

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Feminist Icon Judy Chicago on Resisting the Cycle of Erasure

Written by Marisa Crawford

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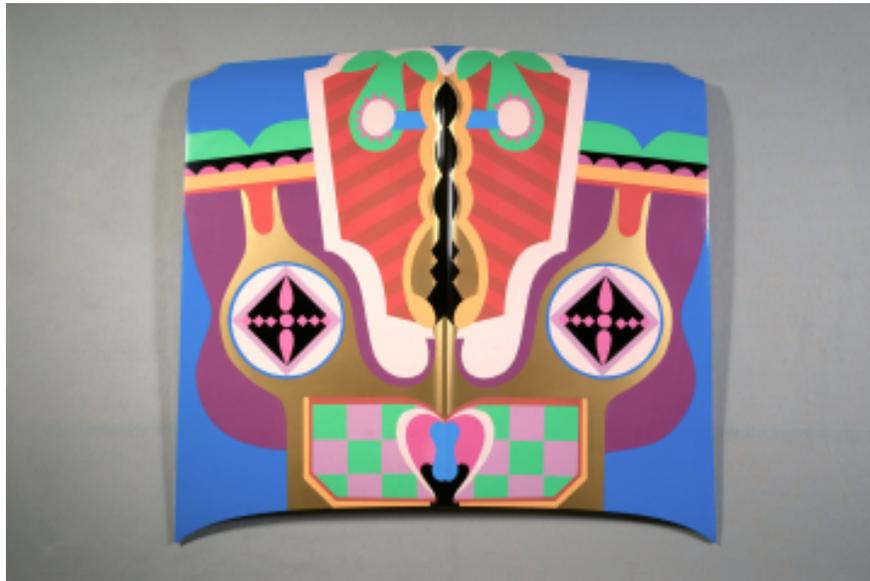


Judy Chicago, "On Fire at 80" (2019), Cirrus Gallery 50th Anniversary Commemorative Print © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York (Courtesy the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco. Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, New York)

I first learned about Judy Chicago's artwork from the essential third-wave feminist book Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future, published in 2000 by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards. In their chapter called "The Dinner Party," the authors reference Chicago's eponymous work as a jumping off point for their own project, underscoring Chicago's role as a second-wave feminist foremother, whose ideas laid the bedrock for future generations of art and activism.

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Indeed, Chicago's work has been fundamental in bringing themes like women's history, childbirth, and menstruation into the art world and larger cultural conversations. From getting her start in the male-centered art scene of Los Angeles in the 1960s, through turning 80 this past July at a celebration that marked the opening of a new "Through the Flower" art space in her hometown of Belen, New Mexico, Chicago's impact can be felt both through her prolific studio output, and her efforts to establish communities and traditions among women artists.



Judy Chicago, "Birth Hood" (1965/2011), sprayed automotive lacquer on car hood, 43 x 43 x 4 1/8 in. (© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY)

Best known for "The Dinner Party," – an epic installation made up of a banquet table filled with ceramic place settings representing different women across time – Chicago's career has not been without criticism or controversy. As she described during our phone conversation, she fought against sexist gatekeepers early on in her career; even The New York Times called "The Dinner Party" "failed art" in 1980, dismissing its vulval imagery as "crass" and "single-minded." More thoughtful intersectional feminist critiques of "The Dinner Party" have highlighted the work's limited inclusion of women of color, and its conflation of genitalia and gender identity. These criticisms speak to second-wave feminism's predominant focus on white, cis women's experiences, and illuminate the important ways in which feminist thought has evolved over the past fifty years.

Still, Chicago's career serves as a model for enacting social change amidst a hostile environment. Her work feels newly relevant in our current political moment, when anti-choice policies have

brought conversations about reproductive health and the rights of women and other people with uteruses back into the forefront of our collective cultural dialogue, and amidst revived feminist movements like the Women’s March, #MeToo, and the “women’s wave” of the 2018 midterms and 2020 Presidential race. And with three new shows opening this fall, including a showcase of her early work (*Judy Chicago: Los Angeles* at Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles), and a reflection on mortality (*Judy Chicago—The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction* at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and the forthcoming *Judy Chicago: Picturing Extinction: Studies for the End* at Manhattan’s Salon 94), Chicago doesn’t plan on slowing down anytime soon.



