

# DAZED

**Artist Judy Chicago on capturing the highs and lows of being human**

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On Fire at 80, 2019© Donald Woodman

## **The feminist artist speaks on how she uses her art to understand birth and death, and all the emotions, anxieties, accidents in-between**

When the celebrated feminist artist Judy Chicago, now 80 years old, missed her connecting flight from Dallas to London for the opening of the first major UK survey of her work at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, she quipped to her team, “Just think of this as practice for when I’m not here anymore.” No one laughed. “I’m always telling jokes that I think are funny but nobody else does,” she tells me over the phone.

Chicago has long regarded art as a way to understand mortality and other aspects of the human condition. The exhibition in Gateshead spans a half-century, from those pastel-coloured smoke sculptures pluming in the California desert in the 1960s to her autobiographical drawings of the early 1990s. At the root of it all is her desire to make the invisible visible – whether it’s deeply personal, common to all women or universal.

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Rewind back to the 70s and you have "The Dinner Party" (1974-79), the monumental installation for which Chicago is best known – or, as she describes it, "the piece everyone wanted to see and no one wanted to show". Shortly after this, Chicago made the *Birth Project* (1980-85), a series of 80 tapestries which sought to redress the lack of images of birth in western art and, in doing so, celebrate the birthing process and women's power. It's no surprise that, in light of the ongoing discussion surrounding abortion, this work has surfaced as a major point of interest. "It's sad that all these years later women are having to fight the same battles," says Chicago, who collaborated on the project with 150 needleworkers across the US, Canada and New Zealand. "Anybody who thinks these issues are passé must be living on another planet."



"The Creation" from the Birth Project (1982). Modified Aubusson tapestry, Weaving by Audrey Cowan, 42 x 163 in. (106.7 x 414 cm) Collection of Museum of Arts and Design, New York City, Gift of the Robert and Audrey Cowan Family Trust © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, New York

Of course, the human condition encompasses more than birth and death – it's about everyday emotions, anxieties, accidents. At the tail end of 1985, Chicago married photographer Donald Woodman and three weeks later she was hit by a truck on her weekly Sunday-morning run. "My Accident" (1986), which brings Chicago's writing and drawings together with naked photographs of her taken by Woodman, records the incident and its aftermath. The tone is tender ("I felt humiliated at having my new husband see my battered body"), the childlike writing and comic book-style layout full of promise ("We were newlyweds and just starting our life together"). It's hard not to imagine Chicago's lips curling into a wry smile as she wrote: "Donald was wonderful but it was a hell of a start to our married life".

In her art, Chicago makes her most personal feelings public. Comprising 140 annotated drawings, "Autobiography of a Year" (1993-94) chronicles 12 months' worth of peaks and troughs. One panel documents the artist's money worries, another her frustration at the quicksand nature of time. Uplifting moments, we're informed by a colour chart, are highlighted canary-yellow – as in "Weeping with joy at having a brush". Patches of depression are visibly bleak: a naked figure standing against a smudgy grey backdrop, for example, ready to throw in the towel.

Chicago doesn't believe in sugar-coating – and yet, throughout much of her work, darkness is pinpricked with light. "I think it's important to be able to laugh at oneself and aspects of the human condition," she says. In that same series, a pink-and-red heart blooms from a bouquet to mark Valentine's Day while three feline portraits would suggest that, yes, as the caption reads, "Basically she preferred her cats to most people". Even the more glib moments teeter on the edge of comical. "I think that, sometimes, life is funny," she tells me. "Tragic, painful, challenging, and funny."

**"I think it's important to be able to laugh at oneself and aspects of the human condition" – Judy Chicago**

The everyday tragedy of mortality is at the forefront of her most recent series: *The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction* (2015-17). Divided into three parts, it deals with psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, the artist's reckoning with her demise and the piecemeal destruction of the planet. "I've always had an intense awareness of my mortality because my childhood was so shadowed by death," says Chicago, whose father died suddenly when she was 13.



In *The End*, a series of drawings on black paper combines text and imagery and is designed to shock us into recognising a state of emergency. A polar bear perches on a floating slab of ice. An elephant lies dead on the ground, its trunk and tusks hacked off. Thirty-eight million sharks are finned each year, we learn from Chicago's cursive scrawl, and each time, tossed back into the ocean where, unable to swim, they suffocate. This is art at its most powerful, highlighting the harrowing effect humans can have on the planet.

"For so long, all I had was the power of my art," says Chicago, who refers to her career as a miracle. "In the end, that was enough." And after creating a vast body of work about extinction; what next? "I'm very busy," she assures me with a chuckle.

*Judy Chicago is on view at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead until 19 April 2020*



Study for "Smuggled from The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction" (2014). Prismacolor and acrylic paint on black Arches 9 x 12 in (22.86 x 30.48 cm) © 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