 1980s, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from HUC at a graduation ceremony in Cincinnati.

"The degree from HUC meant something special to me," she said. "I come from 23 generations of rabbis, up to my father, who broke away and became a labor organizer and a Marxist. The Judaism that I feel connected to is rooted in the Passover experience, the idea that we were slaves in Egypt and we became free and now it is our mandate to help everyone else attain that freedom. That, and the concept of tikkun olam, of healing and repairing the world, are what Jewish values are for me."

Chicago was in San Francisco in April to mount a one-day, immersive dry ice installation called "Be No More" at SFMoMA, a response to the Trump administration. One of many assistants she invited to join her was Jourdan Abel, director of programs at the JCC of San Francisco.

"She is the kindest, most thoughtful and collaborative artist," Abel said. "She herself is the embodiment of all the values expressed in her work."

To coincide with her show at the Jessica Silverman Gallery, Chicago will appear at the JCCSF on Sunday, Sept. 10, in conversation with Sarah Thornton, a writer and sociologist of art and culture.

"Whether people are of the age to have fought for women's rights alongside her in the '60s and '70s, or whether they read about 'The Dinner Party' in college decades later, we can all find reasons to want to hear her," Abel said.

"Judy Chicago: Pussies." Sept. 8 to Oct. 28 at Jessica Silverman Gallery, 488 Ellis St., S.F. 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Artist is scheduled to attend opening reception, 6-8 p.m. Sept. 8. jessicasilvermangallery.com

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"Pussy Power: Judy Chicago," 7 p.m. Sept. 10 at the JCCSF, 3200 California St., S.F. \$28-\$38.