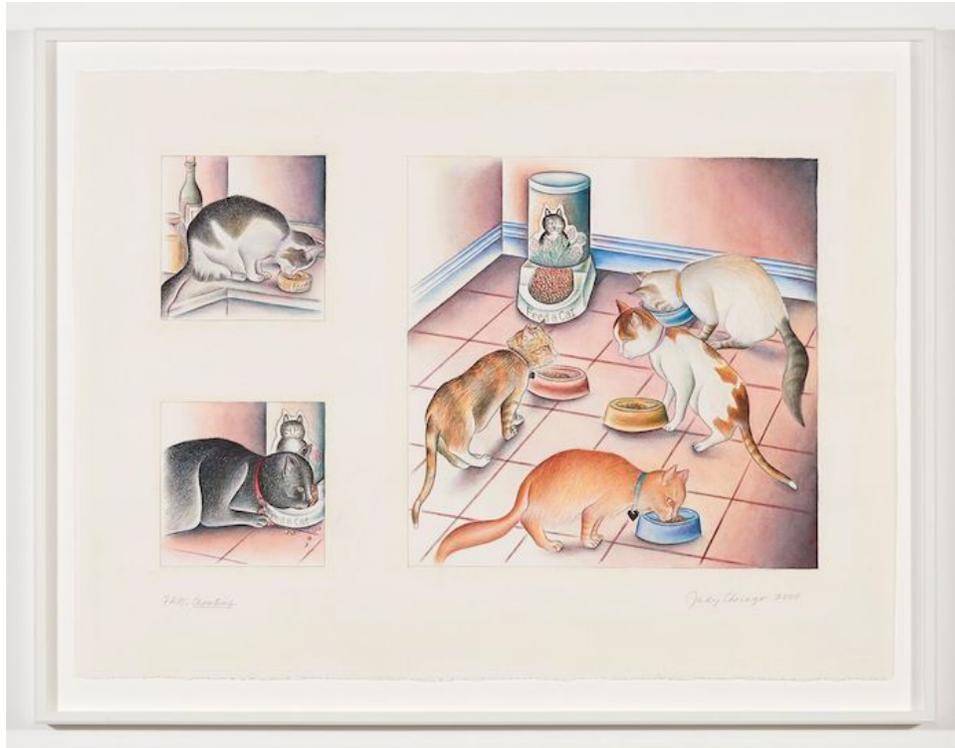


ARTFORUM

Critic's Pick: Judy Chicago

By Anne Prentnieks

October 3, 2017



Judy Chicago, *7AM / Chowtime*, 2000, watercolor on arches, 22 x 30".

In this “grab her by the pussy” presidential era, symbolism seems insufficient as protest—and yet it drove the reclamation of a historically derogatory term for female anatomy, giving rise to thousands of pink hats with kitten ears. Likewise, in the works that make up “Judy Chicago’s Pussies,” Chicago explores the iconography of the pussy as both feminine core and feline house pet, channeling wit, fury, and the inherent bodily and metaphysical power of womanhood.

Traditional equivalences between cats and women—both seen as mercurial, manipulative, and cruelly seductive (think “sex kittens”)—are clearly archaic, and yet stereotypically feline qualities, such as feral independence, astute awareness, ferocious (even maternal) protectiveness, suspicious acceptance of domesticity, and, most of all, individualism, align with feminist ideals. Chicago’s cats similarly become analogues to the uniqueness of women. In “Kitty City: A Feline Book of Hours,” 1999–2004, sweetly domestic scenes present the animals as singular characters carrying about their private lives, but also hint at their reserved disquietude toward captivity.

Despite Chicago’s prolific past four decades, this is the artist’s first solo exhibition in San Francisco since *The Dinner Party* began its world tour at SFMoMA in 1979. This show smartly lays out early works—ceramic plate studies for *The Dinner Party* and wall-hung images, including the luminous spray-painted grid of *Morning Fan*, 1971, from Chicago’s “Fresno Fan” series, created after she attended auto-body painting school as the only woman in a class of 250. Her “Potent Pussy” drawings, 1973, meanwhile, are the artist’s first examination of her cats, in which the felines’ irises spiral into hypnotic pupils. Soft-edged and gently gradated though Chicago’s images may be, her decades of work belie the sharpened claws of a pussy that bites back.