



Judy Chicago, the Godmother

By Sasha Weiss

February 7, 2018

For decades, the feminist artist was pushed to the sidelines. Relevant once again, she can no longer be ignored.



Judy Chicago in N.Y.C. last December. Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

IN A LARGE, low-lit room is a triangle-shaped table arranged with 39 place settings, the site of a distinguished gathering. It is laid with plates that rise a few inches off the table, as if levitating, each one sumptuously painted with wings or petals or licks of flame emanating from a glowing center: variations on the vulva. As you move along the table, which is 48 feet long on each side, the plates become small sculptures, bulbous and gleaming. Beneath them are runners embroidered with elaborate designs and names in gold thread — women of accomplishment who are familiar and unfamiliar, mythical and rarely spoken of: Sappho, the ancient poet; Anna Maria van Schurman, the 17th-century artist, thinker and theologian; Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female physician in the United States. The whole assemblage stands on a floor of luminescent triangular tiles covered in more gold — 999 names of other heroic women written in curling letters. The room is like a temple — a holy place, distinct from the everyday.

When Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" opened on March 14, 1979, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, no one had ever seen anything like it. It was theatrical, audacious and definitively feminist: a work of stark symbolism and detailed scholarship, of elaborate ceramics and needlework that also nodded to the traditional amateurism of those forms, a communal project that was the realization of one woman's uncompromisingly grand vision, inviting both awe and identification. It caused an immediate sensation. But that was only the beginning of its tumultuous life.

One cold day in December, I met Judy Chicago, who is 78, at the Brooklyn Museum, where "The Dinner Party" is now permanently installed. Her style, like "The Dinner Party," is flamboyant and groovy and uncategorizable. She wore jeans, a leopard-print silk shirt under a black vest embroidered with sequins and a double strand of gold beads. Her lipstick was purple, her curly hair dyed a reddish-pink, with tinted glasses to match, giving her a dreamy, psychedelic look. But the eyes peering out from behind those glasses were sharp and commanding.

We walked into "The Dinner Party" accompanied by Chicago's husband and constant companion, the photographer Donald Woodman, who that day played the part of a benign bodyguard. Chicago regarded her creation with the fierce and slightly bemused love of a parent for a grown child. The work is so thoroughly assimilated into art history that its authority feels like a given, but Chicago remains protective of it. She vividly remembers its difficult birth – the years of painstaking labor, the organizing, over five years, of a volunteer force of 400 to help her, the doubt about whether it would ever be finished and the eventual triumph of its debut. Chicago's intention, she told me – with a mixture of self-deprecation and utter seriousness – had been to rededicate the history of Western civilization to the women who are often left out of it. She wanted to make a work so large that it could never be erased. When I asked her what it was like to be in the presence of the piece now, sadness crept into her voice. She said she felt relief. "From the beginning, you know, I was determined – it needed to be permanently housed, because if it hadn't been, it would have simply reiterated the story of erasure it recounts. It just – I had no idea it was going to take this long."



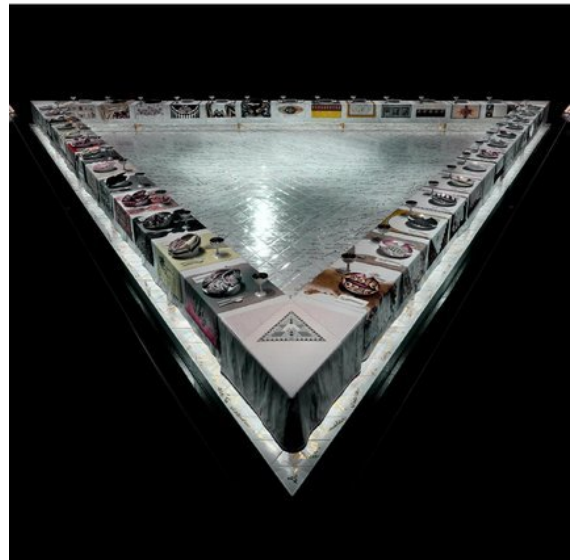
The October 1970 advertisement Judy Chicago placed in Artforum announcing both her one-woman show at California State University, Fullerton (Artforum ran the boxing ring photograph later that year), as well as her name change from Gerowitz (which belonged to her first husband) to Chicago; she wanted to be free of any kind of male-dominated nomenclature. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.

