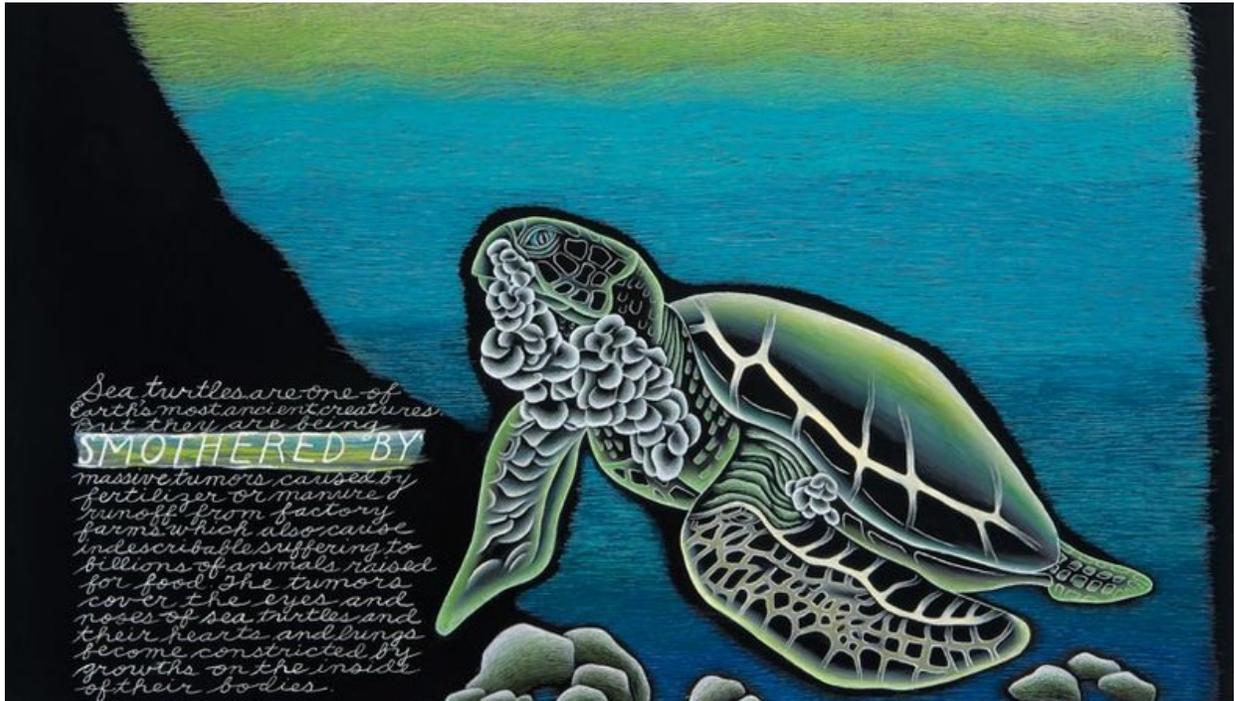


# The Washington Post

**Judy Chicago doesn't have time for games. The planet is dying, and so are we.**

Written by Phillip Kennicott

September 24, 2019



Judy Chicago's "Smothered," 2016, from her exhibition "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction." (Courtesy of the artist/Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; ♦ Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo ♦ Donald Woodman/ARS, NY)

Climate change won't just change how we live, it will radically remake how we die. Along with cancer and heart disease, now we can expect to perish during crop failures, extreme heat events, catastrophic storms and tropical disease pandemics, and suffer increases in asthma and other lung ailments. As the world becomes largely uninhabitable, we will also lack the old and reliable solace of knowing that the beauty of the world – the flora and fauna of the planet we love – will outlast us. None of us will be able to say on our deathbeds: All of this richness and wonder will subsist, nature will outlast me, and it is time now for other people to sustain the rhythms of life, birth, love, loss and death.

This dismal interconnection of our personal death with planetary crisis haunts a new exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, "Judy Chicago – The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction." The pioneering feminist artist, who had a health scare in 2012 that forced her to consider her own death, connects feelings of personal mortality to the way animals are forced into extinction by climate change, habitat loss, poaching, pollution and other man-made depredations. The work is small-scale, and often looks like illustrated pages from a handwritten book. Chicago, who turned 80 in July, paints on ceramic and kiln-fired glass, filling the small panels with thoughts and fears rendered in her familiar cursive script and evocative figures of animals, men and women, including a female figure with curly red hair who resembles the artist herself.

