KQED

"Judy Chicago (Finally) Gets Her Due in de Young Retrospective"
By Sarah Hotchkiss
September 16, 2021

Judy Chicago stands in 'Judy Chicago: A Retrospective' at de Young Museum in San Francisco, CA. *(Gary Sexton)*

The de Young Museum's *Judy Chicago: A Retrospective* opens with what appears to be a death mask. It's the artist cast in bronze from the waist up, head on a pillow, flowers in her hands and a cloth pulled up to her chest. Like Han Solo, but peaceful. *Mortality Relief*, as the piece is called, and its zoological analog *Extinction Relief* are part of the (very much alive) artist's recent meditation on death and extinction, a project called *The End*. In an accompanying series of small, luminous paintings on black glass, she imagines the ways in which she might die—an unavoidable eventuality—alongside the animal populations decimated by human activity and disregard.

It's a somber start to an exhibition that triumphantly celebrates Chicago's six-decade-long career. *Judy Chicago: A Retrospective* presents the artist's most recent artwork first, then traces a path backwards through seven bodies of work, including her best-known piece, *The Dinner Party*. It's a tactic that might be disorienting had Chicago's level of rigor or artistry ever varied. It didn't. From her active, contemporary practice to her minimalist sculptures and paintings of the '60s and '70s, *Judy Chicago: A Retrospective* proves that Chicago has always been making at the highest level.

Installation view of 'Collected,' 2015 and 'Poached,' 2015–16 from 'The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction.' *(Photo by Gary Sexton; Courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)*

In each body of work ("body" doing double duty here as one of the artist's primary fixations), Chicago adopts a new mode of making. For *Holocaust Project* (1985–93), it's stained glass and cast glass sculptures; for *PowerPlay* (1982–87), it's monumental figurative paintings on linen; for *Birth Project* (1980–85), needlepoint and tapestry. Chicago's willingness to sketch, test and simply *learn* while honing her own skills and an artwork's final appearance plays out in notebooks across the exhibition. Some projects span as many as eight years.

In a series of test plates painted with butterfly imagery and Chicago's even, lovely script, she writes about learning china-painting in the early 1970s. "I realized that I would have to extract it from its historical context and make it a more flexible technique," the plate reads. This same sentence might be applied to all of her work. She claims the "feminine arts" (pottery, needlework) and through repetition and painstaking detail, makes their value blatantly obvious. She adopts the "masculine arts" (sculpture, large-scale painting) and renders them in rainbow-hued pastels, emphasizing the toxic, destructive qualities of traditional masculinity.

Installation view of 'Butterfly Test Plates,' 1973–74 at de Young Museum. *(Photo by Gary Sexton; Courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)*

There's an ease in Chicago's virtuosic jumps from medium to medium that could obscure the hard, long, slow work at the heart of each project, but exhibition curator Claudia Schmuckli and assistant curator Janna Keegan take care to foreground process. That labor is most evident in the de Young's presentation of *The Dinner Party*, Chicago's best known piece. It is by necessity made up of test plates, cartoons for banners and studies on paper—the actual *Dinner Party* lives at the Brooklyn Museum.

Chicago has said she didn't know if she'd live long enough to see her career escape from the shadow of *The Dinner Party* (1974–79), an installation of 39 commemorative place settings at a triangular table that celebrates over 1,000 important female figures from history. The piece premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979 and toured internationally for nine years thanks to grassroots organizing efforts, but it only emerged from storage twice more (in 1996 and 2002) before finding a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Plagued by negative press coverage, attribution controversies and characterization within the House of Representatives as "pornographic art," *The Dinner Party* was for many years Chicago's greatest accomplishment and greatest albatross.

Judy Chicago, 'Driving the World to Destruction,' from the series 'PowerPlay,' 1985. *(Courtesy of the artist; Salon 94, New York; and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco; © Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Donald Woodman / ARS, NY; Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)*

The Dinner Party lies at the heart of the de Young's retrospective, but it doesn't dominate the exhibition, in part because that gallery is surrounded by more finished, finalized objects from bodies of work that are just as multifaceted and visually compelling. In the next door "Feminism" gallery, which includes documentation of Chicago's work establishing feminist art programs, paintings from her *Reincarnation Triptych* (1973) glow with inner light, portals through which women from the past might journey into the present.

As Chicago's art shapeshifts in its physicality it elicits different bodily reactions. While the circular, flower-like canvases of the *Reincarnation Triptych* beckon, the *PowerPlay* paintings purposely overwhelm with their vertical scale and imagery. In them, nude male figures, rippling with shaded muscles, spew violence and destruction onto the natural world. That energy, in turn, is countered by the horizontality of textile pieces like *Earth Birth*, which present a feminist take on the traditional landscape. Here, the human figure does not impose upon or overshadow its surroundings, but is one with it, enfolded by the earth and radiating energy outward.

Installation view of 'Earth Birth,' 1983 at the de Young Museum. *(Photo by Gary Sexton; Courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)*

Of course, (human and animal) bodies are everywhere in the exhibition, rendered in porcelain figurines, eating Shabbat dinner, giving birth and dying. One can't help but be reminded of one's own corporeal form throughout—and the permissions and limitations society assigns to us based on how that form is perceived. What *Judy Chicago: A Retrospective* does best is what Judy Chicago has done for her entire career: questions inherited value systems, refuses to look away from difficult subjects, and lights the way for all the feminist art to come.