

DAZED

Judy Chicago: "Pioneering artist Judy Chicago on turning her art to the climate crisis"

By Emily Dinsdale

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Judy Chicago (2020)

Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, New York.

From her seminal work of feminist art, "The Dinner Party"(1979) to the time she undermined the phallic-nature of architecture by creating a grand womb-like space for Dior's SS20 couture show in Paris, Judy Chicago is known for challenging what she describes as the "mass terrorism" of toxic masculinity. What began for Chicago as a quest for gender equality has come to also embrace what she perceives as all victims of the tyranny of patriarchal control, including the planet itself. "My body of art is a part of a long historic struggle for justice," the American artist tells Dazed. "That now includes climate justice. If I have been able to make a contribution to this struggle, I will have achieved my lifetime goals."

In 1960s California, attending Richard Serra's exhibition at the Pasadena Museum, Chicago was horrified by "Sawing" - a now-notorious artwork involving a configuration of cut-down endangered redwood trees in the centre of the gallery. She was appalled by Serra's machismo and sense of entitlement to the natural world, which seemed to characterise so much of the art being championed at the time. In response, Chicago began a series called *Atmospheres* with the intention of making art that worked in harmony with the environment rather than damaging or claiming dominion over it.

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Never afraid of playing with fire, the feminist artist embarked on a study of pyrotechnics in order to create large-scale ephemeral works that would temporarily transform and "feminise" the landscape without leaving a legacy of destruction, unlike so many of her much-lauded male contemporaries in the realm of land-art. "My work represents a significant challenge to that of many of my male peers whose work involves bulldozers and other heavy equipment and leaves a permanent scar on the land," Chicago tells Dazed. "In contrast, I use environment-friendly smokes that create moments of intense beauty but leave no permanent marks."

In the first iteration of *Atmospheres*, Chicago used white smoke to transform a street in Pasadena with a veil of mist. Since then, *Atmospheres* has evolved into a series of extraordinary site-specific smoke-sculpture performances across the US, drawing thousands of visitors to experience the world around them momentarily transformed by Chicago's brilliant explosions of colour.

Collaborating with non-profit art foundation [Light Art Space](#), a team of digital creatives and pyrotechnic experts, her new creation "Judy Chicago Rainbow AR" is an immersive app which allows you to recreate *Atmospheres* and experiment with Chicago's ethereal plumes of coloured smoke in your own surroundings. "I want to create an experience of beauty in one's personal environment at a time when public gatherings are limited," the artist explains.

Scroll through the gallery above to remind yourself of the staggering beauty of *Atmospheres*. Meanwhile, below, we talk to Judy Chicago about her new venture into the world of augmented reality, dismantling the patriarchy, and her desire to bring a touch of hope into the abject year that is 2020.



Fireworks performance. Performed at the Cal-State Fullerton Campus, Fullerton, CA © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archives Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco.

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Could you share with us the story of your Atmospheres series – how it began and how it's evolved into this latest iteration, "Judy Chicago Rainbow AR"?

Judy Chicago: I began my *Atmospheres* series in the late 1960s, creating increasingly complex firework pieces that were intended to soften and feminise the environment in ephemeral, site-specific performances. In these radical firework performances, I used brilliant explosions and sequences of colour as a visual metaphor to portray different emotive states. Some of my most recent *Atmospheres* performances have included 'A Butterfly for Brooklyn', which was presented in front of an audience of more than 12,000 people in Prospect Park, and 'Purple Poem for Miami' in 2019, which coincided with my solo exhibition at ICA Miami. Recently, the Nevada Museum of Art acquired my fireworks archive as part of their major land art archive. My work represents a significant challenge to that of many of my male peers whose work involves bulldozers and other heavy equipment and leaves a permanent scar on the land. In contrast, I use environment-friendly smokes that create moments of intense beauty but leave no permanent marks.

'Judy Chicago Rainbow AR' marks a new stage in my work with pyrotechnics, using new technologies to capture an authentic experience of my smoke sculpture performance in the digital realm. Technically-speaking it is very innovative - International Magic used cutting-edge technologies to translate and simulate the physical behaviours of my artwork inside augmented reality, including device motion, fluid smoke simulations, real-time particle systems, noise shaders and harmonic sound to create an authentic, interactive experience, unique to the viewer each time they enter the work. The result is that plumes of smoke billow across the viewers' screens, changing colour, enabling the viewer to transform and beautify their surroundings and become part of their own interactive, site-specific performance. The experience is also accompanied by a polyphonic soundtrack, which I realised in collaboration with sound designer Colin Bailey.

I love your idea of feminising the world around us and "bathing our environments with light, art, and beauty". What do you feel is the importance and significance of this act?

Judy Chicago: In the mid-sixties, I was living in Pasadena and Richard Serra had an exhibition at the Pasadena Museum. When I went to the opening, I was horrified to see a group of cut-down redwood trees, which were already endangered, piled up in the middle of the gallery. I expressed my distress to Richard. The next morning, there was a pounding on my studio door and when I went down the stairs and opened it, there was Richard waving *Artforum* around saying, 'You may not like it but they do.' This story pretty much sums up my position in the art world; my perspective was definitely not in the mainstream. Masculine, patriarchal approaches were not only accepted but valorised while my work was marginalised for decades.

