

DATEBOOK

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

"Essential Judy Chicago works to see on view in the Bay Area this fall"

By Tony Bravo

August 20, 2021



Judy Chicago at the after-show dinner for the Dior Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2020 show as part of Paris Fashion Week in January 2020. Photo: Anthony Ghnassia / Getty Images for Dior

Pioneering feminist artist Judy Chicago is being celebrated this fall in a unique confluence of exhibitions in the Bay Area. It's an appropriate creative homecoming of sorts for Chicago, 82, whose world-famous installation "The Dinner Party" debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979.

Now, San Francisco will play a key role in the ongoing rediscovery of the larger body of Chicago's career beyond that iconic work.

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"Judy Chicago: A Retrospective" at the de Young is the first full-career exhibition on the artist of its scale, featuring 130 works across mediums. The show was originally scheduled to coincide with the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in the United States in 2020 but was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic. The retrospective follows recent survey shows of Chicago at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, and the Turner Carroll Gallery in Santa Fe, N.M.

Also on view in San Francisco will be "Judy Chicago: Human Geometries" at Jessica Silverman as well as "Judy Chicago: Cohanim" at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, part of the "Experience Leonard Cohen" exhibition.

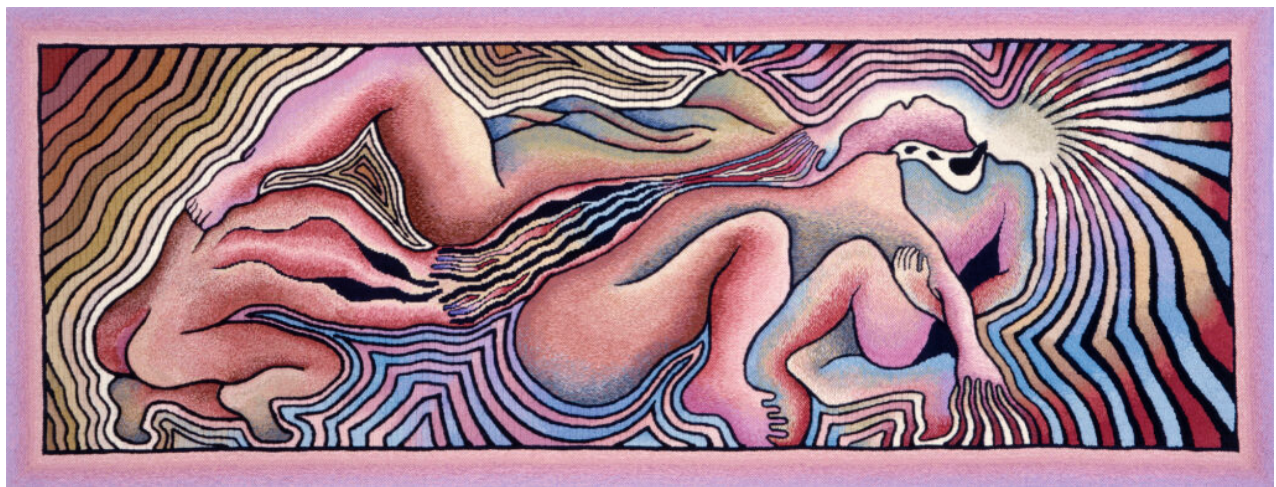
In Berkeley, one work by Chicago will be featured in "New Time: Art and Feminisms in the 21st Century" at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

Chicago's mediums have spanned sculpture, painting, installation and even smoke. She is also known for exploring topics like female agency, gender power dynamics, birth and motherhood. "Some of the subjects I've taken up now occupy a great deal of work by women artists," Chicago says. "Not that women hadn't worked on that subject before, but their work had been left out."

In projects including "The Dinner Party" she has also utilized art forms like textile, embroidery and porcelain, mediums that have frequently been dismissed in patriarchal art histories as merely feminine "crafts." Those distinctions, says Chicago, have "effected the perception and reception of art" for decades and have been more recently embraced.

The Chronicle asked curators at all four Bay Area exhibitions to discuss works they felt were particularly significant examples of Chicago's oeuvre, ranging from her early experiments with geometric abstraction and minimalism in the 1960s to sculpture from the 21st century.

"Judy Chicago: A Retrospective" at the de Young Museum



Judy Chicago, "Birth Trinity: Needlepoint 1," 1983. Needlepoint by Susan Bloomenstein, Elizabeth Colten, Karen Fogel, Helene Hirmes, Bernice Levitt, Linda Rothenberg, and Miriam Vogelmann.

