

Judy Chicago: vibrant celebration of the female body

By Rachel Spence

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The artist's work — subject of her first major UK show at Gateshead's Baltic Centre — pays colourful homage to womanhood



Judy Chicago, 'On Fire at 80' (2019) Photo © Donald Woodman/ Artists Rights Society, New York

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A menagerie of fish, birds and insects flows through a serpentine human body, its contours emerging out of swooping graphic lines. This is a cosmos in eternal motion yet certain images leap out — a hand grasps a flaming sun; a fetus crouches in a rainbow-hued womb — before this fluid universe dissolves into the turquoise waters to course beyond the frame.

Even before you know that Judy Chicago has entitled her 1984 image "The Creation", its fierce ambition, as well as its vibrant palette, internal dynamism and that lonely, omnipotent hand, bring to mind that other, earlier vision of the world's birthing.

Yet that unborn child tells us that the US artist is turning Michelangelo's vision on its patriarchal head. Chicago's world is born of woman and no less radiant for it.

Chicago is now in her 81st year, and her fidelity to women's fecundity — as mothers and artists — has remained unyielding, urgent and angry. Always, however, she is celebratory rather than condemnatory. That doughty optimism shines through an immaculate new monograph of the

feminist pioneer at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. Spanning her 50-year career, it is Chicago's first major survey show in the UK.

"The Creation", which opens the show, turns out to be not the painting it appears but a tapestry. An accompanying text reveals that as a young artist Chicago considered needlework to be "woman's work" and would have felt "humiliated" had "a male artist or dealer discovered me . . . at the embroidery machine or loom".



'The Creation' (1984) © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York P

That the art world now believes both women and textiles to be worthy of note is in part down to pioneers such as Chicago. She was born in 1939, and her juvenile years saw contemporary art dominated by minimalism which, as she said, was supposed to be "genderless, universal and devoid of emotion", although in truth, she continued, it was about the "authority of the straight, white, male".

Chicago kicked those ideas out of the park. Although not shown here, her early work included stunning minimalist sculptures in the jazzy, uplifting shades that would become her signature.

Such works threw a gauntlet down to modern art's male gatekeepers who derided colour, especially pinks and purples, as frivolous and girlish. The earliest works at Gateshead are a trio of photographs – "Desert Atmosphere" (1969–2018), "Smoke Bodies" (1972) and "Purple Atmosphere" (1969–2018) – which commemorate performances Chicago made with fireworks in the Californian desert that saw the crystalline air infused with spectacular clouds of deep plum and aubergine vapour.

Those hues – fleshy, sanguineous, with more than a hint of the uterine – signal Chicago's determination to praise rather than blame the female body. Her most famous expression of that sentiment is of course "The Dinner Party" (1979). An epic homage to trailblazing women – from Sojourner Truth to Eleanor of Aquitaine – the installation comprises 39 place settings, each one evoking a vagina, around a triangular table. A 2015 film recounts Chicago's desire to represent the Last Supper "from the point of view of those doing the cooking"

Five years in the making, it is a funny, ferocious tour-de-force – the subliminal reference to cunnilingus just one of numerous coded allusions – which caused trouble from the start. One art critic described it as a "libel on the female imagination". In 1990, a US congressman condemned it as "3D ceramic pornography". But women loved it so much, the San Francisco Museum of Art, which debuted it in March 1979, had to introduce timed ticketing for the first time and renamed a cash register in the gift shop "Judy".

Here in Gateshead, we see just one plate-in-progress. A quiet honouring of Hrosvitha, a 10th-century German poet, the trio of sample dishes bear a colourless labial pattern that, in its final iteration, has absorbed gentle tones of sage and pink. Meanwhile, a riveting 2015 film, which

recounts the story behind the work, includes Chicago's desire to represent the Last Supper "from the point of view of those doing the cooking".



Hrosvitha test plates from 'The Dinner Party' (1974-78)
© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Her awareness of hidden labour was seeded in Chicago's childhood thanks to a father who was a Marxist and a union organiser. Although he died when she was 13, she remembers him as her "primary parent" who worked nights and cared for her during the day while her mother worked as a medical secretary. "I grew up in a house that was filled with diverse groups of people and a lot of political debate," she told Hans-Ulrich Obrist in one interview. "My father played games with me aimed at teaching logic, values and tolerance."

