GLAMOUR

Judy Chicago Never Wanted to Have It All
Written by Mattie Kahn
September 25, 2019

Judy Chicago, On Fire at 80, Cirrus Gallery 50th Anniversary Commemorative Print, © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, New York, Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Not that she wants to dwell on the past, but the fact is when artist Judy Chicago was fresh on the L.A. art scene in the 1960s, the best compliment a woman could hope to receive was that she painted "like a man."

"And generally, there weren't any compliments because most women artists were invisible. I was able to be somewhat visible," Chicago insists now, with a note of pride. "But I kept running into obstacles." Women couldn't get a foothold in major shows. Dealers didn't want to work with them. Their husbands wanted them at home, or their children needed them.

The odds—the men!—were stacked against them. And Chicago was determined to beat them. She wanted to make a contribution to art as a discipline. She wanted to create work that would be remembered. And she knew she couldn't do that from the sidelines. So she began to wonder, How had women *ever* done it? To whom could she look for an example? But when she started to research her foremothers in the tradition, Chicago came up blank. "I wanted to see if women before me had encountered the same kind of challenges that I was facing, but I discovered that so much of what women had done—there was no record of it," she recalls. "It had been erased."

Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party,* 1979

Chicago unveiled the first of what would be a career filled with correctives in March 1979, introducing her most iconic work, *The Dinner Party,* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The massive installation was, as the *New York Times* recently put it, "theatrical, audacious, and definitively feminist: a work of stark symbolism and detailed scholarship." It was also *replete* with vaginas. The piece is made up of a triangle-shaped banquet table set with 39 plates. Each side is 48 feet, and each plate is labeled with the name of a woman Chicago thinks we should know. Not just other artists, but writers, adventurers, and activists: Sojourner Truth and Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe. Within its first three months on view in San Francisco, more than 100,000 people came to

see it. But critics hated it, and reviews were vicious. It was amateur, graceless, and obvious, some said. It was too big, too loud, *too much*. After its stint at SFMoMA, Chicago put it in storage.

Ever since, Chicago's mission has been twofold. First, to restore women to their rightful place in the art historical canon. Second, to ensure her own work wouldn't meet the same fate as that of the women at her proverbial table, consigned to the margins or, worse, disappeared.

Judy Chicago, *Birthday Bouquet for Belen,* Smoke Test, 2019. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

It seems her efforts have paid off. In the last four decades, women artists have made slow but determined gains. And Chicago? Well, Chicago has become impossible to miss.

Now 80, with purple-streaked hair and an impressive social media presence, Chicago feels omnipresent. A mammoth exhibition showcased three decades of her work in Miami in 2018. At the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., she has a new series on view, a prescient meditation on extinction and our finite resources. Earlier this month Jeffrey Deitch mounted a show focused on her earliest work. And that same week the nonprofit Visionary Women invited her to kick off its annual salon series. (Gloria Steinem will have to wait; her salon is scheduled for later this fall.) All that builds to a crescendo in a few months when the De Young Museum in San Francisco will host her first ever career retrospective, not so far from where she found her voice in Los Angeles.

For Chicago, this isn't some sudden twist of fate or even a triumphant, overdue encore. She has worked for this moment, and not alone.

“When I was younger, I thought I could overcome all of that [sexism] by myself with my paint brush,” Chicago recalls. But the longer she’s toiled, the clearer it becomes: “It’s taken me a lifetime to accomplish what I have and now I know that change has to be made brick-by-brick.”

Here, Chicago reflects on her life in art.

On securing her legacy

Institutions aren’t doing their job. That’s how women’s erasure continues. It’s totally enraging, but women have to do it for themselves. And that’s what I’ve done. I’ve done it for myself. I’ve made sure that my archives have a home across three institutions—Penn State University, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and Schlesinger Library at Harvard—and they’re being digitized too. That was important to me because that’s what keeps a record of this work; Harvard is never going out of business.

But this is not art work. It’s just hard work. What it requires is doing more than what it asked of my male peers, who can concern themselves only with their work. In the ’70s I started writing because no one was writing about my work. Later, I started organizing women artists in Southern California because I had no community and no support. Is it fair that in addition to making art, I had to do all that? Of course not.

Once, one young woman asked me, didn’t I think it was egocentric of me to be so concerned with my legacy. I told her no, that’s what men have done their whole lives.

Judy Chicago with *Zig Zag and Trinity,* c. 1965 © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archives Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco and Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles

On "having it all"

I never tried to have it all. I lived without financial security, until my wonderful husband insisted that we had to do something about that and we had to have a house of our own. Until then, I'd never had a permanent house. I find it very fascinating that young people now think about retirement or ask me about how I financed my career. I had no money, and I never wanted property or things. I knew that if I did, I'd have to get a job other than being an artist.

I also understood that I would never be able to have the career I wanted if I had children. The women artists I knew who did, even if they did succeed, they felt guilty all the time. They felt guilty when they were in their studios. They felt guilty when they were with their children. There's still a lot of discussion about the penalties women artists pay if they try to have a family even now. I wasn't interested.

The model for achievement in America is still a white, male—unencumbered. I wanted to be unencumbered.

On social media

I'm on Instagram. I have 29,000 followers. I love it. I love to see what women artists are doing and making. I love to hear from people. I think it's been an incredible platform for women, especially in parts of the world that are more closed-off. It's like a portal.

I love that so many young people follow my Instagram and come to my openings. It means that my work is still vital. When you're old, that's important.

Judy Chicago in conversation with Andrea Bowers at a Visionary Women salon event in September 2019
Rachel Murray/Getty Images for Visionary Women

On feminism

I still hear stories from young women, girls who are told that feminist art is "passé." Once, a student who met me told me she showed her work and was asked, "What are you? Some kind of Judy Chicago?" Like it's an *insult*. These changes that we've had as a culture are profound, but they have to be translated into institutional changes to make a difference.

Fighting to be recognized—it's such an energy suck. It's so time-consuming. Who in my generation ever dreamed that young women would have to go to battle for abortion rights again? Who thought we'd still be having some of these same conversations?

On representation

You can learn a lot about what our society considers important and unimportant by what's missing, what isn't shown in museums and textbooks. It's images of birth, images about the Holocaust, images about slavery, truthful images about death.

As women, we've been negative space for most of history, and it's very palpable. And for men, it's not even apparent. Men absolutely can't imagine what it's like to grow up with the kind of absence we grow up with. Absence of sculptures in the parks. Absence of models of female achievements. Absence in the halls of government. Absence in the museums. Absence! I'm sure it's the same for people of color and for people across the gender binary. Growing up with absence negatively affects your self-image and your idea of what you can do to. It's terrible and simple. What's not imaged in a certain way doesn't exist. And so it's art's responsibility to change that.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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