Photo: © Judy Chicago / Donald Woodman / ARS, New York

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"Birth Trinity: Needlepoint 1" 1983, textile

The work "Birth Trinity: Needlepoint 1" was executed by needlepoint artists Susan Bloomenstein, Elizabeth Colten, Karen Fogel, Helene Hirmes, Bernice Levitt, Linda Rothenberg and Miriam Vogelmann.

Claudia Schmuckli, the curator of contemporary art for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, describes the scene as "female figures holding, cradling, pushing, pulling, forming mountains, engendering rivers, becoming the sun" and says it is a work that "posits woman as creation, as world." She adds that the "laborious nature" of needlepoint work fittingly resonates with its subject matter, that of a different kind of labor.



Judy Chicago's "Driving the World to Destruction," from the series "PowerPlay," 1985. Sprayed acrylic and oil on Belgian linen.
Photo: © Judy Chicago / Donald Woodman / ARS, New York

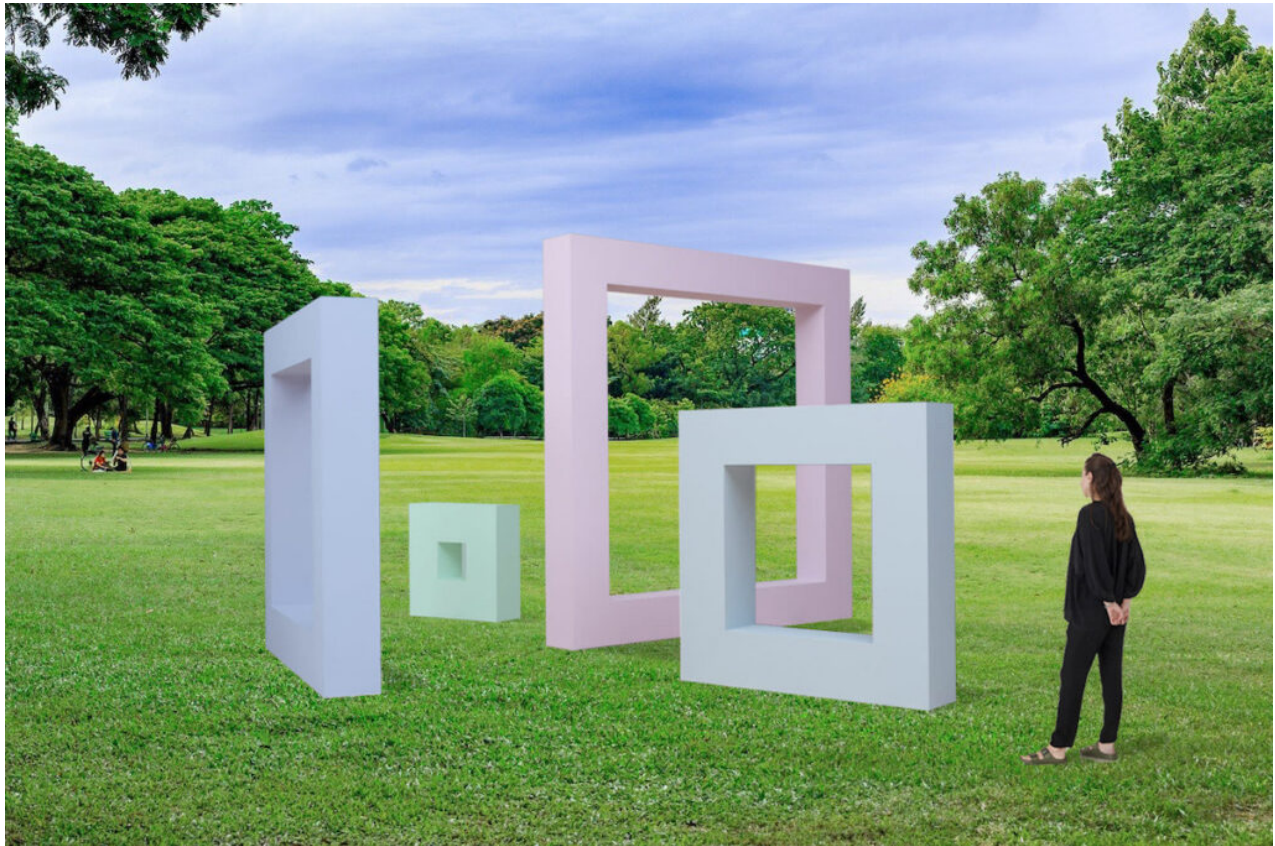
"Driving the World to Destruction" 1985, painting

This painting from Chicago's "PowerPlay" series is an example of the environmental subject matter that has become a significant focus of her career.