Chicago was shocked. To be rejected by the art world was a refutation of her identity. She'd studied art since she was 5 years old, and had been one of the few women to gain recognition in the 1960s L.A. art scene. For her, "The Dinner Party" was the culmination of a process of radical self-transformation. She retreated to her modest studio in a small town outside San Francisco, \$30,000 in debt from loans she'd taken out to pay for the work's completion, and spent the rest of the summer alone. "The Dinner Party" was taken apart, boxed up and put into storage.

For years, the gulf between popular adulation and critical dismissal of "The Dinner Party" persisted. Over the next two decades, it was largely ignored by American art institutions. (An exception was the Brooklyn Museum, which showed it in 1980, prompting a nasty review in *The New York Times* by Hilton Kramer, who plainly disdained the work's vaginal imagery.) But thanks to the strenuous efforts of Diane Gelon, who had been the project coordinator on "The Dinner Party," it was shown all over the country in alternative venues – the top floor of an office building in Chicago, the Cyclorama in Boston – and supported by donors, from the Rockefellers to women who sent Chicago five dollars because they thought the work was revolutionary. Slowly, "The Dinner Party" was reinscribed into art history. In 2002, when it was acquired and again shown at the Brooklyn Museum, Roberta Smith, an art critic for *The Times*, pithily summarized its jagged reception. "Call it what you will: kitsch, pornography, artifact, feminist propaganda or a major work of 20th-century art," she wrote. "It doesn't make much difference. 'The Dinner Party' ... is important."



"Smoke Bodies" (1972), a piece from Chicago's pyrotechnical body of work, intended to bring color and softness to the landscape. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives



"The Dinner Party" (1979). Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, gift of the Elizabeth A Sackler Foundation, ©Judy Chicago, photo ©Donald Woodman

When I first saw "The Dinner Party" several years ago, I regarded it with a mixture of reverence and suspicion. I had somehow absorbed two contradictory ideas about it – that it was major and that it was kitsch. Its symbolism had come to supersede its status as a *made* thing, the product of a particular brain. Standing next to it alongside its creator, the plates glinted with a new meaning. It was a repository of women's history, but it was also an archive of Chicago's evolution as an artist.

I started to imagine how different the fate of "The Dinner Party" would have been if it had been shown for the first time in 2018. The opening with Solange and Patti Smith and Oprah and maybe even Hillary Clinton in attendance; the scores of Instagram posts – loving shots of the plates accompanied by hashtags: #JudyChicago, #Vaginachina, #Herstory – the winking references to it during fashion week. The work's populism, I suspect, would have been instantly embraced by artists and thinkers; no critic would have

dared to dismiss it out of hand, though the small number of women of color included in the work might have prompted a heated discussion on social media of an alternative canon of names who could have been listed on the floor. It would have penetrated the culture so deeply that it would have been impossible to reject.

The audacity of “The Dinner Party,” its rhetorical energy, its humor (the vulva plates are, among other things, a play on what it might be like if women took as much pride in their anatomy as men did) would be obvious to us now. Chicago anticipated this generation’s style of feminism — pugilistic, sincere, frank and unapologetically grandiose. Her investigation of “domestic” forms was also prescient: Artists as different as Swoon, Cindy Sherman and Emma Sulkowicz are indebted to her. Her vision reached beyond the art world as well: She saw how identity could be the locus of larger structural change, how the fury women felt at being left out could be channeled to dismantle the fortified institutions men have built to retain their control. She anticipated the very question at the core of the #MeToo movement: What would the world look like if *womenheld* power?



