SIMONE LEIGH
A STAR IS BORN

JUDY CHICAGO
TAKES OVER
THE ICA

FAIR HIGHLIGHTS
ABRAHAM CRUZVILLEGAS
INAUGURATES
THE GRAND BALLROOM
THE LONG-AWAITED AFTERPARTY FOR JUDY CHICAGO

After decades as an outsider to the art world, the prescient artist Judy Chicago is the talk of the town with a survey exhibition opening this week at Miami’s Institute of Contemporary Art, a conversation at Art Basel Miami Beach and a museum show of all new work planned for the nation’s capital in 2019. By Laura van Straaten

Judy Chicago in The Dinner Party china painting studio, Santa Monica, Calif., 1972
THE LONG-AWAITED AFTERPARTY FOR JUDY
—who has one, who doesn’t, who is trying to find hers and what is keeping her from doing so—has long been a preoccupation of feminism, as it has for the artist Judy Chicago, who will celebrate her 80th birthday next summer, and whose voice was for many years largely excluded from the dialogues happening in the art world.

But Chicago’s voice has recently been discovered by new audiences eager to hear what she has to say. Earlier this year, she was a cover girl of sorts for *The New York Times’* T Magazine and one of *Time* magazine’s “100 Most Influential People.” Next, she has three big solo shows, one opening this week at Miami’s Institute for Contemporary Art, one in the works with dealer Jeffrey Deitch (a first-time collaboration) and an exhibition of all new work at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Plus, there’s the publication next fall of a major monograph.

“The art world is not a sprint; the art world is a long haul,” Chicago says, with a smile and just a hint of a sigh.

“She is one of the leading artists of her generation, and of course she has such an enthusiastic public and she’s made a big impact, but in terms of entering into the inside art world, that’s really just happening now,” says Deitch. His exhibition of Chicago’s work in his new Hollywood gallery next fall, combined with the shows over the past several years mounted by gallerist Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn of New York’s Salon 94, and Jessica Silverman, whose eponymous gallery is based in San Francisco, will, as Deitch puts it, help Chicago to “catapult over the wall,” especially with private collectors.

“I look for important voices that could use a bit of amplification, and a shift in context,” says Greenberg Rohatyn. “Judy became famous for one body of work (The Dinner Party)—yet has spent years exploring male power, birth, extinction and more. Now maybe people will listen a little more,” because Chicago has long been “expressing sentiments that are widely acknowledged now in this political moment.”

I’d been warned that Chicago’s telltale voice can intimidate. When I first hear it emerge (from her mouth impastoed in Goth-y red-black lipstick), it rings nasal, Midwestern and friendly, despite her many years living in the Western U.S. Of course, it was this very accent that, in her years in Los Angeles after earning an MFA from UCLA, earned her the nickname that Chicago (née Cohen) famously turned into her nom de guerre. (Fittingly, she currently is part of MCA Chicago’s group show “West by Midwest,” examining the connections between artists with Midwestern ties and West Coast culture, through Jan. 27.)

Perhaps I find her voice friendly since it reminds me of my own flat vowels. Having been urged by her loyal handlers to read her memoir before our interview, she is visibly delighted when I reveal we were born on the same day at the very same hospital nearly 30 years apart and that the first home I knew was two blocks from her family’s, just off Lake Shore Drive on the Windy City’s Near North Side.

Earlier this year, when Chicago received an honorary doctorate from...
the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she was introduced as an artist “forever wanting to make an impact on our history” and “committed to meaning.” Perhaps it was not just Chicago’s forthright feminism but also its Midwestern earnestness that turned people off?

That sounds about right; she describes her dismay at how “the whole art world was turning to irony and detachment,” soon after she entered it. (Women artists who used detached humor and irony like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer found favor and commercial success during much of Chicago’s career.) Then, “by the ’90s I was just considered like, ’Ugh, she’s such an essentialist,’” she adds, lowering her voice with disgust. But she’s never stopped working.

One of my big questions is what will it be like for Chicago—after feeling like an outsider to the commercial market—to be in the belly of the beast at Art Basel Miami Beach, the biggest art fair in the Americas? Besides the ICA exhibition opening, she will do a dialogue with Alex Gartenfeld as part of Miami Basel’s Conversations series, on Dec. 8 at 2:30pm in the Miami Beach Convention Center, and will also be honored at this magazine’s annual Women in Arts luncheon.

“One of the things that has been confusing about my career is I have had such a wide audience and just a nonexistence in the art world,” she tells me, ticking off the years of critical reviews bordering on ridicule and the lack of gallery support, and the fact that she’s never participated in a biennial. She seems almost bemused, rather than bitter.

“I don’t do bitter; it’s not a productive emotion,” she says. “I try to keep a global view,” which means thinking about the state and the fate of women all over the world. She puts it more bluntly: “At least I still have my clitoris!”

