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Judy Chicago: "Cunt Art"

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Judy Chicago photographed in 1970 by Jerry McMillan. Courtesy of Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, California.

In 1970, the artist formerly known as Judy Gerowitz renounced 'all names imposed on her through male social dominance' and became Judy Chicago, doing away with both her paternal and marital surnames. She pinned the announcement to the wall of her exhibition of sprayed acrylic lacquer abstract paintings, then on show at California State College, Fullerton, and placed an ad in *Artforum* magazine. Other forms of self-fashioning were also afoot. For the exhibition poster Chicago posed as a prize fighter in a boxing ring. She appears, crop-haired and stocky, in shorts, ankle boots and gloves, leaning against the ropes. The words 'JUDY CHICAGO' are printed across

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the front of her sweatshirt. Six years before California licensed women as boxers, Chicago claimed the space all for herself.

Not that she didn't try to fit in. As a student at UCLA, she hung out at Barney's Beanery, smoking cigars in an attempt to be 'one of the boys'. Jerry McMillan, Ed Ruscha and Joe Goode were 'my three motherfuckin' artist friends'. Judy could 'embarrass a sailor' with her language, according to her biographer, Gail Levin. When Ed Kienholz made an installation based on Barney's, *The Beanery* (1965), the critic Sidney Tillim described it as a 'valentine to firewater and fraternity', a love letter to an art scene that was centred around bikes, beer and bravado. In 1957, Kienholz and Walter Hopps opened the Ferus Gallery on La Cienega Boulevard, with a line-up of largely unknown young male artists they called 'the studs'. As Chicago later put it, 'no women artists were taken seriously. The men sat around Barney's and talked about cars, motorcycles and their joints. I knew nothing about cars, less about motorcycles, and certainly didn't have a joint.' She was under no illusion that the small degree of success she achieved in LA in the mid-1960s was made possible by her response to an art world allergic to questions of sexual difference.

After graduating from UCLA she enrolled on a course in car bodywork, the only woman among 250 students. It was there that she learned how to spray-paint, a technique then popular among custom-car enthusiasts in Southern California, producing a series of hoods in bold biomorphic shapes. But despite their shared enthusiasm for hard edges and psychedelic hues, the floral, vulvic and phallic forms of *Bigamy Hood* and *Birth Hood* would have made Chicago's hot-rod contemporaries blush. They set the tone, early on, for what would go on to be her trademark imagery, combining forms she described as both 'feminine' and, more blatantly, feminist.

Chicago took her name from the city of her birth, the place she first studied art – taking Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago before moving to LA in 1957. Her first husband, Jerry Gerowitz, died in a car crash while she was still in her twenties. She later described *Bigamy Hood*, a response to the 'double death' of her father and husband, in surprisingly erotic terms: the phallus 'stopped in flight' and prevented from 'uniting with the vaginal form'. California was an unusual choice for an ambitious 18-year-old set on becoming a professional artist. There were only a handful of commercial galleries in LA, compared to New York, where Pop Art was in the ascendant and Abstract Expressionism still in full swing. She later said she was lured by tales of sunshine and bohemia and 'probably an unconscious desire to get away from Chicago'.

Her father, Arthur Cohen, a political activist and labour organiser, died when she was thirteen. He casts a long shadow over her work and is given the last word in *The Flowering*, the latest addition to her autobiography. She describes the 'near constant political arguments' that took place in the family's second-floor apartment during her childhood and Arthur's 'expressed commitment to equal rights for women', among other progressive causes. (The FBI kept a file on him in the 1940s and opened one on Chicago herself a decade later.) She is now 82 and still wears sweatshirts with her name printed across the front. Fans of her work, particularly her two best-known feminist collaborations, *Womanhouse* from 1972 and *The Dinner Party*, made between 1974 and 1979, wear her sweaters and T-shirts; you can also buy two award-winning wines from the vineyard in Belen, New Mexico, that is run by the foundation she established some years ago to support her work.

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Caroline Herschel place setting for 'The Dinner Party' (1974-79).