Judy Chicago, “Let it All Hang Out” (1973), sprayed acrylic on canvas, 80 x 80 in. (203.2 x 203.2 cm) (© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, New York)

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Hyperallergic: *As a pioneer of the feminist art movement, what gave you the strength to push against the conventions of the time, and the male-dominated art world you were part of?*

Judy Chicago: I grew up in an unusual, politically radical family. My father was a Marxist, and he raised me to feel that I had an obligation to try to make a contribution to the world. And also for a woman of my generation to be, like, loved by a father was very unusual at the time. And so I grew up, I guess, not afraid of men. My father used to do a lot of political organizing, and he would hold groups in our house where he would go around a circle and invite everybody to speak, including women and including me. That's where my pedagogy comes from. I grew up in an environment where I was encouraged to stand up for myself and speak up. My parents believed in equal rights for women, and like I often say the only problem was they didn't tell me the rest of the world didn't agree.

H: *Can you describe what the LA art world was like for you in the 1960s and 70s, when you started doing work around the feminist art movement?*

JC: There's a show that's happening in LA [*Judy Chicago: Los Angeles*] at Jeffrey Deitch's gallery, which will showcase the work I was doing in the 60s and early 70s across a lot of genres, like painting, sculpture, installation, performance, and fireworks, and it's the first time the full range of my production from those years will be seen. In fact, we're reconstructing several major sculptures that I had to destroy because I couldn't get support for them, and let me tell you why this show is so important to me. I did a piece called "Rainbow Pickett" (1965), which has become a kind of important work because of its inclusion in the first Minimalist show ("Primary Structures," 1966) at the Jewish Museum. And when I finished it, the most important curator in Southern California at the time, Walter Hopps, came into my studio and I wanted him to see "Rainbow Pickett," but he absolutely refused to look at it. And years later I had breakfast with him in Washington, and he tried to explain his behavior by saying, "Judy, you have to understand that at that time women in the art world were either groupies or artists' wives. So what was I to do with the fact that you were making work that was stronger than the men's? I had to avert my eyes."



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



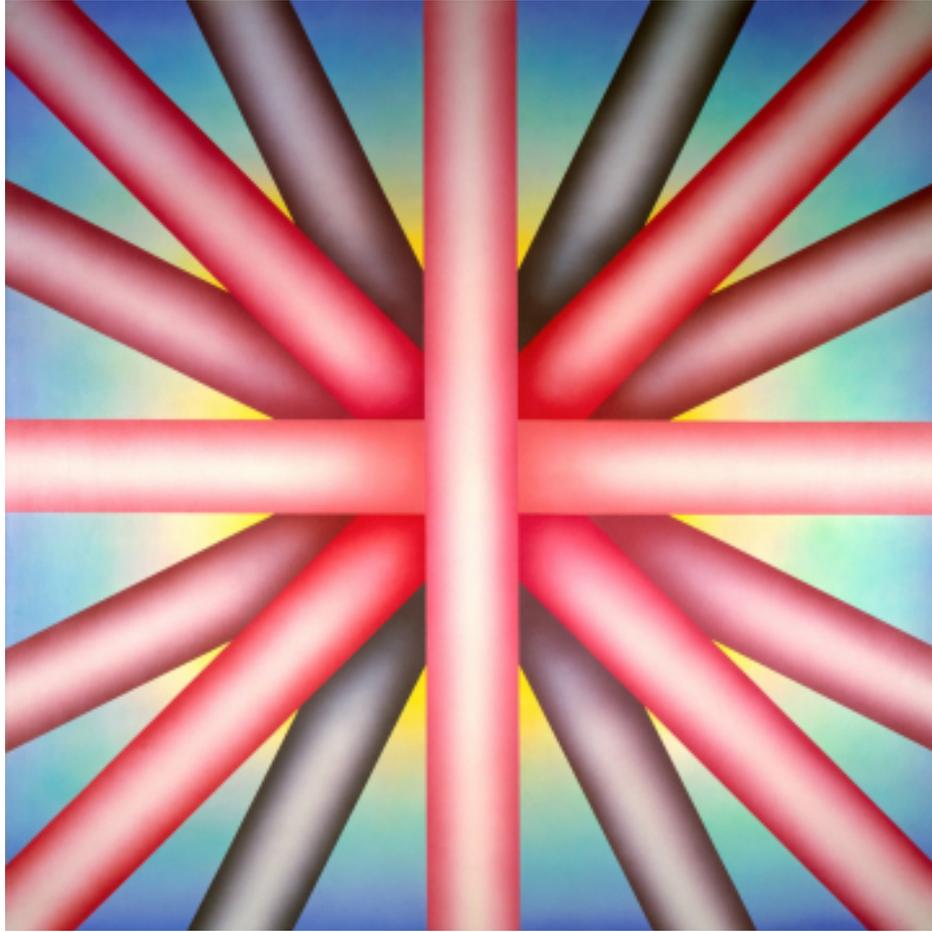
Judy Chicago, "Sunset Squares" (1965/2018), acrylic on canvas-covered plywood, 4 parts: 108 x 108 x 12 in; 84 x 84 x 12 in; 60 x 60 x 12 in; 36 x 36 x 12 in, (© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, courtesy the artist; Salon 94, New York; Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; and Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles, photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio)

