

SF WEEKLY

"At the de Young, Judy Chicago finally gets the retrospective she wanted"

By Jonathan Curiel

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Judy Chicago. Photo courtesy of Gary Sexton

Controversy can define and elevate an artist's career, kickstarting it into decades of fruitful existence. Exhibit A: Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, and Tracey Emin. But controversy can also overwhelm an artist's career, reducing the artist's other work to veritable asterisks as people focus on the art that pushed the artist into the public eye. Exhibit A: Andres Serrano, whose 1987 photograph called [Piss Christ](#) generated considerable controversy for its depiction of a crucifix in urine — and is still the work that's most closely associated with him.

Where does Judy Chicago fit into this spectrum? [The Dinner Party](#) made Chicago's name when it debuted in 1979 — and rightfully so. Now [permanently displayed](#) at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, *The Dinner Party* is a massive triangular banquet table that has settings for 39 women from history, including Sojourner Truth, Virginia Woolf, Susan B. Anthony, and Georgia O'Keeffe.

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At each setting is a porcelain plate that, except for Truth's setting and that of composer [Ethel Smyth](#), has intricate butterfly forms that resemble vulva. Chicago made the work to elevate women's achievements at a time when the art world (and the world at large) devalued women's contributions, and *The Dinner Party* holds up as a work of art — though not without criticism, including from some women who say *The Dinner Party* skews too heavily toward white women and that its depiction of Truth's plate, which shows three faces, treats Truth differently from most of the other plates, as if it were impossible to imagine Truth in the same way as *The Dinner Party*'s other women.

The de Young Museum's new exhibit, "[Judy Chicago: A Retrospective](#)," mentions this controversial aspect of Chicago's career in the gallery devoted to *The Dinner Party*. But the gallery itself segues into multiple other galleries that show the full arc of Chicago's career and essentially extricate Chicago from the shadows *The Dinner Party* have long cast over her art. "Judy Chicago: A Retrospective" is the artist's first retrospective, which is hard to believe because Chicago, who's 82, has been a prominent art-world figure for more than 40 years. Why did it take so long?

For Chicago, the answers relate to the same issue she raised with *The Dinner Party* in 1979: Outspoken women artists have been pigeonholed or dismissed for decades. And as Chicago told journalists at last week's de Young media preview, so many people — including many current art curators, she implied — still only consider her in relation to *The Dinner Party*.

"I'm sure for everyone who knows about my career, I've had a long, hard struggle," Chicago said at a lectern inside a ground floor de Young gallery. "My work and my values are definitely at odds with the prevailing art industry — one that privileges form over content and measures art not by its meaning but rather by how much money it sells for — particularly at auction, where women's work notoriously commands far less than men's."

Trailblazer

Chicago, who wears her hair in multiple colors, is known for her forceful oratory and unflinching demeanor, but early in her talk she almost broke down in tears as she reflected on an exhibit that elucidates everything she's worked for. Chicago is a pioneer of feminist art, and her vocal battles to increase women's representation in museums — and to redefine what women could make as art — helped lay the foundation for new generations of artists, and new generations of curators like the de Young's Claudia Schmuckli who believe Chicago has not previously gotten the spotlight she deserves.

In 1970, Chicago founded the first feminist art education program in the United States at what is now California State University, Fresno. In 1972, she co-founded Womanhouse, a Los Angeles space that became the first to exhibit feminist art. This was two years after Chicago changed her last name from the name of her deceased husband (Gerowitz) and discounted going back to the last name she was given at birth (Cohen) — an action she publicized in a big ad in *Artforum*, where she wrote, "Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name: Judy Chicago."

"For me it was important to show Judy as an artist who is very much alive — and has never ceased to make work that deeply engages with current issues and concerns," said Schmuckli, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's curator-in-charge of contemporary art and programming, who

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joined the museums in 2016 and who hugged Chicago at the lectern. "This moment is long overdue."