Chicago courted populism from the start. Her particular brand of feminism is fiery, accessible, but the politics behind it deserve to be taken seriously. The same is true of her need to hustle. Feminist artists don't usually make much of a living from their work, and Chicago has never shied away from acknowledging the financial as well as the creative difficulties. She remains a firm and forceful advocate; her willingness to engage with younger feminists is unusual in an artist who came of age in a movement defined by binary, if not essentialist, thinking. Gloria Steinem was an early champion, as was Anais Nin, who encouraged Chicago to write what became the first instalment in her autobiography, *Through the Flower: My Struggles as a Woman Artist*, in 1975.

In the preface, Nin described *Through the Flower* as an account of 'disappointments, betrayals [and] obstacles', but it's also an excellent source of anecdotes and gossip. Steinem's preface to the new volume opens with a statement that shows how much has changed since the publication of *Through the Flower*, almost fifty years ago: 'I can divide my life into before and after Judy Chicago.' *The Flowering* summarises and revisits Chicago's earlier autobiographical writings, beginning with her childhood, and closing with Covid-19. Reading her isn't always easy. She describes the death of her husband and also the sexist encounters and assaults that she and her

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contemporaries endured at the hands of lovers, boyfriends, teachers and strangers, some of them terrifying, some simply banal. On one occasion, a fireworks engineer she had commissioned for a project got down on the ground in front of her and began to hump the floor, saying: 'I could do it to you right here.' At times it seems impossible that a female artist could have achieved anything in 1960s LA, and Chicago didn't always come out fighting. Depression, illness and anxiety ate up studio time.

The feminist movement offered ways of refocusing her art. During the 1960s and 1970s, Chicago moved between abstraction and the development of a 'core female imagery'. The evolution of that imagery was not as straightforward as some critics have suggested. Binaries blur; phalluses flop and fold; vaginal forms stand erect and proud. Semi-abstract bodies and body parts come in and out of view, exploding in orgasmic technicolour sunbursts. Nonetheless, the work created a schism in the women's art movement, and remains fraught. Chicago has addressed this in recent years, framing her feminist politics in more inclusive terms, but her visual vocabulary of the period was undeniably coded 'feminine'. Writing in 1974, Chicago championed Georgia O'Keefe's 'folds and undulations' and the floral and ovoid forms in works by Barbara Hepworth and Lee Bontecou, which fundamentally, as she put it, 'represented cunts'.

She knew what she was up to in using that word. She was reclaiming it from her male contemporaries, who had been joking for years about Chicago's 'cunt art' (in a similar vein, the artist Carolee Schneemann has described being referred to as 'a cunt mascot'), and from a society that used it to show 'contempt for women'. That the artists she referred to didn't agree with her characterisation didn't matter much to Chicago. Bontecou was horrified at the idea that 'content' or 'meaning' could be read into her abstract work, genital or otherwise. 'All freedom in every sense' was her response to my own naive interview question twenty years ago about the role of feminism in her metal relief sculptures, built up around a large, black, velvet-backed central void. She rejected Chicago's theory entirely: 'Art is not male or female.'

In 1971, Chicago and the abstract painter Miriam Schapiro set up the Feminist Art Programme at the California Institute of the Arts in Santa Clarita. They wanted a space off-campus to work with their new recruits and found a dilapidated house some forty miles away in Hollywood that would eventually serve as both studio and gallery for *Womanhouse*. It came as something of a surprise to the students that the first six months of the course would be spent learning to use power tools, glaze windows and sand floors, and that they were expected to work long days and endure hard physical labour to which none of them, Chicago complained, was accustomed. The informal daily 'rap sessions' became heated and divisive. (The feminist philosopher Mira Schor, who was a student on the programme, later compared the experience to 'political boot camp'.) For her part, Chicago accused the students of clubbing together to 'monster her' while at the same time accepting the tensions as a necessary and painful pedagogical process of feminist self-realisation: 'The angrier they feel, the more they strike out.'