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H: *That definitely paints a powerful picture. Thinking about that context you were working in, one thing that so many find inspiring about your career is how you've balanced creating your own artwork with supporting other women artists and encouraging community among women artists. I'm thinking about the collaborative "Womanhouse" exhibit in the 70s, and more recently opening your art space, Through the Flower. What role has feminist community and collaboration played in your life and career? What did building a community of support among women and feminist artists look like for you early in your career?*

JC: I was very, very isolated in the male-dominated, male-centered art world, and so I had to build a community because I didn't have one. And I also understood that success as an artist depends on a community of support – supporting family members, gallerists, collectors, critics, curators – and I didn't have any of that. So in order to survive and succeed I had to build it myself. I had to do a lot of things myself, because there was an absence of support for women artists. There still is at the level of support that exists for male artists.

A lot of women artists [in my community] didn't identify as feminist, didn't want to be called feminist artists, but I still supported them. [My community building] started with first developing a new form of art education that I felt would meet women's needs because university art education is inherently biased against women. For example, one of the students in my first Feminist Art Program at Fresno State – Nancy Youdelman, who has gone on to make a very significant career in art – wanted to make sculpture and was making sculpture, but she did not want to make plaster cubes, which were the kind of assignments that were given out in sculpture classes. She wanted to make sculpture with a needle, thread, and fabric, and so she never enrolled in a sculpture class. It was only in the Feminist Art Program that she was encouraged to make sculpture the way she wanted to. So my first step was to create a new type of art education that was geared toward the needs of women, because I had noticed that a lot of young women had gone to art school with me at UCLA and were in graduate school, but gradually in the first ten years of practice they dropped out. I wanted to see if I could provide support and help women succeed as professional artists without having to deny who they were as women, which was what my program was about.



Judy Chicago, "Heaven is for White men Only" (1973), sprayed acrylic on canvas, 80 x 80 in. (203.2 x 203.2 cm)
(© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, New York)

When I was at Cal Arts we had something called Wrap Weekends where we would invite women artists in the community to come and show their work to each other, and I have to tell you, I found women artists working in the back of their male partner's studios. I found women artists painting in their kitchens. I found women artists working small because they didn't have studios of their own, and then [Miriam Shapiro and I] invited some of those women to participate in "Womanhouse" (1972). I started women's galleries, organized women's shows, and wrote books. When I started the Women's Building it became a meeting place, and a support place for women in the arts. I did this around my studio work, which was always a priority for me. While I was building support for others, it was helping me feel supported and not so alone.

H: *In developing art education to meet women's needs, did the kind of artwork women have done historically in terms of traditional women's crafts influence your thinking in how to develop a program like that?*

JC: People have made a lot of my incorporation of traditional women's crafts like china painting and needle work into my work. What they forget about – and it's going to become visible in the Jeffrey Deitch show – is that from the beginning of my career I used fringe techniques. I went to auto body school, I used plastics, I did a feather room which I'm reimagining. I worked in dry ice, and fireworks. I used to say I'd work in bubble gum if that was the appropriate medium. For me, techniques are not gendered; I think that's ridiculous. Using an airbrush or working with feathers is no different than using china paint or designing for needle work. It's just a different type of technique; it's the social construct around it that's the problem: oh, a man can't use a needle and thread. Well they do now, but they didn't when I was going to school. That's because of the feminist art movement.