"Will I die screaming in pain?" is written in an arcing scroll above two figures, the red-haired woman and a dark-haired double, whose bodies are contorted in agony against a black background. "Will I die in my husband's arms?" asks another painted-glass image, depicting the same woman with a weeping man bent over her. A roomful of animal images digs more deeply into the specifics of environmental degradation, examining the fate of Galapagos penguins, sea turtles, salmon confronting dammed-up rivers and elephants slaughtered for their ivory tusks.



Chicago's "How Will I Die? #8," 2015. (Courtesy of the artist/Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; ♦ Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo ♦ Donald Woodman/ARS, NY)

Two large bronze sculptures give focus to the collected cries and provocations gathered on the walls. One shows Chicago lying as if in a coffin, eyes closed and hands serenely holding a clutch of flowers. The other shows some of the animals that face destruction, gathered together like the castoffs at a taxidermist's studio. A third gallery functions as a prologue, illustrating the five stages of death defined by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross.

Chicago's work is uncomfortably personal. There is no paucity of narcissism in the art world, but deeply personal work that touches on emotions commonly felt by ordinary people is relatively rare. So, too, is the often blunt, direct way in which Chicago illustrates those fears. And the colors that animate these images aren't drawn from the orderly, soothing palette of high design, but from a riot of bright blues, yellows, purples and greens. Since completing her most acclaimed work, "The Dinner Party," in 1979, Chicago has pursued a courageous countercurrent to the mainstream art world, mixing the personal and the political, fusing feminism to populist imagery, using materials and

championing media that have long been relegated to the world of “craft” or the homemade, or are gendered as feminine.



Chicago's "Mortality Relief," 2018. (Courtesy of the artist/Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco; ♦ Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo ♦ Donald Woodman/ARS, NY)

In a new monograph on her work, the artist says: “I love objects, and I’m a maverick. So here’s the art world moving into bigger studios, with more assistants, making larger work for bigger mega-rich people, or sending their art out over digital media. I’m alone in my studio with my paintbrush, making modest, small work that I hope will achieve what Jacob Lawrence achieved in the Migration Series: real art that tells a story.”

That is a fine and accurate self-assessment. To see what this means in practical, visual terms, consider one of the panels made on fired black glass, titled “Mortality.” It consists of handwritten words, all synonyms for dying or death (“Pop off,” “Turn to dust,” “Dead as a doornail”). In some ways, this is remarkably similar to a 2005 painting by Mel Bochner that uses a riot of pinks, greens, blues and purples to spell out a thesaurus of phrases and words that mean die: “Succumb, Pass Away, Drop Dead, Conk Out . . .” Bochner’s work, however, foregrounds its conceptual origins – he

has made a large series of these thesaurus paintings in a similar style – stressing a wry humor over the actual meaning of the words themselves. The fear that accompanies dying is nowhere to be found in what is essentially a visual game with semantic meaning and meaninglessness.

Chicago's development of a similar idea isn't nearly as orderly, nor so self-consciously intellectual in its remove from the words depicted. She isn't playing any kind of game at all, and that earnestness is discomfiting. I found her panels devoted to the stages of dying – denial, anger, depression, etc. – too earnest, too directly literal, too subservient to Kubler-Ross's ideas, like the way illustrations in a dictionary are used to define a word. But I was deeply engaged with most of the rest of this exhibition, especially the panels that come together as a personal and secular breviary of dying.

The connection between Chicago's personal fears of death and her anger and sadness about the extinction of our coequal animal citizens is important, powerful and necessary. In the accompanying monograph, author Sarah Thornton writes: "Now that the art world is revoking its virtual excommunication of Judy Chicago, it is time to position her work in broader dialogue with postwar art history." Which is to say, it's time to realize how consistently prophetic Chicago has been, despite turning left every time the art world turned right. If contemporary art is essentially an ongoing critique of the systemic rules and biases of the art world itself, a self-perpetuating deconstruction by artists of what other artists were doing five minutes ago, Chicago has consistently taken the long view, developing a thoroughly personal and trenchant form of critique. And she has managed to do it in a way that has wide popular appeal.

She is now focusing those energies on our dying planet, and she has underscored a terrifying and sad fact: Our deaths are becoming disconnected from what we sometimes call Mother Earth. So we die alone, each death orphaned of meaning on a planet that is dying, too. There is no more urgent subject under the sun.