Womanhouse turned the large ramshackle house on Mariposa Avenue into a domestic nightmare. Chicago, Schapiro and their students worked across seventeen rooms, with the main living space dedicated to performance and time-based works. Chicago's surprisingly literal *Menstruation*

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Bathroom featured sanitary products and a bin overflowing with blood-soaked tampons viewed through a gauzy curtain, while Vikki Hodgett and Robin Weltsch covered the walls and cupboard doors of their *Nurturant Kitchen* with moulded foam breasts. Sandy Orgel's Surrealist-inspired linen closet had a female mannequin trapped between its shelves. Faith Wilding's *Crochet Environment*, known as the 'womb room', was described by Chicago as a 'kind of woven Bontecou environment', the large stretched carapace of crocheted string punctuated with gaping holes recalling the hole-studded surfaces of Bontecou's imposing sculptures. A horror-show bride towered over the landing on the staircase; elsewhere, a second mannequin drowned in a sand-filled bath. The performances included Chicago's play *Cock and Cunt*, performed by two leotard-clad students, one sporting a giant pink satin phallus and the other an oversized strap-on fabric vagina. The script was based on group exercises Chicago had developed the year before, which imagined a couple's escalating argument over gender roles: 'A cock means you don't do the washing up ... You have a cunt. A cunt means you wash dishes' and so on. It's easy to cringe at the aspects of *Womanhouse* that register today as little more than historic set pieces, but Levin's clear-sighted account of the project in her biography of Chicago, first published in 2007, reminds us how high the stakes were for these women, and how bold and immediate *Womanhouse* was, both for the participants and for the ten thousand or so people who visited during its month-long run.*

For what was effectively a student project, the impact of *Womanhouse* was extraordinary. It received a write-up in *Time* magazine, visitor numbers were huge (the opening day was for women only) and it has continued to exert its influence, even if the only visual record is Johanna Demetrakas's 1974 documentary, along with a few grainy photographs. Despite or perhaps because of this, only one name has ever really been associated with the collective work. According to the students, including those who went on to become successful feminist artists and academics in their own right, *Womanhouse* was the Judy Chicago show. Neither consciousness-raising sessions nor Chicago's self-described role as a mother substitute could disguise the fact that while to the outside world *Womanhouse* was a great success, most of the students experienced it as anything but.

Chicago's foundation in Belen is marking the fiftieth anniversary of *Womanhouse* later this year with *Wo/Manhouse 2022*, a new project that invites proposals from local artists 'across the gender spectrum'. The accompanying description of the home as a site of comfort and conflict marked by abuses of power could be referring to *Womanhouse 1.0*. Chicago herself has said that she wants the new version to address the 'misogyny, racial bias, attacks on women's and trans rights, and political turmoil' that dominate the feminist landscape today by staging a 'historic dialogue' with the original *Womanhouse*.

For her chapter on *Womanhouse*, Levin secured interviews with scores of people, including many of the original participants, and their voices add much to a story that has been told many times. By contrast, her earlier chapters rely on interviews with Chicago's male contemporaries, ex-boyfriends and lovers. Scene-setting phrases such as 'the wartime aims of the United States and the Soviet Union converged in the desire to stop Hitler' do little to keep up the pace. When Chicago goes to art school we learn that the department was the result of a 'merger in 1939 from the former Teachers' College into the newly created College of Applied Arts', as if Levin is keen to

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show us all of her homework. At other times we learn more than we ever thought we needed to know about Chicago's capacity for endless orgasms. It is hard not to contrast this with Chicago's own writing style, which flits and glosses, parsing key events with economy and humour.

Schapiro is afforded short shrift in Levin's book (Chicago and Schapiro fell out after *Womanhouse*). 'Her ambition had no bounds,' Chicago wrote in her journal, which is quite something coming from a woman who once said she had always taken for granted that she was destined to become famous. Levin in turn acknowledges Schapiro's misgivings about Chicago, and her irritation at being described more than once in the press as a 'warm grandma' compared to the brilliant, younger Chicago. In *The Flowering*, Chicago, unable to let it go, describes Schapiro as 'a zaftig, middle-aged, dark-haired ... somewhat brooding woman', though she acknowledges how much she admired Schapiro for having succeeded as a painter in New York during the hyper-macho heyday of Abstract Expressionism. All this is a far cry from the well-known photograph reproduced on the cover of the catalogue for *Womanhouse*, in which Schapiro and Chicago sit side by side on the steps of the house, a picture of unified sisterhood. Another photograph, taken around the same time, marks the beginning of the end of their professional relationship. An exhilarated Chicago stands at a podium, microphone in hand, proclaiming to an admiring audience of feminist critics, writers, historians, curators and artists, while a pissed-off Schapiro perches on the steps at her feet, staring into the middle distance while Judy does her thing.