On the Cover: Judy Chicago is featured in T’s Feb. 18 Women’s Fashion issue. Photograph by Collier Schorr. Styled by Suzanne Koller

But Chicago seems doomed to a lonely clairvoyance. Of course, she doesn’t mind that her nearly-60-year career is finally being considered as a whole — she has upcoming or current shows at the Brooklyn Museum, Salon 94 in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D. C. For a long time, she has chosen to work outside familiar methods and institutions — a path that promised little recognition or attention. She has always taken the long view.

Now she has posterity in mind: What will happen to her work once she's gone?

JUDY CHICAGO WAS born Judy Cohen to a progressive Jewish family in Chicago in 1939. Her mother was a former dancer and medical secretary, and her father was a labor organizer who adored his daughter and encouraged her precocity. The house was often full of friends debating books and Marxism, and Chicago was invited to participate. As she writes in "Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist," the first volume of her wonderfully earnest 1975 autobiography, her father instilled in her a lasting sense that she was a match for any interlocutor. Throughout her childhood, she spent Saturdays at the Art Institute of Chicago, taking figure drawing and painting classes, and then wandering through the museum alone, studying Seurat, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec. When Chicago was 13, her father died suddenly – the great loss of her life.

In 1957, she enrolled as an undergraduate at U.C.L.A., eventually earning a master's in painting and sculpture. Through her roommate, she met her first husband Jerry Gerowitz, a rebellious free spirit who was killed in a car accident. At 23, she was a widow, and one of the few women to participate in the burgeoning scene around the Ferus Gallery, a locus of West Coast cool whose artists included Edward Kienholz, Robert Irwin, Ed Moses and Ken Price. This storefront on La Cienega Boulevard represented an irreverent hyper-masculinity. (A 1959 photograph showed four Ferus artists draped over a motorcycle.) Chicago would join "the boys" at the bar where they jostled with one another, teased her and talked about cars and their "joints." She often went home and cried, but told herself to suck it up. This was the world she wanted to be part of.

To fit in, Chicago cultivated her own brand of machismo, shearing her hair, wearing big boots and smoking cigars. She moved away from the biomorphic, feminine imagery that her graduate school professors had ridiculed, and pushed herself to do work that was increasingly abstract and technically difficult. She went to autobody school to learn to spray-paint, making a series of four pastel-colored paintings on car hoods; she created an enormous fiberglass sculpture modeled on freeway pillars and environmental sculptures she called "Atmospheres," setting off flares of colored smoke in the desert, in the mountains and on the beach.

One day, Walter Hopps, an owner of Ferus, visited the Pasadena studio Chicago shared with her second husband, Lloyd Hamrol. Her 1965 sculpture "Rainbow Pickett," a series of brightly colored wooden beams, each progressively larger in size, leaned against the wall. Rather than look at the work, Hopps literally turned his back on it and started talking with Hamrol and another male artist. (In 1966, it was included in "Primary Structures," a major Minimalist show at the Jewish Museum.) Years later, she ran into Hopps and he explained that he'd been paralyzed by the fact that her work was better than that of the men in her circle, and he didn't know how to respond. She was demoralized and increasingly angry. She hated being ignored by critics. She hated constantly being told her ambition made her a bitch and a dyke and that women couldn't be artists.

These experiences of misogyny radicalized her, a stance that was reinforced by literature from the women's movement that was reaching the West Coast – Valerie Solanas's "SCUM Manifesto" (1967), Kate Millet's "Sexual Politics" (1970) and Shulamith Firestone's "The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution" (1970). "If these women could say how they felt," she writes in "Through the Flower," "so could I." Rather than distort her ideas to suit the male-dominated art world, she wanted to invent a new art world, and a new way of being in it. In 1970, she decided to divest herself of her married name. Together with Jack Glenn, the owner of a local gallery, she created an announcement of a solo show that was a spoof on the brawny posters of the Ferus boys. She posed in a boxing ring – one where Muhammad Ali had once trained – wearing work boots, satin shorts and a sweatshirt emblazoned with her chosen name: Judy Chicago. In the ad, Glenn crouches in the background, a skulking manager, and her friend's girlfriend, who was pulled into the shoot at the last minute, poses alongside her. Chicago's expression is confrontational and cocksure.



