

WWD

"Judy Chicago's Retrospective Exhibition 'Herstory' to Open at New Museum in New York"

By Kristen Tauer

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The exhibition, which is sponsored by Dior and opens Oct. 12, is a journey through six decades of feminist art.

Judy Chicago hasn't had time to overthink "Herstory." The 84-year-old artist's wide-ranging retrospective exhibition opens at the New Museum in New York this fall, and while in some ways the show has been many decades in the making, the actual exhibition came together within the last year. New Museum curator Massimiliano Gioni, who has collaborated with Chicago on several previous projects, wrote Chicago about the exhibition in August 2022, and the rest is — history.

"When I was young, I definitely overworked things," admits Chicago, several months before the exhibition's debut. "In the last couple of decades, I've taken to heart something Lou Reed said: 'first thought, best thought.'"

"Judy Chicago: Herstory" opens Oct. 12 and will run through early 2024. The exhibition encompasses the entirety of Chicago's six-decade career and also aims to place her work in conversation with other female creatives through "The City of Ladies," a show-within-a-show.

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Chicago's most widely known installation is perhaps "The Dinner Party," permanently installed at the Brooklyn Museum, which gives notable women throughout history a place setting at Chicago's triangular table.

"Herstory" follows Chicago's first retrospective, mounted at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in 2021. "For people for whom 'The Dinner Party' had overshadowed the body of my work, it was a revelation," Chicago says. "[Revelation] was a word I heard over and over again, but it was a fairly traditional retrospective — which was fine, because it was my first."

That exhibition was structured in reverse chronological order, opening with her most recent project, "The End: A Meditation on Death."

"I've tackled some pretty difficult subject matter, and there has been an effort to kind of ignore it," Chicago says.

She notes that the backward progression of the de Young show was an effort to ensure visitors couldn't avoid her more challenging works, including "Power Play," which explores the impact of power and masculinity, and "The Holocaust Project," a collaborative series with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman.



Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman, "Rainbow Shabbat," 1992. Stained glass, 54 x 204 in (137.2 x 518.2 cm). Fabrication by Bob Gomez; glass painting by Dorothy Maddy. © Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. © Donald Woodman/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

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The New Museum retrospective promises to be bigger than her first, and will present her work in new contexts. Chicago notes that the exhibition addresses another word that has been used to describe her career — “marginalized.” “Which is one of the great euphemisms of all time,” she says. The show also highlights work by other notable female creatives, many of whom have inspired Chicago throughout her career.

“When Massimiliano proposed this, and also when I saw the work he was bringing together, I realized that one of the reasons for my quote ‘marginalization’ is that I have been working out of multiple histories for many decades that are unknown in the art world,” she says. “So it’s not just the history of needlework, or the history of china painting. Going back to Christine de Pizan’s ‘The Book of the City of Ladies,’ it’s also the history of feminist thought. It’s the history of female-centered art. It’s an alternative paradigm to the patriarchal art history paradigm. So I believe that this will give people a really new understanding of my work.”

“The City of Ladies,” described also as a “personal museum,” emphasizes Chicago’s role as a historian, archivist and organizer throughout her career.

“We first of all wanted to show how attuned to the most interesting positions of contemporary art in the 1960s she was right from the start, and how the contribution was extremely important and sadly also completely erased by art history because she was a woman artist,” says Gioni, noting Chicago’s role in art movements like minimalism in addition to feminist art.

“She’s both a living classic and yet has the friction or quality that we associate with artists who have not been fully assimilated,” he adds. “And that is the beauty also of working with an artist like her. She’s an artist who has completely transformed the history of art, and has had an impact on culture that is much bigger than the sole art world.”



Judy Chicago, “Virginia Woolf,” from “The Reincarnation Triptych,” 1973. Sprayed acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 in (152.4 x 152.4 cm). © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Collection Kirsten Grimstad and Diana Gould

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Working with curators like Gioni and Claudia Schmuckli of the de Young has offered Chicago a new perspective through which to recognize threads throughout her career. The artist notes that one of the most surprising sections of her work to emerge was one that Gioni coined "Gender Games."

"I've been accused of being an essentialist. And [Gioni] wanted to demonstrate that was completely untrue," Chicago says. "He created a section called 'Gender Games,' which is one of the larger sections in the show.

"He wanted to show that I had an awareness of the shifting nature of gender beginning with my earliest work, like the 'Rearrangeables,' as in rearranging gender relations," she adds, describing her 1965 sculptural installation "Rearrangeable Rainbow Blocks," composed of rainbow-colored geometrical shapes. "And that way preceded the essentialist argument. I always had a much more nuanced understanding of gender than was appropriate to my being accused of being an essentialist."

"Herstory" is sponsored by Dior, marking a continuation of the artist's relationship with the fashion house and its artistic director of womenswear collections Maria Grazia Chiuri. In early 2020, the designer and Dior tapped Chicago to design the set for her couture show, "The Female Divine."

"Doing 'The Female Divine' was one of the great creative opportunities of my life," says Chicago, who has also since designed a bag for the brand's Dior Lady Art bag project. "Dior, when they work with an artist, they make available a vast array of resources. They also brought my work to a global audience," she adds, describing Chiuri as "a real feminist."

"One of my questions when [Dior] first brought me to Paris to see a couture show was whether art could have any real place in the world of fashion — which, of course, has historically oppressed women. And [Chiuri] has been demonstrating that fashion can empower women."

The banners from "The Female Divine," which feature embroidered questions like "What If Women Ruled the World?" and "Would Both Women and Men Be Gentle?" will be installed at the New Museum, along with the 225-foot catwalk carpet from Dior's couture show, which the brand is having re-woven, and goddess sculptures.

"For many decades, I have worked on the idea of the female divine and female spirituality, dating back before the 'Dinner Party' to a triptych called 'Did You Know Your Mother Had a Sacred Heart?' from the '70s," Chicago says; the work, based on Virgin Mary altars, is part of Los Angeles County Museum of Art's permanent collection, and is rarely shown publicly. It will accompany her "The Female Divine" work at the museum.

"It will be completely new for most of the audience," Chicago says.

"And then in relationship to that work will be 'The City of Ladies,'" she adds. "You'll see a variety of images upon which my work draws."

Works include an illuminated manuscript by Hildegard von Bingen, who's represented in Chicago's "The Dinner Party," as well as pieces by Hilma af Klint, Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe.

"Massimiliano even got a real Artemisia Gentileschi from the Uffizi [Gallery of Florence]," she adds. "Can you imagine what it will be like to be in that space?"

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Pretty soon, visitors won't have to imagine; they'll get to experience what it's like for themselves.

Chicago, for her part, is already busy preparing for the next project: an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London, set to open in June 2024.

The next thought might also be Chicago's best thought as well.



Judy Chicago, "Immolation," 1972. Archival pigment print, 36 x 36 in (91.44 x 91.44 cm). © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy the artist

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