H: *Moving into the present day, how do you feel about where we are today in feminist history, and in feminist art history? Has enough progress been made?*

JC: How can you ask me that?! Of course there's been progress, but the more important thing is that when I was doing research into women's history that led me to "The Dinner Party," I discovered a cycle of erasure, and a pattern of repetition – and that's what we're seeing right now. This is not the first period in history when women artists have become prominent. Around the court of Marie Antoinette in the late eighteenth century, there were so many famous and successful women artists, women like Adelaide Labille-Guiard, who was teaching female students because young girls were growing up with the idea that they could be successful women artists; or Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, who had created the largest body of work of any woman artist until her time, but 200 years later her work was not even catalogued, and she was forgotten – she didn't have her first retrospective in France until a couple years ago. Same thing with Rosa Bonheur, who was incredibly successful during the 19th century and has been erased from history.

With the naiveté of youth I thought me and my paintbrush would overcome that cycle of erasure, but we're still in it. That's evidenced by the fact that women in their 20s are going to have to fight the same damn fights for reproductive rights that my generation fought. As long as we're trapped in this cycle of repetition, we cannot build on the wins of our foremothers because those gains slip away within decades of being won. At the same time, some women have more rights and privileges than women have ever enjoyed, but that's only some women on the planet. There are other women on the planet who can't go to school, who can't work, who can't drive, who have no access to medical care, maternal care, no childcare support, and are subjected to antiquated patriarchal practices like genital mutilation. So, progress for whom?



Judy Chicago, "The Dinner Party" (1974-1979) (© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society, NY Photo © Donald Woodman/Artists Rights Society, NY)

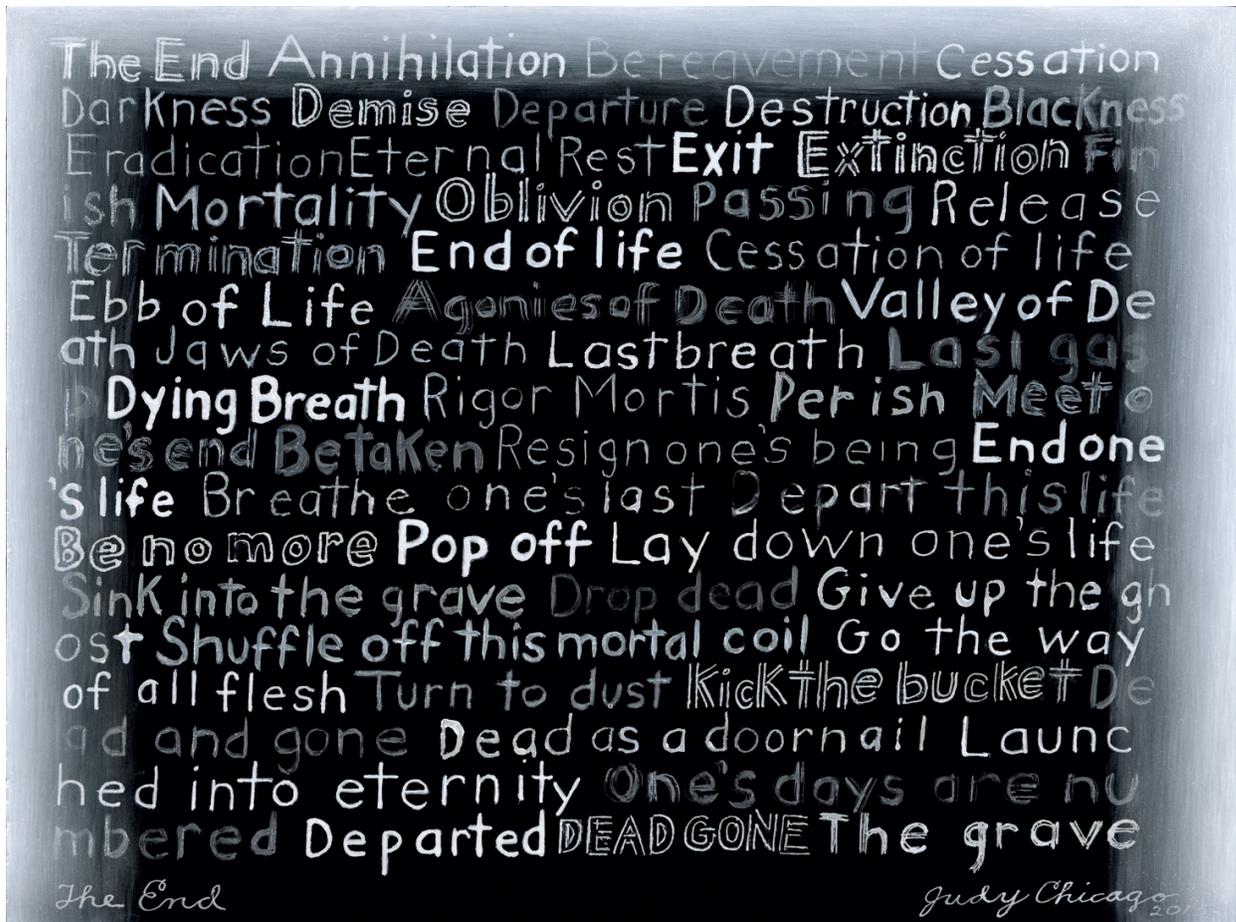
H: *"The Dinner Party" is of course such a foundational piece of feminist art history, and has sparked many important conversations, in particular around questions of inclusivity within feminism. What's your response to these critiques?*