The poster "Miss Chicago & the California Girls" (circa 1970-71) from Fresno State College's feminist art program. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives housed at the Penn State University Archives

Her paintings from this period, however, tell a different story. They suggest she was struggling, frightened, trying to invent an image-language that reflected her vulnerability and the bruises she'd sustained trying to wedge her work into the rigid strictures of the art world. She asked herself the question, "How do you fit a soft shape into a hard framework?" and made a series of paintings that tried to answer it. Her painting "Flesh Gate I" from 1972 has a repetitive grid structure painted in gentle oranges and pinks; inside each cell is a dark opening that seems to pulse or beckon. In another series from the same period called "Fresno Fans," pinks and yellows fade and flicker. The paintings are tense and luminous, forceful and delicate. You can feel Chicago breaking out of the cage of abstraction, teaching herself to become the artist who could make work that was declarative and explicit.



Artists including Edward Kienholz, Claes Oldenburg and Ed Ruscha gathered for a portrait at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1968 – Chicago is seated in the foreground with pink tights. ©Julian Wasser



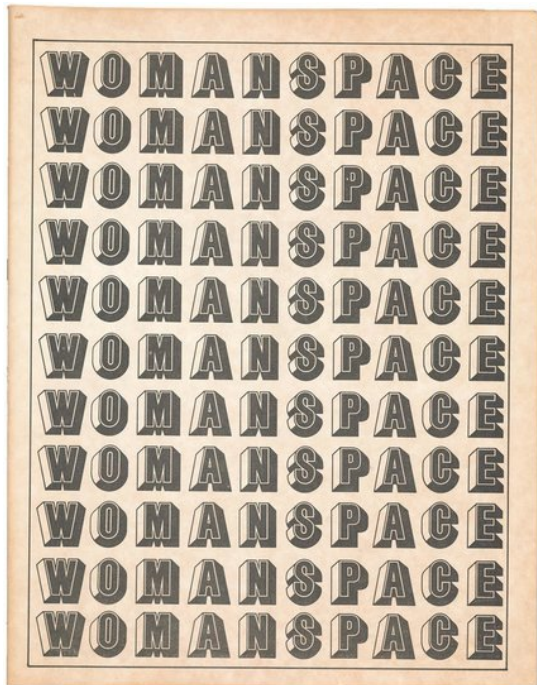
Eggs cascading into breasts in a room of "Womanhouse" called "Nurturant Kitchen" (1972), by Chicago's collaborators Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch and Susan Frazier.

Courtesy of Miriam Schapiro Archives on Women Artists, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries

Chicago began immersing herself in art made by women, reading literature (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and others) and studying generations of female artists (from Judith Leyster to Mary Cassatt to Barbara Hepworth), trying to locate in their work an iconography that reflected the female body and its particular sensations. She painted round forms, shapes that opened and closed and seemed to pulsate or wriggle. She became a teacher of studio classes on feminist art, the first of their kind, at Fresno State College and then at CalArts in Valencia. She pushed her students to create work based on consciousness-raising sessions in which they investigated their experiences as women, including being harassed by men.

In the summer of 1971, along with Dextra Frankel, a curator and professor of art at California State University, Fullerton and Miriam Schapiro, a painter whose work was a model for Chicago's, she toured the West Coast to find pieces for a women's art show. Many of the artists they encountered were self-taught, working in cramped spaces in their bedrooms, on porches, or in the back rooms of studios belonging to male friends or partners. Chicago was struck by the way their art-making was tucked between laundry and cooking, their work displayed among toys and family curios. Some of it was excellent — like the paintings of a woman who worked on scraps of her husband's canvas — but Chicago had to overcome her own snobbery to really begin to see it. Her idea of what it meant to be an artist was changing: It was no longer being alone, making large paintings in a studio; it could be something more improvisatory and intimate.

