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"Judy Chicago Isn't Finished Yet"

By Laura Studarus

July 28, 2021



Judy Chicago.

Photo Credit: Shondaland / Amber Hawkins

On July 17 in Belen, New Mexico, a small crowd gathered to cheer as the town's arts district was covered in billowing, multicolored smoke. The spectacle, equal parts sculptural and performance, was called *Diamonds in the Sky*, a new, ephemeral art piece by feminist multimedia artist Judy Chicago created to highlight the city she's called home since 1996. The piece, homed in the courtyard of Chicago's the Through the Flower Studio in Belen, like the many smoke sculptures she's created since first cloaking a Pasadena street in white mist in 1968, was born out of a place of joy and a desire to feminize the surrounding environment.

It's the hallmark of a life spent happily playing with fire. Born Judy Cohen in 1939, Chicago says that she knew by the age of 5 that she "never wanted to do anything but make art." By the time she exited her teenage years, she was attending UCLA on a scholarship to do just that. As she recounts in her recently released memoir, *The Flowering: The Autobiography of Judy Chicago*, it was when that desire to explore and create came up against the established, largely white-male art world that Chicago realized she'd have to establish a new school of thought.

It's a goal that has taken a multitude of forms. Leading an all-women team in the creation of *Womanhouse*, a Victorian-house installation created during her tenure as a professor at CalArts

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in 1972. Envisioning the *Birth Project*, a large-scale exploration of the power of motherhood (even if Chicago didn't choose that path for herself). And portraying male power, dominance, and violence through a series of Renaissance-inspired paintings across her *PowerPlay* series.

"I've done a lot of projects on difficult subjects," Chicago tells Shondaland. "With what time I have left, I don't really want to do that. ... My last major project was from 2012 to 2019 [*The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction*]. And that was a really tough project, especially the section on extinction. After that, I thought I would do another project that dealt with what we're doing to other creatures [on Earth] ... but I don't want to be in that place anymore. I mean, that two years on extinction was harrowing! Just because I hadn't come face-to-face with what we're doing to other creatures in the scale we're doing that. For example, there's one image about the finning of sharks. Sharks are finned alive, and they can't swim after it's done. They simply sink to the bottom of the seabed, where they suffocate to death. But we do it to 100 million sharks a year."



Mortality relief from The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction, 2018; Patinated bronze, 36 × 20 × 7.5 in (91.44 × 50.8 × 19.05 cm)

Photo Credit: Donald Woodman

The idea of making art from such blatant suffering is unnerving. But at 82, Chicago is pragmatic in her declarations, the same unwavering, determined attitude she applies toward her career. Across her memoir, she doesn't flinch when describing the messier parts of a life dedicated to art. Her recollections encompass many small moments, including the stress that initially came when she

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took up running as a way to move her body, as well as larger issues like managing the interpersonal drama that came with managing the team that helped her create her iconic installation *The Dinner Party*.

Completed in 1979, *The Dinner Party* features 39 intricate place settings arranged in a massive, room-encompassing triangle. Each place setting, from vulva-shaped bowls to the hand-embroidered table linen, is personalized with colorful swirls, fabric, or structural-like embellishments – mini monuments to notable women in history: Georgia O’Keeffe, Virginia Woolf, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Sacajawea, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Empress Theodora of Byzantium are among the invited guests at Chicago’s supper. It’s an ambitious work, one that brings together art forms – embroidery and ceramics – generally considered to be the dominion of women, with a scale that’s impossible to ignore.

Although it’s now permanently housed at the Brooklyn Museum and taught in university art-history classes as a major moment in feminist art, the piece wasn’t always loved. Initial reviews were mixed, and despite the work touring the world, plans for it to become part of the collection at the University of the District of Columbia were scuttled after a *Washington Times* article referred to her art as “women’s genitalia on plates.” Although frustrated that her vision wasn’t fully embraced at the time, to the point that lawmakers threatened to cut the school’s funding if it accepted and displayed the art, Chicago persisted.



The Dinner Party, 1979. Mixed media installation. Collection of Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation
Photo Credit: Donald Woodman

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"I've experienced all the hurt and the rejection and pain of all of it, and I've kept working," she says. "I made so much art because whenever I didn't know what to do, [I worked]. Like when the Congress was debating *The Dinner Party*. What the hell was I supposed to do? I had gone back in my studio; that's the only thing I've known. I know I've had a long struggle, but it was worth it because what was important to me was to make art."

Chicago's still-unfolding career is seen by many as a turning point for female-identifying artists — and created a benchmark for breaking from the art-world establishment. Her goal was to create a body of work that couldn't be erased. And certainly, contemporary female-identifying artists, including Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and even the anonymous collective Guerrilla Girls, wouldn't have found a toehold in the art world without Chicago creating a path forward. However, she's careful to note that even now there's still a long way to go to assure that women have the right to create art that speaks to their experiences.

"When I set out to try and figure out how to forge a feminist art practice, and also how to try and create an education that was more beneficial to women than traditional art education, what I hoped for was our global feminist movement," she says. "Right now, feminists in China are having their social-media accounts closed. They're being arrested. They're being silenced. There was that wonderful project by a Japanese artist who made this vagina-shaped boat and got herself into all this trouble. The degree to which younger women feminist artists are still coming up against social control and social resistance, and then male hostility, there's a long way to go until women all over the planet have the level of freedom that women artists have in the United States. And feminists! I think that feminist art, as my own practice evolves beyond issues of the body ... I define [feminist art] differently now than I did when I was young. And it relates to how I see feminism, which is a long struggle to bring equality and justice to the world."

For now, Chicago's contributions are all coming from her 7,000-square-foot studio, where she's spent her pandemic downtime creating a newly released *Garden Smoke* series, captured by her husband, photographer Donald Woodman. "I've been incredibly busy, but that doesn't mean I haven't felt terrible about that anguish and that displacement," she clarifies.

But while she hasn't ruled out larger, more intense art series, for now she's focused on creating joy, both in her art practice and life.

"I don't have that much longer, so I don't want to waste time," she says. "I don't want to waste the time I have being negative, or being unhappy, or being bitter. I particularly think bitterness is not an attractive place to be. So, I'm trying to wrestle as much pleasure as I can from my life. And from this period. As to the future of the world, I don't know. I don't know whether or not we'll be able to reverse the course we're on. However, I think about history, and I think, well, there was a time when the whole world thought the planet was flat, and if people would challenge that, they were killed. And somehow collectively the whole world was able to change its mind and realize that that idea was really screwed up and wrong. So, are we capable as a human species of changing that course we're on? I don't know, and I won't be here long enough to find out the answer. But I think it's very difficult right now. Being a young person has so many challenges."

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