JC: Well, first of all, there are aspects of "The Dinner Party" that still have not been understood. "The Dinner Party" is structured the way the history of Western civilization is taught still today. And the way the history of Western civilization is taught is through a series of usually white male heroes. "The Dinner Party" is a symbolic history of *women* in Western civilization, so when somebody says why aren't there more Asian women, it's because that's not what I set out to do. I set out to tell the history of women in Western civilization. In the narrative structure that I chose,

which can be and is being criticized – and one could even say “The Dinner Party” is an early critique of it – Native Americans do not and North and South and Central Americans do not come into that story until “Columbus discovered America” – in other words until the European colonization of the Americas – and at that time Sacagawea is introduced into the story along with numerous native women in North, Central, and South America who resisted colonization and worked for women’s rights. African Americans were not introduced into that narrative until Africans were brought over in chains, enslaved. And at that point in that narrative is Sojourner Truth, along with numerous African American women who not only worked for abolition but also for feminism, and to overturn lynching laws. So the way the history of Western civilization has been taught is racist, sexist, homophobic, Eurocentric, and “The Dinner Party” critiques that, actually. One of the things “The Dinner Party” asks of viewers and particularly offers to female viewers is seeing themselves in history, beyond the personal. The personal question is “why am I not represented?” The more important question is where are we in history, and how did we get here?

H: *Your Birth Project exhibit celebrating “the birth process, from the painful to the mythical” is currently on view at The Harwood Museum of Art in New Mexico. Do you see this project as having a new significance given the current administration’s focus on restricting the reproductive rights of women and other people with uteruses?*

JC: It’s kind of horrible and sad, right? The *Birth Project* has been getting a lot of attention, and I think it is because it celebrates this central place of women in reproduction and our right to freedom and control over our own bodies, at a moment when that’s – yet again – under attack. I [created] the *Birth Project* in Northern California, and it was the center of the alternative birth movement then, in the 1980s, where women were insisting on de-medicalizing birth, taking control of their own births, having the right to not have so much medical intervention. And three decades later, there has been a re-medicalization of birth through this incredible resurgence of Cesareans. The vagina is built – the vulva is built – to give birth. And watching a vulva give birth was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. My God, if everyone grew up watching this, knowing this, seeing this, the idea of the vulva as passive would be put to rest permanently. I mean, to watch the vulva give birth is to watch one of the most powerful organs in the human body.