"Judy Chicago: A Retrospective" begins not with Chicago's earliest work but some of her latest: Glass plates with kiln-fired paint and writing that highlight species that are close to extinction and highlight imagined scenes of Chicago as she wrestles with her last moments on Earth. These works, Chicago says, speak to her view that women's justice relates to "a global justice that encompasses all living creatures."

Among the exhibit's earliest works are Chicago's abstract patterns from the late 1960s and early 1970s that seemingly have nothing to do with justice or feminism or anything that Chicago is known for. *Pasadena Lifesavers Red Series #4, 1969-1970*, for example, shows four octagonal shapes with multiple colors. But Chicago says they represent female sexuality in ways that men, at the time, couldn't see.

Art & Activism

In 1972, Chicago was more explicit with two photo lithographs that are on display at the de Young: *Gunsmoke* shows a man's hand with his gun inserted into the mouth of a pained-looking woman, while *Red Flag* shows a woman's hand withdrawing a bloody tampon from her vagina amid a darkness of shadows and pubic hair. Countering artworks that take the perspective of a male gaze, *Red Flag* and *Gunsmoke* still have the ability to shock, with *Gunsmoke* adding the specter of violence while taking its title from a [hit TV series](#) about the American West.

This motif of violence — of male-engendered violence that connects in Chicago's eyes to society's treatment of women, animal species, the environment, and other areas — is what emerges when you see the entirety of Chicago's output, as with her striking Holocaust-related artworks. *The Fall*, from 1993, is a car-length tapestry that narrates the Holocaust and what Chicago sees as its European antecedents, including industrialization and its push toward mechanistic, dehumanizing efficiencies.

Yet amid Chicago's stern subject matter is a work like 1992's *Rainbow Shabbat*, a giant stained-glass piece that unites people of multiple ethnicities and faiths at a table — which is to say, Chicago uses an anchor that's similar to *The Dinner Party*, but this time with people whose arms are around each other. Also at the de Young: a series of 1980s artworks that depict women and birthing, as with *The Creation* and *In the Beginning*, whose swirls and patterns portray primordial scenes of life's origins with women at the center. These are some of Chicago's best works — a series that, she says, addressed a subject matter that the art world ignored, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Light and bright colors pervade Chicago's art, but there's very little lightness of subject matter, whether it's her earliest work or her latest. At the press preview, Chicago acknowledged her propensity for seriousness, and her belief that art can activate people's views to change society, have been factors in what she called her "marginalization by the art world," saying: "Even though my gender definitely contributed to this situation, I believe the more important issue has been my vision of what art can be and do."

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Chicago certainly isn't the only visual artist — or artist of any genre, including music — who has had to navigate her activist instincts against her creative instincts. Nina Simone dealt with that her entire life, too. Chicago handled her career the only way she knew, she says: With defiance. And a loudness that still hasn't dissipated even as she crossed the threshold into being an octogenarian. At the press preview, she recalled being in San Francisco 40 years ago when *The Dinner Party* came to SFMOMA under its then-director, [Henry Hopkins](#).

"Forty years ago," she said, "I was here for the opening of *The Dinner Party* and at that time, Henry Hopkins, who was the director of the San Francisco Museum of Art, said to me: 'Judy, this is the culmination of your career.' And I said, 'Henry, I'm just getting started.'"

Still, in the 1990s, Chicago said "the worst moment of my career was when *The Dinner Party* was in storage and facing an uncertain future. And I had to read articles that said I couldn't draw. I started drawing when I was three. I started taking art lessons when I was five. For me, living and drawing were almost synonymous."

The glass plates that open "Judy Chicago: A Retrospective" are basically drawings. And they're vintage Chicago: They're explicit, in-your-face works that ask the viewer to think hard before moving on. In other words, they're just as visually confrontational as the plates from *The Dinner Party*.

That's why, as Schmuckli looked at Chicago from the lectern, she said: "You still kick ass."

Chicago smiled, but was silent as some people applauded — a rare moment when Chicago didn't need to say anything at all.