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Judy Chicago: "What Does Art Have to Do With the Coronavirus?"

By Judy Chicago

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A view of Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," an installation devoted to important women in history, on display at the Brooklyn Museum.

Photo: Courtesy of Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Since I wrote the first draft of this essay in early March, the world has turned upside down. I have revised the original text, guided by a single question: Does art matter when we are facing a global crisis such as the current Covid-19 pandemic?

Obviously, there is a great deal of art that doesn't matter. This includes the work issuing from those university art programs that every year pump out thousands of graduates, taught only to speak in tongues about formal, conceptual and theoretical issues few people care about or can comprehend. Then there is the art created for a global market that has convinced too many people that a piece's selling price is more important than the content it conveys.

But when art is meaningful and substantive, viewers can become enlightened, inspired and empowered. And this can lead to change, which we urgently need.

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My education about the potential power of art began in the early 1970s, when I delivered a lecture in Grand Forks, N.D. It was not a place where I would have assumed art would matter. Nonetheless, more than 200 women and men attended my talk. I showed images from "Great Ladies," my series of abstract portraits of some important and forgotten women in history, such as Christina of Sweden, the 17th century queen and patron of the arts who widely influenced European culture. At that time, women's studies as an academic field was in its infancy; I had discovered those figures through my own research, driven by a desperate need to find out about women before me who had faced obstacles like the ones I had encountered in my career.



A detail of "Half-Scale Study for Double Jeopardy" by Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman on display in 2018 at the Ronald Feldman Gallery. The work is part of the couple's collaboration "Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light."

Photo: Courtesy of Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

After my talk, I did something artists rarely do; I asked the audience what they thought of my work. After a few minutes, someone said my stated aim of depicting significant women in history was interesting, but that without my spoken explanation people would never have been able to understand my work. That interaction was a revelation, and it inspired me to figure out how to make my imagery more accessible, starting with "The Dinner Party," my symbolic history of women in Western civilization. Since its premiere in 1979, countless people have told me that seeing it changed their lives.

Because I had structured "The Dinner Party" so that it could be understood by a broad audience, it was rejected by the art establishment and shunned by the museum system. But what happened next taught me that art could inspire action.

Communities across the United States, Canada, Europe and even Australia mounted a phenomenal grass-roots movement, as was documented by Dr. Jane Gerhard in her 2013 book "The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007." Those who participated in it raised money, pressured public institutions and, when unsuccessful, moved to find alternative spaces to exhibit "The Dinner Party." Millions of people viewed my piece as a result

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of these worldwide efforts.

In subsequent projects I have continued to focus on creating an art of meaning in forms that could be widely understood. And I have continued to witness people flocking to my shows even in the face of ongoing critical resistance.

One might ask what this has to do with the global pandemic afflicting us. The answer lies in art's power to shed light on the problems we are confronted with at this difficult time.

Much of my art has been directed at interrogating issues related to abuses of power, as well as the victimization and erasure of certain groups. "PowerPlay" focused on the ways that toxic masculinity is literally "Driving the World to Destruction," as the title and imagery of one painting in the series suggests. "Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light," created with my husband, the photographer Donald Woodman, was an effort to warn the world about the global system of injustice and oppression that had produced the Holocaust, which Virginia Woolf once aptly described as "patriarchy gone mad."

I am not citing my own art as an egocentric exercise. Rather, I am pointing out that I have been trying to use it to educate, inspire and empower viewers to effect change. Significant change can only occur if we shift our focus to the work of those artists who have had the courage to show us who we are and what we are doing. Artists like Goya, whose masterpiece series "The Disasters of War" is a powerful reminder that those who have the least to say about human events suffer the gravest of consequences. Or Käthe Kollwitz, whose vivid portraits of the effects of poverty on the working classes should be viewed as part of any discussion of income inequality to more powerfully illustrate what those words really mean.



A detail from Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party" at the Brooklyn Museum. The installation is a symbolic history of women in Western civilization.

Photo: Courtesy of Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Art that raises awareness of the state of our planet can be especially important in today's world.

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One example of this is the work of the contemporary artist and illustrator Sue Coe, whose pieces on animal mistreatment have been ignored or, at best, marginalized by an art community that seems to privilege meaninglessness over consequential work. My most recent project, "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction," also sought to bring attention to what we humans do to other sensate creatures on our shared planet.

This is the kind of art that matters most as we confront the devastating force of the coronavirus. The philosopher David Benatar recently wrote in *The New York Times* that the pandemic is a consequence of our gross maltreatment of animals. As the primatologist Jane Goodall put it in a YouTube video addressing the outbreak: "All over the world we've been destroying the places where animals live in order to get materials to build our homes, our cities and to make our own lives more comfortable."

We must *wake up*; this pandemic offers us the opportunity to realize that the path we as humans have taken — a path that has rendered our leaders unable to confront, let alone reverse, climate change or to alter the way we treat our fellow creatures — will result in endless havoc. Art matters if artists use their talents to help us find our way.

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