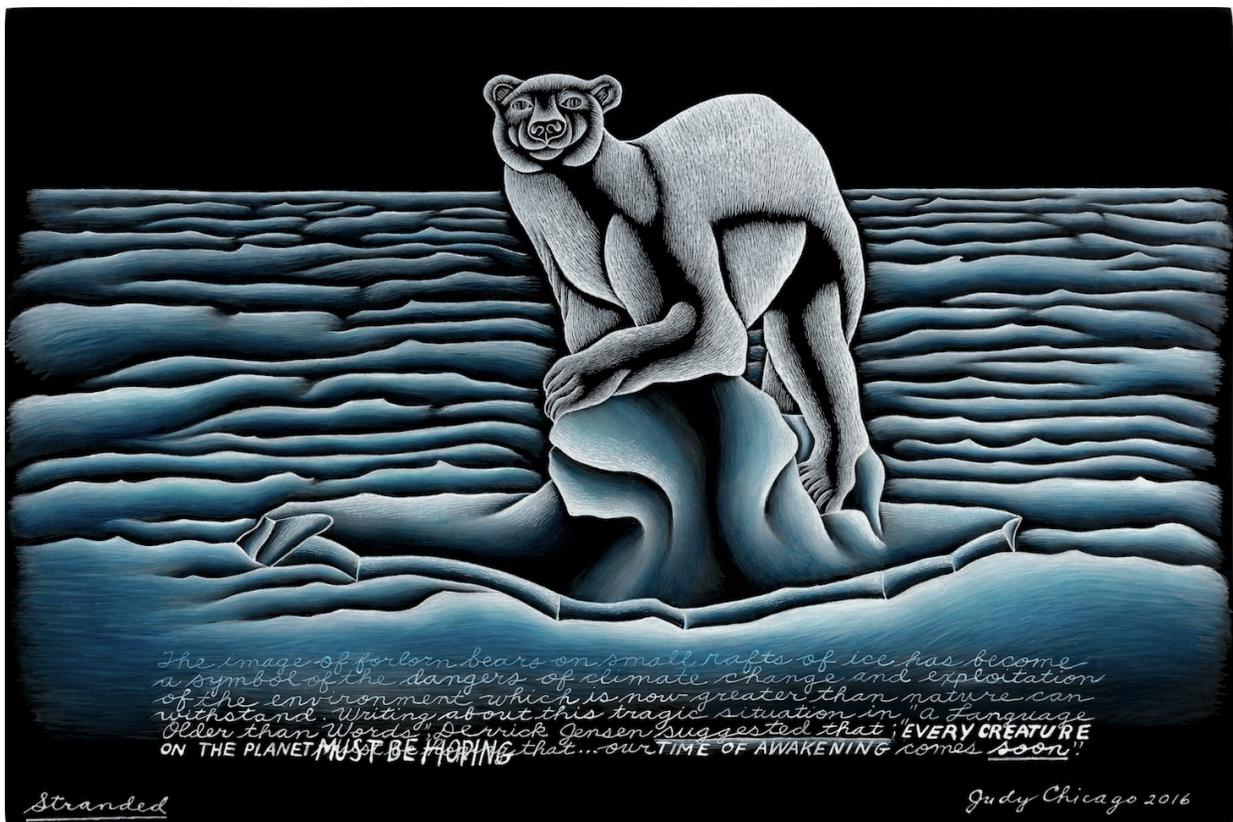


Judy Chicago Title Panel: Mortality from The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction, 2015 Kiln-fired glass paint on black glass 9 x 12 in. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

H: *In addition to Judy Chicago: Los Angeles, you have two other exciting shows coming up this fall, Judy Chicago –The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA), and Picturing Extinction: Studies for the End at Salon 94 in New York. How do these three exhibits showcase the trajectory of your career? And what's next for you?*

JC: Well, where I'm going next is to Los Angeles, Washington, New York, and then to Boston for the launch of the Judy Chicago Portal! [laughs] And also next May I'm having the first retrospective of my life at the De Young Museum at San Francisco. It's amazing, isn't it, that "The Dinner Party" premiered in San Francisco, and my first retrospective is going to be in San Francisco? And then there's the publication of a major monograph [Judy Chicago: New Views, being published this month by the NMWA and Scala Arts Publishers]. The LA Show is the first comprehensive view of my early work, so actually my publicist Ron Longe calls the shows "from the beginning to the end," which is funny.

Working on *The End* was just grief-inducing – not the part about mortality; for the mortality section, it was difficult to ask questions about how I will die, and coming face to face with trying to make images about that process. But it was the extinction section that was grief-inducing; the scale of what we're doing to other creatures. I feel like art has a really important role in helping us look at subjects that would be otherwise unbearable to think about. For example, do you know what finning is? Finning is the process by which shark fin soup is made. And what they do is they cut off the fins of sharks while they're alive, which means they can't swim, they can't hunt for food, they sink to the bottom of the ocean and they suffocate to death. And do you know that a hundred million sharks are finned a year? Can you imagine what it was like spending months painting that?



Judy Chicago, "Stranded" from "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction, 2016 Kiln-fired glass paint on black glass, 12 x 18 in. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

H: *What advice do you have for young women artists today?*

JC: I don't really dispense advice because I think it's presumptuous – everybody has to find their own path. But that they don't have to reinvent the wheel. I think that the first and most important thing is to learn their history as women and as women artists, and build on that.

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Judy Chicago: *Los Angeles continues at Jeffrey Deitch (925 N Orange Drive, Los Angeles) through November 2, 2019.* Judy Chicago –*The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction at the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA – 1250 New York Ave NW, Washington, D.C) continues through January 20, 2020.*