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"Judy Chicago: Herstory" Review: The Many Facets of a Feminist Icon

By Brian P. Kelly

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Installation view of 'Judy Chicago: Herstory' at the New Museum PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI New York

At the New Museum, the artist's first New York survey shows that there's plenty to appreciate in her oeuvre beyond 'The Dinner Party.'

Fortunately things are different now. But for much of art history, the creative pursuits were dominated by men. While that may have been shifting when a young Judy Gerowitz graduated from UCLA in the early '60s, her work—mostly under the name Judy Chicago—would be instrumental in elevating women artists to the hard-won status they have today.

Despite her seminal place in 20th-century and feminist art history, Chicago has suffered from a reductive view in the public eye. She's most associated with "The Dinner Party" (1974-79), her iconic installation of a triangular banquet table with place settings celebrating female figures across the ages, which resides at the Brooklyn Museum. Those who know her beyond that probably think of her thrumming, pastel-hued paintings that spiral out of central portals or her more risqué works that celebrate the female anatomy. But as "Judy Chicago: Herstory" at the New Museum proves, there's a lot more to her.

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Surprisingly this is the first major New York survey dedicated to Chicago, and at a moment when women's rights are more central to the cultural conversation than they have been in decades, it's aptly timed. Taking over four floors of the museum and curated by the museum's Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari and Madeline Weisburg along with Margot Norton of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, it shows that Chicago has fought for inclusion from the beginning and, more strikingly, it reveals the breadth of materials and methods she's embraced over her career.



Judy Chicago's 'Rainbow Pickett' (1965/2021) PHOTO: JUDY CHICAGO/ARS, N.Y.

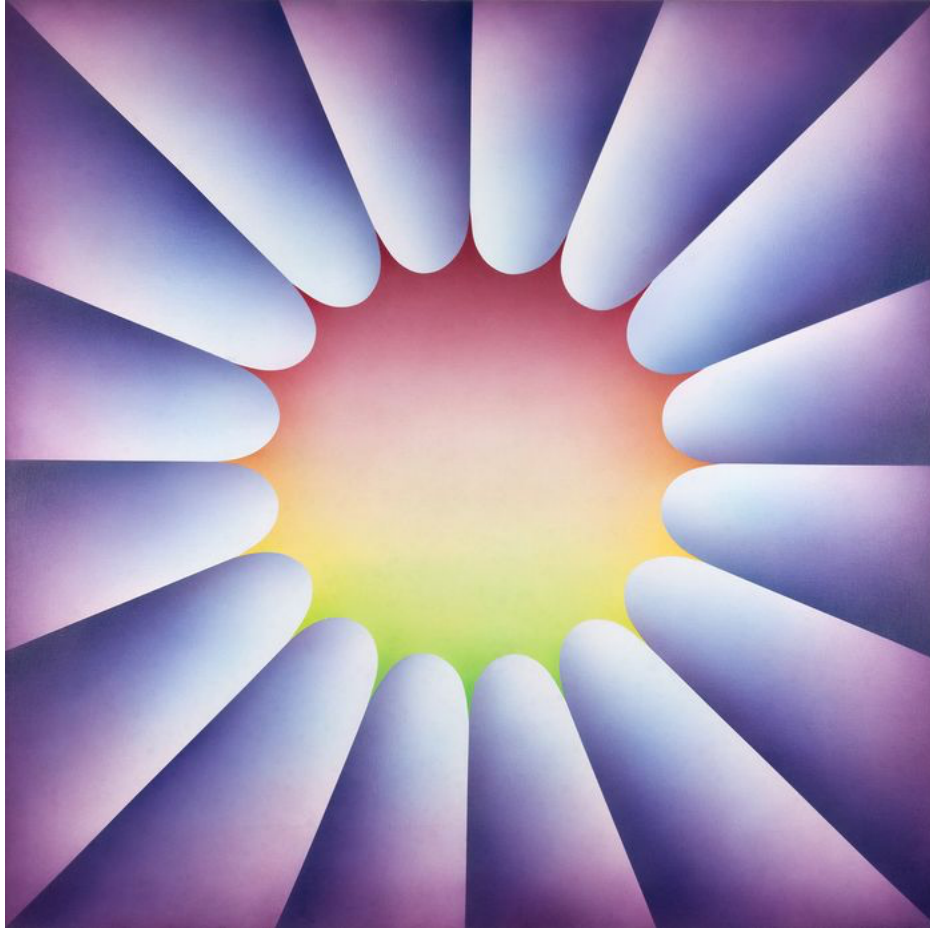
From the very first gallery in this chronological presentation, we can tell that this isn't the Chicago that most people know. Her "Rainbow Pickett" (1965/2021) is a candy-colored series of stainless-steel beams leaning against the wall whose staggered lengths make the space feel like it's growing or shrinking depending on the angle from which you view them. Exhibited in the Jewish Museum's 1966 survey of Minimalism, "Primary Structures," the work was one of only three made by women in that show. It was a boys' club, yes, but even fresh out of school Chicago was adamant that she wouldn't be excluded.