Chicago doesn't gloss over her many bust-ups with friends and fellow artists. Instead, she tells us that each fight, each unkind word, each disagreement was for the best. When the feminist writer Ti-Grace Atkinson flew to LA to visit *Womanhouse* she was greeted at the airport by four students from the programme dressed as cheerleaders, all in pink, the letters across their chests spelling 'C-U-N-T'. As the passengers disembarked, they began a loud chant ('give us a "C", give us a "U" ...'). Atkinson's bemusement turned to upset later in the evening after a 'ferocious argument' with Chicago about the relative value of men to the cause, with Chicago insistently for and Atkinson broadly against. The row bothered Chicago enough that she wrote an article about it. When she learned that Atkinson had burst into tears on reading the piece, Chicago regretted 'that I couldn't have been there when she cried and held her because she really is my sister. But she intimidated me.' In her book, Levin uses this moment to tease out the complexities of feminist allyship during the difficult early years of the movement.

Between 1974 and 1979 Chicago made her best-known and probably most influential work, *The Dinner Party*. It consists of a sculptural installation of ceramic plates arranged in a triangular table layout, accompanied by banners, panels and gold-lustre floor tiles, celebrating more than a thousand historical and contemporary women, 39 of whom are given places at the table. It is hard to overemphasise the centrality of *The Dinner Party* to the women's art movement, to debates about representation versus abstraction, about the complicated ways in which celebration slips into veneration, and about the exclusionary process of constructing a feminist 'canon'. Marred by financial and technical issues, *The Dinner Party* was a headache from beginning to end. It toured the US extensively throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, and is now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum, where it can be viewed in all its (mostly intact) splendour. Nearly all of the plates have the central motif of a butterfly or vulvic form, from Isabella d'Este's brilliant swirls to the labial

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petals of Sappho and O'Keefe. The guests of honour include Kali and Boudica, Hildegard of Bingen and Natalie Barney. One can admire the sheer nerve of the piece, in particular the greedy elbows-out way in which it occupies space (*The Dinner Party* is often described as 'epic' and 'massive'), without particularly liking it. Of the designs, my favourites include the fully three-dimensional flowering of the Virginia Woolf plate, whose ceramic petals spill out and over into billowy waves, and the improbably froufrou, frilly pink folds of Emily Dickinson. There is something at once ridiculous and touching about the work, the mismatch of its grandiloquent historical sweep and domestic place settings, where all these women are finally offered 'a seat at the table'. And although it remains popular with visitors, *The Dinner Party* has had a rough time with critics in recent decades, accused of promoting an essentialist, reductive idea of 'female imagery'. Some have noted the scarcity of women of colour and lesbians, and complained about the way in which those who do feature were portrayed (Chicago recently rewrote the text accompanying Sojourner Truth's plate).

As with *Womanhouse*, many of the collaborators and artisans who worked on *The Dinner Party* felt it unfair of Chicago to claim sole authorship, something she addresses in *The Flowering*. Chicago points out that *The Dinner Party* provided women the opportunity to participate in a work of both 'personal and historic' meaning, and that those who claimed to have been exploited did not appreciate how unusual it was for all the participants to have been named in the work's credits. 'Ultimately,' she wrote, '*The Dinner Party* was my conception.' It is easy to see why she fell foul of a feminist politics that favoured collective action over promotion of the individual self. The same thing happened to Kate Millett after the publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970: 'They want *Sex Pol* to be anonymous so it can be the whole group talking. But I wrote it, and it's not the movement speaking. It is me.'

In her own writing, Chicago emphasises the primacy and materiality of making art. Levin's biography addresses the life at the expense of the work, leaving us wondering how Chicago came up with the wonderful early minimalist sculptures, such as *Rainbow Pickett*, that first made her name and which she quickly abandoned, or what drove her back and forth between abstraction and figuration in those formative years. Chicago is an astute interpreter of her own work - not a given with artists - and it is through her own writing, which Levin thoughtfully mines, that we find the self-styled cunt artist.

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