During this time, her New York contemporaries, feminist artists like the sculptor Lynda Benglis (famous for her nude 1974 Artforum ad — inspired by Chicago — in which she posed with a dildo) or Judith Bernstein (who outraged critics and gallery-goers alike with her large-scale phallic drawings) were establishing themselves as deliberate provocateurs: Their goal was to make men uncomfortable. Chicago was more interested in how feminism could be cultivated within a community. Frustrated by the lack of cohesion among feminist artists, she began to seek a way to create it herself. That, as well as the idea of taking work made at a small scale and enlarging it, of mingling the domestic and the personal, became the basis of an installation, "Womanhouse" (1972), that Chicago and Schapiro undertook with local artists and students at CalArts. (This predated the first all-female cooperative gallery — New York's A.I.R., which counted Bernstein among its members — by about eight months.)



The inaugural 1973 volume of *Womanspace*, a journal published by the all-female gallery of the same name in downtown L.A., which Chicago co-founded. Courtesy of the Miriam Schapiro Archives on Women Artists, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries, The Getty Research Center, gift of Hal Glickman, Accession No. 2009.m.5.20



A 1965 installation shot of "Feather Room," one of Chicago's earlier large-scale works, in collaboration with Lloyd Hamrol and Eric Orr, at the Rolf Nelson Gallery in Los Angeles. Even then, her work was about creating environments that stood in contrast to reality. Feathers and inflated plastic, ©Judy Chicago, photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archive

"Women had embedded in houses for centuries and had quilted, sewed, baked, cooked, decorated and nested their creative energies away," Chicago wrote in "Through the Flower." "What would happen, we wondered, if women took those same homemaking activities and carried them to fantasy proportions?" Along with 21 of their students, Schapiro and Chicago renovated a dilapidated 17-room mansion in Hollywood, turning each room into a sculptural environment – Chicago's contribution was the "Menstruation Bathroom," a pristine white-tiled space with a garbage can overflowing with bloody tampons. The living room became the site of performance pieces in which the women enacted births, or engaged in mundane domestic tasks like ironing. Ten thousand people came to see it during its one-month run.

Chicago was becoming convinced that in order for her work to be seen and understood, she would have to create an alternative canon, placing herself in a lineage of powerful women. In 1972, she began a series of biographical portraits called the "Great Ladies," dedicated to historical queens: Marie Antoinette, Catherine the Great, Queen Victoria. They were still abstract: spirals of undulating lines radiating from a taut center, painted in subtly graded pinks, yellows and blues that seemed almost to breathe. She told an interviewer that she "tried to make my form-language and color reveal something really specific about a particular woman in history, like the quality of opening and blockage and stopping, the whole quality of a personality." Eventually, to make her meaning even clearer, she began to write on her paintings, documenting her fears, her methods, her daily experiences, in a cursive that is touchingly neat and girlish. ("I put my finger in my pants and up my vagina, pulling out a bit of leftover menstrual blood," she wrote on a 1973 painting called "The Liberation of the Great Ladies.") The writing unleashed in her a sense of freedom. She began to study the craft of china painting (the decoration and glazing of porcelain) and to wrestle it into the realm of high art with "The Dinner Party." Chicago had to unlearn everything she knew

in order to teach herself how to make something so bizarre and original.



"Rainbow Pickett" (1965, recreated 2004), one of Chicago's early Minimalist sculptures. Latex paint on canvas-covered plywood, Collection of David and Diane Waldman, ©Judy Chicago, photo ©Donald Woodman

FOR THE PAST 23 years, Chicago and Woodman, who were married in 1985 after knowing one another for only three months, have lived and worked in a large brick building in Belen, N. M., 35 miles south of Albuquerque. Their street has an edge-of-the-world quality: It's a few blocks away from one of the largest rail yards in the state, and an old train is parked across the street, near a few scattered buildings squatting in the brilliant sun. The Belen Hotel, as they call their home, a 1907 boardinghouse for railroad workers that Woodman renovated himself, bristled with rugs and objects and artworks, but Chicago's office was spartan, with tall, rigorously arranged bookshelves, framed awards and certificates, and photographs of friends, including one of her mentor Anaïs Nin, whose best-selling diaries, first published in 1966, were an inspiration. The orderliness of Chicago's space spoke to the discipline required to produce works of art that are direct, personal and exposing.