"His hands clutched around a steering wheel, the sinewy male figure in 'Driving the World to Destruction' sets the world aflame, transforming its green coastline into burning spires," explains Schmuckli, who notes that the work was created during the height of the ozone crisis of the

1980s and yet "its critique of environmental destruction in the name of industry rings as true today as it did then."

"Judy Chicago: Human Geometries" at Jessica Silverman



Judy Chicago, "Sunset Squares (outdoor version)" 1965/2021. Mock-up. Polyurethane paint on stainless steel.

Photo: © Judy Chicago / Courtesy Jessica Silverman

"Sunset Squares" 1965/2021, sculpture

Silverman's show exhibits works from 1965 to the present, looking at both monumental and more intimate pieces exploring concepts of gendered aesthetics, human rights and social justice. The sculpture "Sunset Squares," a work of geometric abstraction and Feminist Minimalism, is the piece Silverman considers the centerpiece.

"When the work was conceived in 1965, it was controversial — literally beyond the pale — that Judy used four different pastel colors," says Silverman of the work, which consists of four structures in different sizes and subtle shades of pale pink, baby blue, lavender and mint.

The original was created and conceived in 1965 but destroyed in the 1970s. This new, outdoor incarnation of the work is made to the first piece's specifications in painted stainless steel.

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"The four squares can be arranged in any way to frame the landscape," Silverman says. "They create art out of nature, which is part of Judy's commitment to environmental justice."



Judy Chicago, "Birth Power," 1984. Embroidery over drawing on silk.
Photo: © Judy Chicago / Donald Woodman / Artists Rights Society, New York.

"Birth Power" 1984, textile

In the 1980s, Chicago explored depictions of motherhood and childbirth in "Birth Project," a subject she was interested in reframing.

"In 'Birth Power' a fiery female figure emerges from a black silk background through exquisite linear needlework," says Silverman of the textile, comparing it also to a "feminist genesis or phoenix rising from ashes."

In mentioning the mythological and religious themes, Silverman also notes that Chicago is descended from 23 generations of rabbis, "so her knowledge of the Old Testament is deep. But her spiritualism is more environmentalist, more eco-feminist, more universal."

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"New Time: Art and Feminisms in the 21st Century" at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive



Judy Chicago, "Grand Snake Arm 3," 2008.

Photo: © Judy Chicago / Donald Woodman / Artists Rights Society, New York

"Grand Snake Arm 3" 2008, sculpture

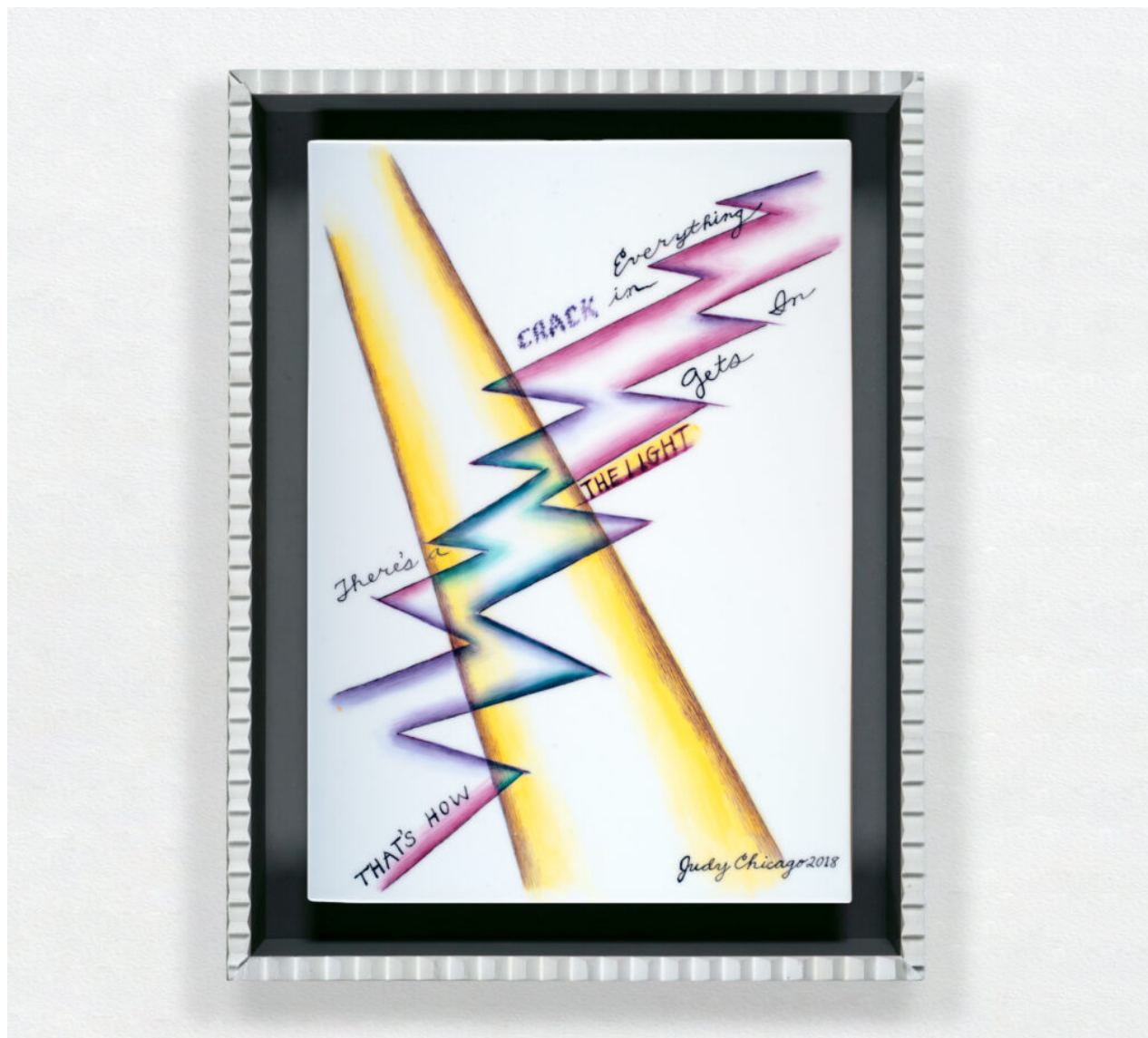
Among the works featured in this exhibition, which explores feminist practices in art, is this sculpture depicting a silver snake slithering up a red, translucent arm that has a hand balled into a fist.

