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Judy Chicago on Rescuing Women From Art History's Sidelines

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Judy Chicago at her arts space, Through the Flower, in Belen, N.M.

Judy Chicago, the feminist artist and author, is playing to the coasts this month. There is a show of her important early work at Jeffrey Deitch's gallery in Los Angeles through Nov. 2, and a new series done in painted porcelain and glass called "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction," opening Thursday at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington. Her most famous work, "The Dinner Party," an epic 1979 installation that imagined a gathering of 39 important women sidelined by history, continues on permanent view at the Brooklyn Museum.

Recently she brought fireworks to the small town of Belen, N.M., where she has lived since 1996. The pyrotechnics celebrated the opening of a new public space for her nonprofit arts organization, Through the Flower — and her 80th birthday. Last month at her first event there, Ms. Chicago spoke with Jori Finkel — a contributor to The New York Times and the author of "It Speaks to Me: Art That Inspires Artists" — about a source of inspiration for her own work: female pioneers of abstract painting, including Georgia O'Keeffe, Hilma af Klint and Agnes Pelton. Of the three, Pelton (1981-1961), is still on history's sidelines, but that is changing: A major survey, "Agnes Pelton:

Desert Transcendentalist,” travels from the Phoenix Art Museum to the New Mexico Museum of Art on Oct. 5 and arrives next spring in New York, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. These are edited excerpts from their conversation.

JORI FINKEL Why does Agnes Pelton’s work speak to you?

JUDY CHICAGO I love her work. She was a contemporary of Georgia O’Keeffe who worked in New Mexico and then retreated to the desert in California. She was part of the Transcendental Painting Group, painters very interested in inflecting their work with spirituality. Whenever I saw a Pelton painting – which was rare, actually; one here, one there – I was always drawn to the luminosity: a sense of light and inner light that I have also attempted to bring into my work.



Agnes Pelton, “Awakening (Memory of Father),” 1943, oil on canvas.

You’ve been a fan of her “Awakening (Memory of Father),” from 1943, for years now.

My reading of the painting is that it’s a dreamlike scene, an abstracted landscape with day and night present at once. It has this form in the sky that’s been described as a golden trumpet. But if you look closely, underneath that shape and also on top, is a faint texture that makes it feel like it’s moving. For me that form is a luminous symbol of death. Agnes Pelton’s father died when she was 10 years old. My father died when I was 13, and I also dealt with his death through abstraction. Pelton used abstraction to convey personal meaning as opposed to just dripping paint on canvas, like Jackson Pollock, or making abstract forms, like Ellsworth Kelly. One of my theories is that until the advent of abstraction, women artists were not free to convey their experiences directly. Abstraction opened up the visual landscape for us to invent forms to convey our internal reality.

Besides Pelton, which other artists are you thinking of?

Natalia Goncharova, Sonia Delaunay, Georgia O'Keeffe, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, starting from the early 20th century when abstraction became a possible mode of expression. Earlier, women artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi had to fit their forms into an art historical tradition created by men, like the way she used [her rendering of] the biblical theme of Judith beheading Holofernes to express the violence of being raped.

Hilma af Klint has also been a real revelation in the art world lately since her recent show at the Guggenheim.

That's an understatement [laughs].

Usually we tell the history of abstraction by identifying three or four men who invented abstraction around the same time in 1913: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky and Frantisek Kupka. Seeing Hilma af Klint's "Paintings for the Temple" at the Guggenheim, which she began in 1906 as a result of her séances, just upended this history.

This show was momentous for art history because this has been an agreed-upon narrative promoted by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) all over the world: Modern art was invented by four male artists. Nope.



From "Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future," at the Guggenheim, "Group X, Altarpieces," left to right: "No. 2, Altarpiece," "No. 3, Altarpiece," "No. 1, Altarpiece," all from 1915.

Even recently, in a 2013 show called "Inventing Abstraction" that tried to complicate the story of abstraction with over 80 artists, MoMA didn't include Hilma af Klint. Their reasoning was that she wasn't a truly abstract artist because she was representing the spiritual realm. And now Agnes Pelton is being called by critics the new Hilma af Klint.

Historically there's a precedent for that. There was a woman named Hildegard of Bingen, for example, from the High Middle Ages, who was an abbot and then two centuries later, some other religious mystic would be called the Hildegard of Bingen of the 14th century. So now we have the Hilma af Klint category into which all these other women are slotted. No, just let Agnes Pelton be Agnes Pelton.

Sonia Delaunay, who with her husband, Robert Delaunay, developed this colorful, symphonic sort of abstraction called Orphism, has an interesting history. It was in 1911 that her painting went from figurative to abstract. She always said the turning point was making a patchwork quilt for her infant son. And she went on to work as a designer in fashion, costumes, stage sets and books. Could design and craft be one root of abstract painting?

That's very interesting. I remember many years ago there was an article in an art magazine about the artist Liza Lou, who does beaded work, and instead of placing her work in the context of the history of beading, like Native American beading or women's crafts, they put her in the tradition of Andy Warhol. Because the way to validate an artist, particularly a woman artist, is to put them in the context of the important male art. What you're talking about now opens up the possibility of starting to see women in our own tradition. I've looked at so much work by other women to validate my own sense of form and also color. When I look at Hilma af Klint's paintings and see all those pastels, I'm like: Whoa, I love that kind of color.

Pelton, Hilma af Klint, Delaunay and O'Keeffe were all bold colorists, although in her first group of abstractions O'Keeffe deliberately avoided color.

I did that too in my first decade of creative practice, because in graduate school they gave me so much grief about my choice of colors. They hated my colors. So for a time my work was monochrome, like with the "10 Part Cylinders" at Jeffrey's show [which Ms. Chicago made from fiberglass in 1966 with the help of boat-builders – and remade for the Deitch show]. It allowed me to focus on form, so I can see why she did that.



Judy Chicago's "10 Part Cylinders," 1966/2019, some near human in height and others even taller, made of fiberglass over sonotubes, at Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles



Georgia O'Keeffe, "Early Abstraction," 1915, charcoal on paper, an example of her early avoidance of color.

Barbara Haskell, a curator at the Whitney, talks about the Art Nouveau origins of O'Keeffe's abstracted forms: They're spirals, snails, tendrils and snaking forms – natural forms, not mechanical.

One reason I selected O'Keeffe and Virginia Woolf to add to "The Dinner Party" table is that I believe these two women began to forge a female-centered language in both art and literature that became a foundation for countless women artists. I used to talk to Anaïs Nin, my mentor, in the early '70s. Could there be a 'female form language' in art? At that time it was completely outside the art dialogue. The biggest compliment you could give a woman artist then was to say she paints like a man.

In the '60s my L.A. gallerist Rolf Nelson had a 24-foot cloud painting by O'Keeffe hanging in his gallery for sale for \$35,000, and no one was interested. People don't remember when O'Keeffe was dismissed or when Frida Kahlo was referred to as "Diego Rivera's wife, who also paints." All of that changed because of the feminist art movement, and now we're seeing decades of scholarship beginning to bring new understanding to a lot of this work.