In the dining room, Chicago pointed out a study for a 2012 piece from a series called "Retrospective in a Box," a painting-on-photograph of Chicago's naked body floating against a red background and surrounded by words: "Aging Woman, Artist, Jew. Everyone Would See Who She Really Was." Chicago has continued her restless pursuit of difficult techniques; for her, the effort is synonymous with the emotional risks she has taken as an artist. She has worked on canvas, glass and porcelain, in oils, spray paint, china painting and needlework. She has made sculptures that fill rooms and tiny cookies shaped like vaginas; she has used dry ice and fireworks; she has mounted performances in houses, in parks, at universities and in museums; she has engaged in collaborations and labored, alone, on large series. After "The Dinner Party," she made other enormous works that took many years to complete, on the subjects of birth ("Birth Project," 1980-85), the Holocaust ("Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light," 1985-93) and violent masculinity ("PowerPlay," 1982-87). Much of this work is only now being widely shown and studied.

In a 1,800-square-foot warehouse behind the Belen Hotel, Chicago's uncollected work was stacked in crates. In the back room is her personal archive. She has meticulously documented every piece she's

made since the early 1960s on some 6,000 index cards, which she and her assistant are organizing for her eventual catalogue raisonnée. Meanwhile, what she calls “my major estate plan” is underway: the Judy Chicago portal, a website that will combine the holdings of three institutions: her paper archives at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard, her art education archive at Penn State University Libraries and her visual archive at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. The completion of the portal will follow the opening of the show of her newest series, “The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction,” at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in June 2019.



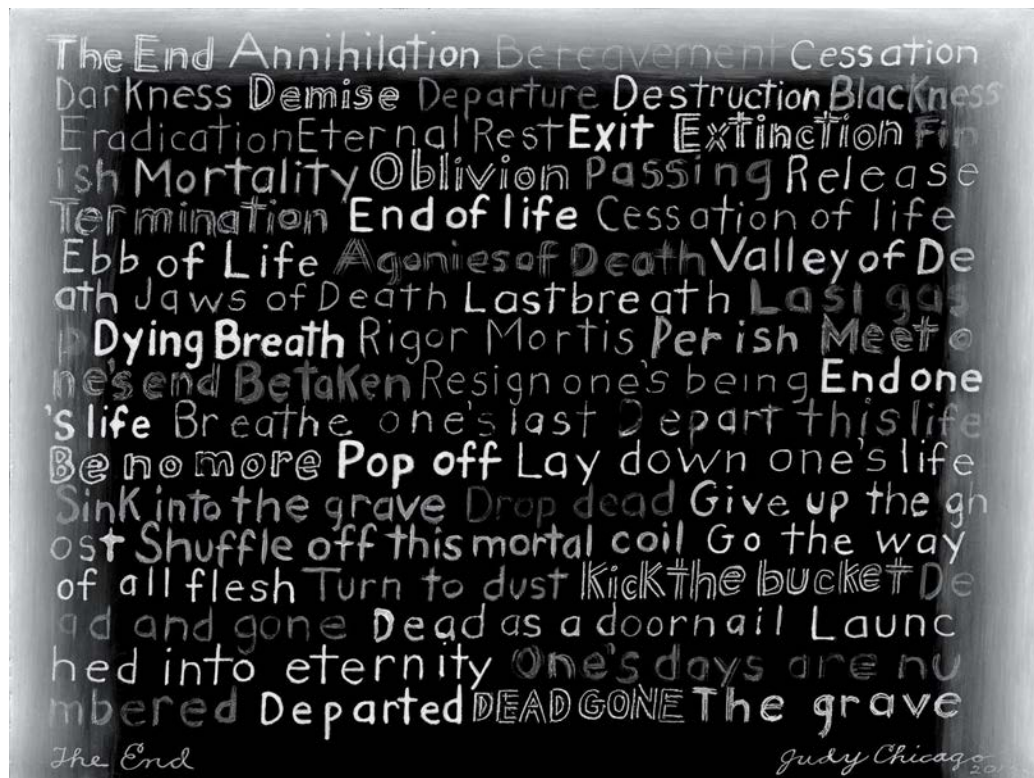
The painted doily invitation for the opening of “Womanhouse” (1972).
Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives housed at the Penn State University Archives