"New Time" curator Apsara DiQuinzio calls Chicago "a vital trailblazer for feminism for the last five decades since establishing the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College in 1970," and notes that the work "speaks to female strength and resilience in a patriarchal world."

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"Judy Chicago: Cohanim" at the Contemporary Jewish Museum



Judy Chicago, "Anthem," 2018, painting.
Photo: © Judy Chicago / Courtesy Jessica Silverman

"Anthem" 2018, painting

Chicago's "Cohanim" series is one of four exhibitions that make up the CJM's "Leonard Cohen Experience," which celebrates the late singer-songwriter.

Curator Heidi Rabben says that Chicago's title refers to the plural of the name Cohen, a Jewish surname that "goes back to Aaron, the first rabbi. In ancient times rabbis had to be descendants of Aaron, the Cohanim." Cohen is also the last name Chicago was born with.

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"What's lovely about this piece is she's realigned with her surname as a gesture of reclamation," Rabben says.

Chicago was a longtime fan of Cohen, and the works in the series respond to particular songs or lyrics of his.

"Anthem" depicts the moment in the same-titled song lyrics – "There's a crack in everything, that's where the light gets in" – with a lightning-bolt-like crack intersecting with a bright beam, something Rabben calls "representative of Leonard Cohen's outlook."

"He embraced conflict, flaws, challenging moments," Rabben continued, "creating space for what defines the human condition."



Judy Chicago's "Bird on a Wire," 2018, painting.
Photo: © Judy Chicago / Courtesy Jessica Silverman

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"Bird on a Wire," 2018, painting

Rabben says this work, also inspired by a Cohen song, is one of three versions of this same concept seen in the exhibition.

"You can tell she concentrated on it, it was meaningful," Rabben says. "The way she speaks about Leonard Cohen, she says his lyrics express her feelings at different points in her life. She's isolating lyrics that hit her hard and got her inspired."

With "Bird on a Wire," Rabben says Chicago is trying to convey "that feeling everyone can relate to, of taking a leap of faith, trying to take flight and be free."

"Judy Chicago: A Retrospective": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Aug. 28-Jan. 9. \$15-\$30. 50 De Young Museum, Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. 415-750-3600. deyoung.famsf.org

"New Time: Art and Feminisms in the 21st Century": 11 a.m.- 5 p.m Fridays-Sundays. Aug. 28-Jan. 30. 2155 Center St., Berkeley. 510-642-0808. bampfa.org

"Judy Chicago: Human Geometries": 10-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday. Aug. 27- Sept. 25. 621 Grant Ave., S.F. 415-255-9508. jessicasilvermangallery.com

"Judy Chicago: Cohanim": Thursday-Sunday. Closed Monday-Wednesday. Through Jan. 2. \$16 general admission. 736 Mission St., S.F. 415-655-7888. www.thecjm.org

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