

"Judy Chicago, New Museum review — feminist artist finally takes her deserved place in the modern canon"

By Ariella Budick

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'Birth Trinity' (1983) © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

She has used bloody sanitary pads, candy-coloured car bonnets and smoke machines in her work

If looking at Judy Chicago's art makes you uncomfortable, well, good. The essential 60-year retrospective at New York's New Museum contains such an abundant supply of provocations, bloodied menstrual pads, gaping sexes, sarcastic needlework and other feminist flexes that it would make anyone break into a sweat. And yet the show is an exhilarating corrective, airlifting Chicago out of footnote status and dropping her squarely in the American canon where she has always belonged. It's taken her decades to win respect from the establishment she spent a lifetime battering.

Chicago is known almost exclusively for a single 45-year-old collaborative work, "The Dinner Party". That installation, which made its debut at San Francisco MoMA in 1978 before going on an international tour, consisted of an immense banquet table in the form of an equilateral triangle, set for a party of 39 women, both legendary and obscure. The guest list includes Susan B Anthony, Empress Theodora of Byzantium, Sappho, Artemisia Gentileschi, Caroline Herschel (a female astronomer and the first woman to discover a comet) and Elizabeth Blackwell (the first woman to receive a medical degree in the US). Each plate, which is really a sculptural relief, features an abstracted cabbage, butterfly, starfish, artichoke or orchid. All of them wind up resembling vaginas.

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The piece drew crowds, excited some critics and angered others. "One of the most ambitious works of art made in the postwar period, it succeeds as few others have in integrating a strong aesthetic with political content," wrote Lucy Lippard in *Art in America*. Hilton Kramer, the *New York Times*'s acerbic standard-bearer, spat out words such as "kitsch", "crass" and "vulgarity".

"It is very bad art," he proclaimed. "It is failed art, it is art so mired in the pieties of a political cause that it quite fails to acquire any independent artistic life of its own."



'Car Hood' (1964) © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

"The Dinner Party" is gigantically absent from the New Museum show, though it's permanently installed at the Brooklyn Museum. In its place are elegant drawings for each individual plate — enough to showcase the piece's extravagant assertiveness, its exuberant and angry muchness. The museum also honours the work's collectivist spirit with a new installation: "The City of Ladies", a splendidly idiosyncratic show-within-a-show of works by lionised and neglected women. Chicago invites Frida, Georgia, Artemisia and Louise to this new party, but also hangs a mid-19th-century photo portrait of Countess Virginia Oldoini Verasis di Castiglione and a charming 1807 watercolour attributed to Lovice Collins.

Born Judith Cohen in 1939, Chicago was raised in a liberal Jewish family that nurtured her intellectual and artistic precocity. From her earliest days at UCLA (where she eventually earned a masters in painting and sculpture), she was sensitive to the posturing of her male peers. Resolved to beat the boys at their own game, she enrolled in an auto-body school (the only woman in a class of 250 men) and learnt how to wield a spray-paint gun.

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She applied that knowledge in the 1964 series Car Hoods, in which she decorated bonnets salvaged from Chevrolet Corvairs with bold geometries and candy hues so luscious they were practically lickable. She covered steel curves in biomorphic motifs that would define the rest of her career: wombs, hearts, ovaries, butterflies and vulvas.



Judy Chicago © Donald Woodman

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The point was not just to wrest California car culture from its macho adherents, but also to feminise the minimalist school that ruled the art world at the time. Chicago's swaggering colleagues — Judd, Serra & Co — ordered their welded, hammered, polished, heavy creations from workshops and factories and presented them in manly black, rust and grey. Chicago did the labour herself. She acquired a set of moulds for concrete highway columns and, using a technique she learnt in boatbuilding school, poured pink-hued fibreglass into them. The result, an upright set of pillars called "10 Part Cylinders", has a soft fleshy glow. The forms recall both votive candles and pylons, transience and brawn.

Chicago ratcheted up the spectacle with Atmospheres (1968-74), a series of events captured in photographs and video that required her to learn how to deploy flames, smoke machines, fireworks and road flares. She lit up the southern California landscape in multicoloured plumes, her self-erasing response to what she called the "patriarchal domination of the land" and the gouges and scars of land art. In "Purple Atmosphere" (1969), dense violet smoke sweeps across a stretch of Santa Barbara beach, veiling the border between land and sea. In "Immolation" (1972), a naked woman, her body painted green, sits quietly amid saffron billows, evoking the photo of a Buddhist monk who has set himself alight.



'Immolation' (1972) © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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With these large, assertive works, and in her public persona, she rejected the limitations of femininity. She wore her hair cropped, favoured big boots, and smoked cigars. Rather than standing back and savouring the female body from a distance, as men have done since time immemorial, she was more interested in what it was like to live in one. In 1970, armed with her new name, she joined forces with Miriam Schapiro and set out to establish a new, explicitly feminist practice and teach it at CalArts.

Together, they recruited 21 students, plus a handful of local artists, to fill a decrepit Hollywood mansion they dubbed Womanhouse. They asked the team to collaborate on a demonstration of how the American home imprisoned women and locked away their hopes. "I wasn't planning on making work at Womanhouse, but when I noticed that there was not one reference to menstruation, I thought: it's not possible," Chicago said recently. And so she contributed "Menstruation Bathroom", a pristine white room festooned with used and bloodied sanitary products.

During its month-long run, Womanhouse received 10,000 visitors — an astonishing figure for a raw installation on a shabby residential block — and the New Museum show captures that ferment in photos and video. The house was demolished shortly afterwards, but by then Chicago had found her mission: to express the realities of being a woman, in all its ferocity and messiness, no matter how the public squirmed.



The 'Judy Chicago: Herstory' show at the New Museum © Dario Lasagni

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That stance made it possible to notice how brazenly, yet how invisibly, men had set the terms for art — by treating childbirth as taboo, for instance. Representations of the virgin birth begin once the newborn has been cleaned off and propped up and the new mom has re-donned her robes; the first moments of Jesus's (or anyone else's) mortal existence invariably take place off camera. "If men had babies, there would be thousands of images of the crowning," Chicago has said.

For "Birth Project", she teamed up with needleworkers all over the country to celebrate the violence of a new human's arrival. All that rupture and rapture, all the fluids and bulbous body parts, are as shocking as they are mundane. It's also shocking that these images still shock, almost 40 years later.

Chicago is drawn to uncomfortable topics at the extremes of life and treats them in a staggering range of media. For "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction" (2012-2018), she uses kiln-fired glass paint on black glass to imagine her own end as well as the end of the planet. A series of vanity-free self-portraits answer the question "How Will I Die" in an assortment of similar ways. Her naked, sagging body draws its final breaths from a ventilator; her cat watches her go; her husband lays his hands on her bluish hips. These paintings are so savagely forthright they are hard to behold. They embody Chicago's unerring sense of the gap between what we want to look at and what we need to see.

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