The seismic shift in Chicago’s career came about thanks to a couple of phone calls from UTA Fine Arts shortly after it was founded in 2015 as part of United Talent Agency by the late Josh Roth. One of those calls was to Greenberg Rohatyn. “Josh called and said, ‘Judy read an article on you in The New York Times and feels like you might be the right dealer for her,’” Greenberg Rohatyn remembers. “I hadn’t really thought of her in years. I first thought, well, I don’t know Judy’s work past a certain time period. It seemed a blur to me.” Silverman got a similar call from UTA.

Each gallerist made a beeline for Belen, N.M., near Albuquerque, where Chicago has long been based. “It was love at first sight,” Silverman recalls. “Judy’s intelligence and creativity was evident in everything she did.” Greenberg Rohatyn was wowed, too: “Her art, even when it’s not didactic, has an authority.”

Additionally, says Greenberg Rohatyn, “she knew and understood her own work and own archive, and had diligent notes and had taken care of her work. She knew that it was important, and that impressed me.”

Those archives and that commitment to conservation are coming in handy. Opening this week, the ICA’s ‘Judy Chicago: A Reckoning’ (through April 21) is aptly titled; it’s her first career retrospective, which is pretty astonishing for someone who has been a household name, in
certain households, for nearly four decades. The show is curated by Alex Gartenfeld and Stephanie Seidel.

"The ICA show has a very specific thesis," Chicago explains. "What Alex was interested in was looking at my move from abstraction to representation." At the beginning of her professional career, Chicago created a significant body of artwork that was minimal, assiduously avoiding the figurative.

"There was just no way for a woman artist or an artist of color or an artist of shifting gender to openly make art that revealed who they were," she tells me. "Everyone had to paint like white guys"

But the more Chicago embraced feminism, the more she veered toward figuration and a commitment to depict the not depicted. That, she reveals, was her fight. She was able to do this, she says, because "I am a classically trained artist and I started out working from the model and from still lifes."

Johanna Fateman, in a catalog for 'A Reckoning,' writes, "Before her rebirth as a feminist artist, she had mastered the technical skills (auto-body painting, boat building and pyrotechnics) necessary to realize polished works stylistically aligned with the industrial bent of her Los Angeles milieu—artists of the distinctly butch Finish Fetish and Light and Space movements." Those talents are on view at the ICA, which pulls from six of the artist's series, including lesser-known artwork, some on public view for the first time in decades. But, Fateman continues, "Chicago arguably threw it all away by casting her lot with women...."

And Chicago did so by embracing not just the figurative, but more visibly content-based artwork—in direct opposition to the prevailing aesthetic of what was commercially viable. Chicago prophetically describes that shift to Fateman: "Unless women faced their circumstance as women on their canvases as well as in the courts, nothing fundamental would change."

The ICA exhibition also considers some of her most important work around gender, like the 'Birth Project' (1980-1985), depicting the process of giving birth, which Chicago says she was shocked to see largely missing in Western art. There is also her ‘PowerPlay’ (1982-1987), a series of paintings examining the male ego and abuses of power, which Greenberg Rohatyn described in particular as "just so perfect for the moment." Indeed, during the U.S. Supreme Court confirmation hearings earlier this fall, Chicago Instagrammed a mashup of faces from ‘PowerPlay’ and the angry faces made by nominee Brett Kavanaugh and Senators Chuck Grassley and Lindsey Graham. It quickly went viral.

The Dinner Party (1974-1979), which is tragicoically referred to as a "seminal" installation in some of the ICA's press materials, is represented in the current show only by test plates Chicago created. But that's a welcome omission since The Dinner Party, which is the centerpiece of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, has long overshadowed Chicago's other bodies of work.

Relatedly and importantly, the ICA exhibition concludes with Autobiography of a Year (1993-1994), 150 works on paper in which the artist explores her relationship to identity and failure.
Next September, an entirely new body of Chicago’s work called ‘The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction,’ will premiere at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. ‘The End’ will comprise more than 40 new paintings on porcelain and black glass, plus two new large bronze sculptures. Nearly a third of the artworks depict her imagination of her own demise. “It started because in 2011 I thought I was really sick, like, really sick,” Chicago recalls. “I've always lived in the reality and knowledge of death,” but suddenly, “I started thinking about dying and the way it's been depicted historically.” Her ailments turned out to be less serious than she’d feared, but by then the idea for ‘The End’ had been hatched.

Chicago has been contemplating how humans are killing the planet, the impact of humanity on other animals and what will happen when Earth is no longer habitable. “I have long felt that human beings are a scourge on the planet,” she says. Those considerations were shaped in part by conversations Chicago had with the esteemed philosopher and humanities scholar Martha Nussbaum. “I called her up cold,” Chicago recalls. Nussbaum is now contributing an essay to Chicago’s upcoming monograph, to be published by Scala next fall.

Greenberg Rohatyn is thrilled by the new work because it’s her firm belief that Chicago should not simply be treated “as a historic artist but as a fresh new voice with a lot of old wisdom.” In the current psycho-personal-political climate, when each day brings new revelations of men’s violence toward and mistreatment of women, as Greenberg Rohatyn puts it, “I think it’s time; it’s Judy Chicago time.” •