

"The renaissance of artist Judy Chicago"

By Anne Bokma

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Judy Chicago. Steve Russell / Toronto Star file photo

Now 84, it took Judy Chicago a lifetime to finally get her due, Anne Bokma writes.

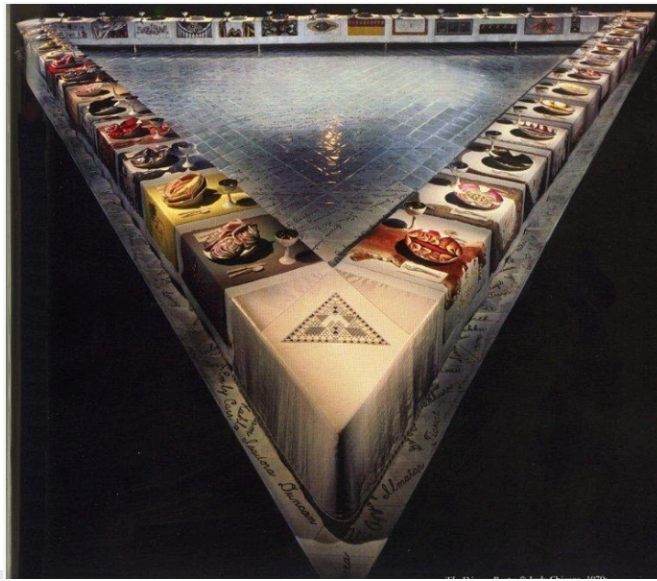
Judy Chicago is best known for creating "The Dinner Party," the world's first epic feminist art installation — an imaginary gathering of some of the most illustrious women in history.

I've always wanted a chance to pull up a seat at that famous table and finally got my opportunity on a recent visit to New York's Brooklyn Museum, where her work is permanently installed.

"The Dinner Party" is a massive ceremonial triangular banquet table with individual place settings for 39 historic women. Some are familiar names (Susan B. Anthony, Emily Dickinson, Sojourner Truth, Sacajawea and Georgia O'Keeffe among them), while others are more obscure (the ancient poet Sappho, the goddess Ishtar, the warrior queen Artemisia).

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Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party." Toronto Star file photo

Each place setting features a large pudenda-inspired painted porcelain plate fashioned in a particular woman's honour. Unabashedly erotic, the glazed plates glisten, their gleaming centres unfolding like flower petals.



In Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," each place setting features a large porcelain plate fashioned in a particular woman's honour.

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The show was a hit when it opened in San Francisco in 1979 — 5,000 people came to the opening and more than 15 million saw the exhibit as it toured the world. Women loved it. Here was a female artist celebrating not only often overlooked women, but audaciously glorifying female genitalia. Some men — particularly male art critics — just didn't get it. They derided the work as feminist propaganda. Hilton Kramer, chief art critic at the New York Times, imperiously labelled it "very bad," adding, "nothing more obvious or accessible or didactic has been seen in an exhibition of contemporary art in a very long time."

The exhibition tour collapsed, and "The Dinner Party" was boxed up and put into storage for almost a decade, waiting for a permanent home. The University of the District of Columbia almost took it, but the U.S. Senate threatened to withhold funding from the university if they did. One Republican senator described Chicago's masterpiece as "a spectacle of weird feminist art." It eventually found its home in 2007 at the Brooklyn Museum. As luck would have it, my visit to that museum coincided with "Herstory," a new retrospective show (on until Jan. 14) celebrating Chicago's 60-year career at New York's New Museum.

I'd only known Chicago as the creator of "The Dinner Party" and had no idea about the vast body of her work, with collections that touch on themes of birth, the Holocaust, environmental disaster, masculinity and her own mortality. Her exhibit, "What If Women Ruled the World?," a series of three-metre high embroidered banners, challenges us to consider how different things might be if women were in power with questions such as "would God be female?" "Would there be violence?" "Would old women be revered?"

She's currently creating a global digital "quilt" to coincide with that project, threading together written and video responses to those questions from women around the world, inspiring them to imagine a more equitable future. (My answer to "would buildings resemble wombs?" A resounding yes — no doubt there'd be far less CN Towers and far more SkyDomes.)

"Herstory" demonstrates Chicago's perseverance throughout the decades despite the criticism heaped upon her. Her indefatigability can be attributed to a strong foundation early in life — her parents encouraged her artistic leanings, enrolling her in drawing classes at the Chicago Institute of Art (an institute that later turned down her application to study there) when she was just three years old after a preschool teacher spotted her talent.

It was a man's world when she enrolled in art school in the 1960s and she fashioned a tough image, smoking cigars and changing her last name from Gerowitz to Chicago in honour of her birthplace (she needed her then-husband's permission to do so).

The misogyny she encountered radicalized her and she decided rather contort herself to fit in the male-dominated art world, she'd pave her own way.

Chicago often collaborated with other women on her massive scale projects, engaging 150 needleworkers, for example, in 1985's "The Birth Project," which features embroidery panels depicting the act of childbirth, a subject rarely depicted in western art.

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Images from "Power Play" examine men's abuse of power in the world. Dario Lasagni / Courtesy of The New Museum

She also explored the darker side of life. In "Power Play" (1987) she examined the construct of masculinity and the ways men can abuse their power — in intimate relationships and in the world. With the "Holocaust Project" (1993) she focused on the evil that can live so closely under the surface of civilization.



Judy Chicago blazed her own unique trail in the art world. Courtesy of Judy Chicago

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As Chicago approached 80 and became more aware of both her own mortality and how climate change is wrecking the world, she created "The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction," a series of portraits that depict her dying in various scenarios (in hospital hooked up to machines, in her husband's arms, screaming in pain) while illustrating the demise of many of the Earth's species, from polar bears displaced by melting ice to elephants slaughtered for their ivory tusks. She confronts the viewer with the idea of their own fate as it ties in with the fate of the planet.

Almost hidden in a stairway alcove between the floors of the New Museum is Chicago's "Autobiography of a Year" (1993-94), a touching collection of 140 image-and-text watercolour-and-pencil drawings that she colour-coded to her mood (yellow for happy, blue for calm and grey for depressed) when she was full of self-doubt, despairing about aging, the state of her career and what she saw as her declining creative powers.

One likes to think if Chicago were introducing her feminist art for the first time today, it wouldn't be nearly as controversial as it was back in the 1970s. But you have to wonder if that would be the case in an era when there's been an ongoing backlash against women's rights — an era when a U.S. president bragged about grabbing women by the pussy, when young women are leery about calling themselves feminists, when women's bodies are being regulated and controlled as reproductive freedoms are rolled back.

Now 84, it took Chicago lifetime to finally get her due. During the past decade she's been feted with grand prizes from the art world and in 2018 Time magazine named her one of the world's 100 most influential people. "It's ironic that after all these years, where I was once critiqued, I am now being lauded," she said at the time.

On the third floor of "Herstory" is an exhibit within an exhibit titled "City of Ladies" (named after the 15th-century book of the same name by Christine de Pisan, who wrote a series of short biographies of accomplished women) featuring the work of 80 women who have inspired Chicago throughout her career, including Frida Kahlo, Gertrude Stein, Emily Dickinson, Martha Graham and Emma Goldman.

It's an example of how Chicago is continuing the work she is most famous for — paying homage to the brilliant women who came before her and making sure they get the recognition they deserve.

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