I told Chicago that I was struck that, though she had often struggled in her career — overcoming the disapprobation of critics, the indifference of institutions and overt and tacit misogyny — she had managed to hold onto a sense of her work’s importance. She said, with her usual matter-of-factness, that it was simply a matter of pragmatism.

“I know the history of what’s happened to women artists’ work,” she said. “A lot of women artists believe that everything has changed. I don’t believe that that is true. Like, when we were in Paris the last time, there was an exhibition of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. You know who she was?” I didn’t.

Vigée Le Brun, Chicago told me, was a court painter in 18th-century France and a superb technician. Marie Antoinette was her patron. “She was the most prolific woman artist who had ever lived, up to her time. And until the time of her 2015 retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris, 200 years after her death, her work had not even been cataloged.” She looked at me seriously. “One of my goals was to make sure that my work would not be lost. And I did not make an assumption that all would be taken care of.” It was her responsibility, her legacy to protect.

We walked into one of her three studios on the ground floor of the house, the one devoted to her glass and china paintings. She showed me panels from her most recent series, “The End,” 37 paintings on black glass and porcelain and two bronze reliefs comprising an investigation of death: her own and the planet’s. The panels include 13 self-portraits imagining herself dying in different scenarios — painfully, peacefully, in one of them with Woodman at her side. Getting color to affix to black glass is exceedingly difficult, requiring multiple firings at very high temperatures; the result has a hard clarity. The paintings were spare and haunting, like folk songs.



An introductory panel, painted on black glass, for "Mortality," one of the sections of Chicago's most recent work, the omnibus project "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction" (2012–2018) that will be unveiled for the first time at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D. C., in June 2019. Kiln fired glass paint on black glass, ©Judy Chicago, Photo ©Donald Woodman

I thought of a conversation I'd had with the curator and gallerist Jeffrey Deitch about a common misunderstanding about Chicago. "Those who haven't seen this amazing history of her work in the 1960s and '70s, they wouldn't classify her as an artistic heavyweight, because 'The Dinner Party,' though it has tremendous intellectual structure, it is meant to be very accessible," he told me. This is a central tension of Chicago's life and work: She masters unyielding materials, immerses herself in the intellectual history of a major subject and flays her insides to get at powerful emotion. The result is work that is simple and comprehensible. Paradoxically, this simplicity may be the primary expression of her grandeur. She wants everyone to see her art and to understand it, so that it might change them and the world.

And it has. Once your eye is trained to see Chicago's imprint, it is everywhere, and unmistakable. It's in Petra Collins's menstruation-positive T-shirts; in the forthcoming installation on Sunset Boulevard in L.A. by Zoe Buckman of a huge uterus drawn in neon tubing crowned with boxing gloves; in the pink "pussy hats" that are worn in opposition to Trump's election. Images like these — symbolically overt, politically and anatomically in-your-face, forcing a public confrontation with sexism — are all descended from Chicago's imagination.

Over our time together, I asked her several times, in several different ways, to tell me who she thought her inheritors and peers are. If she had a seat at "The Dinner Party," which names would flow from her? But she didn't want to answer the question. She has always felt out of step with the present. "Look, you know, before I get interested in somebody, they have to have a long, sustained career. Because that's what real art grows out of." Not the "make-it" dream, not bursts of youthful ingenuity, not critical acclaim — just continuing, no matter the circumstances, to make art. "That," she said, "is what I admire."