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A #metoo 'Reckoning' put feminism back on the table. It never left Judy Chicago's.

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Installation view: Judy Chicago, "Reincarnation Triptych," 1973, on display at ICA Miami through April 21, 2019. Left to right: Mme. De Stael, 1973; collection of Elizabeth A. Sackler. George Sand, 1973; collection of Nancy Stetson. Virginia Woolf, 1973; collection of Susan Rennie and Kirsten Grimstad. **SILVIA ROS**

Fans of Judy Chicago will be glad to know that there are test plates from "The Dinner Party" included in ICA Miami's "Judy Chicago: A Reckoning," a comprehensive look at the large body of work that the pioneering feminist artist began in the early 1960s.

Her most famous work, "Dinner" also became a seminal installation celebrating remarkable women in history, and one of the first major feminist art pieces to be exhibited. Today the table setting (created from 1974-79) – which figuratively and literally brought women's voices to the table – is on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum. The china plates incorporate images of the vulva, and the 39 place settings honor such women as Sappho, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe. In total, 1,038 names are inscribed over the installation.

The vulva, of course, was a counterpoint to the phallus symbolization dominant in the overwhelmingly male-dominated art world. So was the idea to paint the china plates as a craft-like reference to a field associated with women.



Judy Chicago, Mary Wollstonecraft Test Plate #8, from The Dinner Party, 1975-1978. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York, Donald Woodman/ARS NY.

But “Reckoning” at ICA is important in its own right as a survey of work from a prominent woman in an era of #metoo, when a renewed emphasis — a reckoning as it were — on women’s rights and power are back in the forefront of social change. As Stephanie Seidel, associate curator at ICA, points out, this exhibit “is of continuing importance. We are reminded of what we are still facing today [like they were] in the 1970s.”

The exhibit on the second floor is divided into seven parts, each featuring significant works from Chicago’s career. Her prolific output would fill far more than one floor, and we have to be satisfied with snippets.

Incorporating tapestry or other forms of “craft” is no longer rare in art. But the advent of digital imagery and the practice of fabrication (where others actually construct the piece), the sort of physical art-making favored by Chicago is increasingly infrequent. “I believe in the importance of the hands,” said Chicago during a Miami visit. “So much is distanced from the hand” in the process of making art today.

Her hand is found on the earliest minimalist sculpture, forging the plywood and canvas, to the present. It was a determining factor in choosing the work included in “Reckoning,” said Seidel.

Born in Chicago in 1939 as Judith Cohen — she says she changed her name so as not be associated with any group or origin, and as an act of independence — she is better known as a California artist, earning an arts degree from UCLA in 1964. That was the height of Abstract Expressionism, so Chicago decided instead to try her own path and delve into minimalism.

“Reckoning” kicks off with “Sunset Squares” from 1964 — beautiful, large-scale frame square sculptures, painted in very light pastel coloring so at first they look white. The colors are “feminine,” while the colors of the other sculptural set of triangles, “Trinity,” from 1965, are brighter in reds and oranges.



Judy Chicago, *Bigamy Hood*, 1965, 2011. Sprayed automotive lacquer on car hood. *Courtesy of the artist.*

On the wall behind are examples of Chicago's car hoods – fascinating in their choice of material and again, craft. Cars have traditionally been obsessions of men (especially in Southern California), so Chicago decided to “appropriate” that hobby. She attended auto body school and learned spray painting – the only woman among 250 men. But she didn't figuratively include cars in her images; instead, she took over the hoods graffiti-style, with bright multicolored paintings that have distinctive signs of internal female anatomy. Lest you wonder what direction these works are taking, they have bold titles such as “*Bigamy Hood*, 1965.”

The next room includes the dinner plates and paintings from the 1970s – clear in their feminine identity but bold and confident. While Chicago was first drawn towards minimalism, she always kept a hand in abstraction and, increasingly, figuration. “*Heaven is for White Men Only*” is geometrically abstract, with bolts of sprayed acrylic in light reds and grays shooting out from a center. A circular theme becomes dominant in the “*Reincarnation Triptych*” (1973), swirling, glowing pastel paintings in homage to three other pioneering women: Madame de Staël, George Sand and Virginia Woolf.

But the most eye-grabbing and provocative series is the “*Birth Project*.” Ten works from this series are presented here, made from 1980-85. Chicago started to realize that an essential part of life – birth – was all but missing in art representations. Was that process of turning out a baby too visceral, too raw for the public throughout the ages, or at least from the male perspective? Nudes, yes. Vaginas and birth canals? No way. After some research (Chicago herself never had children), she was amazed to find the dearth of childbirth depictions in art.



Judy Chicago, *Earth Birth*, 1983. Sprayed Versatex and DMC floss on fabric. Collection of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and Nicolas Rohatyn.

After studying the actual process, Chicago decided to bring in other women. They worked again in what is considered traditionally women's craft – that of needlework and quilting, mixing thread with painting to come up with the large-scale pieces here such as "The Creation" and "Earth Birth." She enjoined about 150 women in the project, meeting and collaborating with volunteer needle workers in their homes across the country and asking about their own birth experiences. All get credit on these pieces.

Turning the typical ideal of Adam creating life on his head, the "Birth Project" is stunning imagery, and ground-breaking at that. It will be hard to forget these as you re-enter the glam Design District, a place where fashion houses often sell women as objects in its wares.

In another grouping of aggressive figurative paintings, titled "PowerPlay," Chicago paints hyper-masculine men with exaggerated muscles "playing" with fire and ecological devastation, their power on full display. One painting carries the decidedly unsubtle title, "Driving the World to Destruction."



Judy Chicago, *Driving the World to Destruction*, from *PowerPlay*, 1985. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York, Donald Woodman /ARS NY

The exhibit has a surprising, intimate ending that is powerful in a very different way. "Autobiography of a Year" consists of numerous drawings, a departure from the other works here. They document a troubled year, artistically and personally, after she and her photographer husband Donald Woodman moved to Belen, New Mexico. They are melancholy, small works on paper – 150 in all – in pastels and charcoal coloring, with figures surrounded by words and text that express some anxiousness and bitterness, but also some simple questioning and resolve. They reveal a vulnerability not seen in the larger, more brash and unflinching paintings. (Much of her art is now there; other works are part of the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the National Gallery of Art in D.C. and London's Tate Gallery to name a few institutions.)

Where she goes, controversy tends to follow. Just last year, a Judy Chicago museum was proposed for Belen, and like many of her past projects ("The Dinner Party" was panned by many as too overtly feminist), it has run into a storm. According to The Art Newspaper, one of the naysayers included someone who doesn't like "vaginas on plates."

But the tireless and effervescent Chicago, now working into her sixth decade, will continue to create work and challenge the male art patriarchy. And she has a full-time supporter on her side. During the interview, husband Woodman piped in, "guys have to start pitching in too."

One series not represented here are Chicago's photographs of her smoke interventions, where she interjects puffs of multicolored fireworks in foreboding and sterile landscapes, sometimes clouding female performers. (Luckily, they are on view at the Nina Johnson Gallery, 6315 NW Second Ave.)

Chicago will rectify this by returning in February, to light up the ICA's sculpture garden in pyrotechnics; the site-specific smoke piece "Purple Poem" will take place on Feb. 23.