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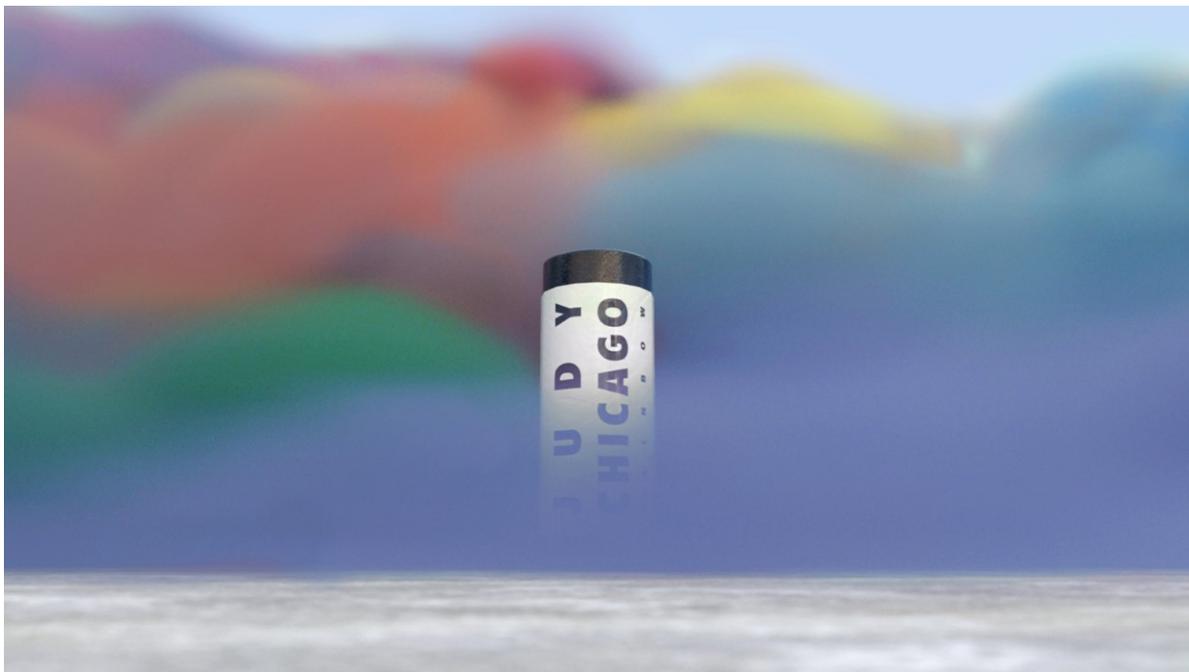
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Nonetheless, shortly after this encounter, I began my *Atmospheres* – going out with a small group of friends to the desert, beaches, and mountains of California and igniting coloured smokes that – for moments – softened and feminised the landscape, providing everyone with an alternative experience to that embodied in the work of such artists as Richard Serra and Michael Heizer, etc. Although it has taken many decades, I am glad that, in the face of climate change, my perspective has come to be seen as expressing a different path, one that highlights and merges with the environment rather than dominating and defiling it.

You set the tone for Dior’s SS20 collection with your question “What if Women Ruled the World?” Could you elaborate on your vision of what that world might be like?

Judy Chicago: My work has always reflected my quest for social justice. In the beginning, I was focused on gender justice but over the years I have come to understand that the oppression of women-identified and trans people is part of a much larger global structure of injustice that includes our gross mistreatment of other creatures and the planet. My body of art is a part of a long historic struggle for justice. That now includes climate justice. If I have been able to make a contribution to this struggle, I will have achieved my lifetime goals.

‘What if women ruled the world’ – originally conceived in response to the invitation to collaborate extended by Maria Grazia Chiuri (the first female director of Dior) for her January 2020 couture show – is having a long life. It is now on display at Jeffrey Deitch’s NY gallery until 19 December 2020, and will then go to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. in relation to their April 2021 gala honouring Maria Grazia and me. Moreover, the print I created in relation to the large banner is being featured in a number of online exhibitions and the questions posed by the banners seem more relevant every day.



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What are your hopes for 'Rainbow AR' now it's out there in the public domain for people to interact with? What would you like people to take away from their experiences with your app?

Judy Chicago: I want to create an experience of beauty in one's personal environment at a time when public gatherings are limited. I recognise that people feel constrained and isolated as a result of the pandemic. As I cannot change the external circumstances I am glad that the 'Rainbow AR' can transform our internal spaces, if only for a few moments - which is also what my *Atmospheres* achieved.

2020 has been a rollercoaster of a year so far, so I hope that my 'Rainbow AR' will also inspire people, bringing hope, joy, and faith in the possibility of change through the visual metaphor of the immersive coloured smoke. There is a Jewish mandate that suggests that one must choose hope even in the face of difficult and challenging circumstances. This is something I try to do every day, and I hope that experiencing a moment of beauty through my 'Rainbow AR' might inspire some hope that can lead to the positive changes we so desperately need. I am grateful to LAS and International Magic - as well as Chris Souza of Pyro Spectaculars, my husband, photographer, and creative consultant on the app, and our staff as it took many people to create this augmented reality experience.

Judy Chicago Rainbow AR is available to download now for free on [Android](#) or [Apple](#)

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