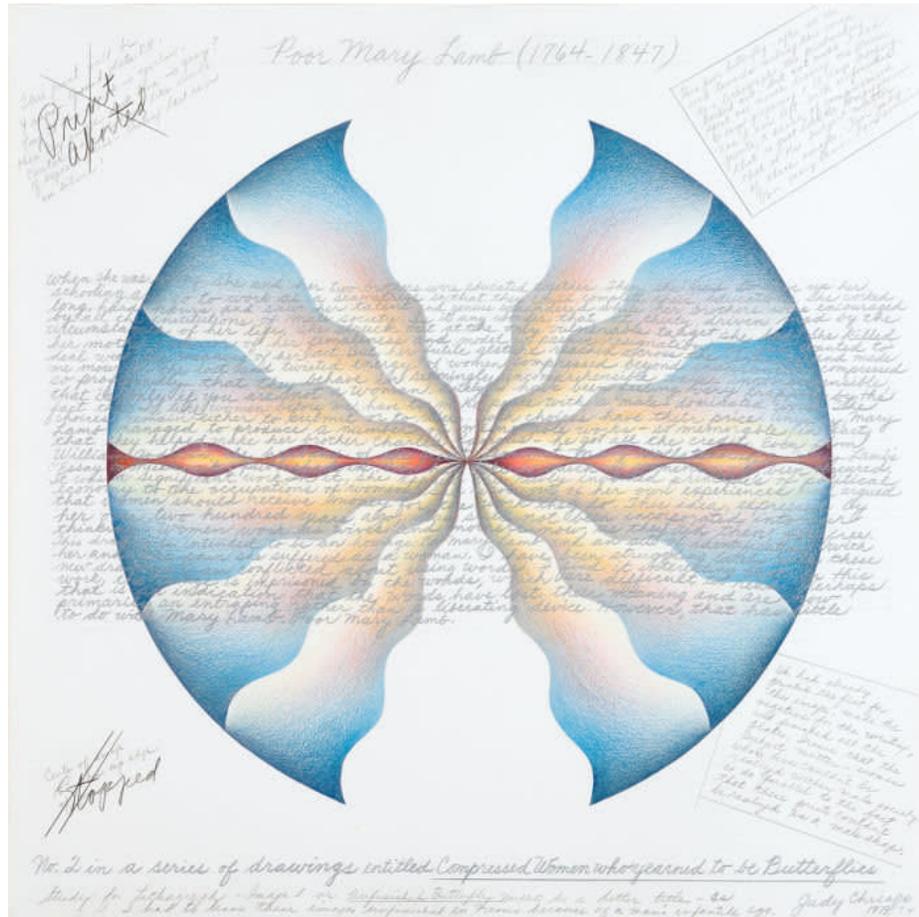
Chicago's collective spirit has never been more relevant at a time when so much art is outsourced to invisible, anonymous makers. Here at the Baltic exhibition, her generous attitude is thoroughly explored in The Birth Project.

Made between 1980 and 1985, and prompted by Chicago's horror at "how few images of birth [existed] in western art", the project involved 150 needleworkers from the US, Canada and New Zealand who contributed to the creation of 100 panels using techniques that included quilting, macramé and embroidery.

Of various elements on show here, the "Crowning Quilt 7/9" (1982) – made as part of the chapter entitled Childbirth in America – demonstrates how, with just a little thought, artists can credit their accomplices in such a way as to enhance the finished work. Taking centre stage is a quilt whose complex ingredients incorporate embroidery, drawing and painting on batik fabric. The result is a gloriously sensual, immediate image, in shades of violet, mauve, amethyst and blueberry, of a woman in mid-childbirth, the symmetry of her breasts, legs and vulva giving her body an archetypal dignity while the baby's head is picked out in threads of white, pink and gold. The result is at once raw and exultant, authentic and stylised, pregnant with mystery yet devoid of romance.

Nearby documentation acknowledges by name the women (and men) involved in the quilt's making. Indeed one craftsperson, Nora Bullock – who was responsible for embroidery and quilting – recounts her own story including her determination to pass the needlework skills she learnt from her mother and mother-in-law down to her own children.

Chicago won't follow suit. Despite her reverence for motherhood, she has no children because, as she once put it: "There was no way on this Earth I could have had children and the career I've had."



'Mary Lamb' from 'Compressed Women Who Yearned to be Butterflies' (1974)
© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Even without offspring, her road has been rocky. Regularly ignored by high-minded contemporary art historians – who saw her punchy, colourful, essentially graphic aesthetics as tacky and superficial – Chicago had little mainstream recognition until recently when she, like so many older women artists, suddenly became fashionable. Only in 2007 did "The Dinner Party" find a permanent home in the Brooklyn Museum.

Her private life has been marked by loss. In 1963, her husband Jerry Gerowitz died in a car crash. Then in the first year of her new marriage, in 1985, to photographer Donald Woodman, Chicago was hit and badly injured by a car. She unfolds this trauma through a startling yet calibrated blend of drawing, photography and text in her series *My Accident* (1986), on show here.

Today, with a run of recent major shows behind her including at New York's Brooklyn Museum and the National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) in Washington DC (both 2017), Chicago should feel she has nothing to prove.



Study for How 'Will I Die? #2' (2014) © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Nevertheless, it's little surprise to find that in her recent work "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction" (2013-18) – shown in the UK for the first time here – she shows she has no intention of going gently into any night. Working in a mix of coloured pencil and white tempera on black paper, she proffers a sequence of human bodies, both male and female, at their moment of extremis accompanied by lines of text. "Will I die screaming in pain?" demands one. "Will I die embracing the light?" asks another.

The latter is the very least this dauntless warrior deserves.

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