This confidence is evident not just in the movements she worked in, but also the methods. Early in her career Chicago enrolled in an auto-body school where, the only woman in a class of 250, she learned spray painting. She used that skill to vibrantly color Chevrolet Corvair hoods, wittily upending the machismo of car culture, with the bright pinks and purples of the geometric "Birth Hood" (1965/2011), for example, outlining hearts and abstractions that hint at the reproductivity of

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its title. Chicago also attended boat-building school, working with fiberglass, which she deployed in her flesh-toned "10 Part Cylinders" (1966/2019), whose varied heights give each its own personality. And her study of pyrotechnics led to a series of gripping performance pieces in the late '60s and early '70s, seen in photographs and video, in which brightly painted women meditate, dance and interact among the billowing smoke of colored flares.



Judy Chicago's 'Through the Flower 2' (1973) PHOTO: JUDY CHICAGO/ARS, N.Y.

Those hoping to see Chicago's more familiar work won't be disappointed. "Through the Flower" (1973) marks a turning point in her career, when she would embrace her best-known aesthetic: surrounding a central element with radiating, petal-like mandalas. There are several examples of these works here, including ones from her "Great Ladies Series" (1973), many of which would inspire her "Dinner Party." And while that masterwork isn't present—visitors will need to head across town to Brooklyn to see it—her preparatory line drawings for all of its plates are.

Chicago's most overtly activist works are among the weakest. A recent series on extinction feels amateurish and pieces from the past that would have been shockingly provocative then are much less so from the vantage point of 2023. The exception, however, are the disturbing Holocaust-related paintings created in the '80s and '90s that still shock us with their horrors: the pile of remains in the washed-out "Bones of Treblinka" (1988), the bondage and heinous devices in "Pink Triangle/Torture" (1989).

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Installation view of the show, the artist's first major survey in New York PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI

But it's her exploration across a variety of media that's most interesting. Her monumental "Birth Project" (1980-85), in which she collaborated with over 150 needleworkers to create textiles that address what she saw as a dearth of depictions of childbirth, is represented by some of the most stunning works in the show: "Birth Trinity: Needlepoint 1" (1983) shows a pair of figures helping a woman in labor, the trio blending into a single cosmic being; the stark black and white of "Earth Birth" (1983) are punctuated by a glowing yellow that spills out of its central woman's mouth and radiates from her uterus. Elsewhere we get an overview of "Womanhouse," an exhibition that grew out of the Feminist Art Program Chicago established at Fresno State College, which took over a dilapidated mansion and filled it with installations and performances. The variety of materials and methods in the show can seem endless, with Chicago working (sometimes in collaboration) in colored pencil, cross-stitch, stained glass, aluminum, engraving, lithography, wood and more.

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Works by Agnes Pelton, Hilma af Klint and Georgia O'Keeffe in the 'City of Ladies' section of the show PHOTO: DARIO LASAGNI

The exhibition's capstone is a show-within-the-show that spreads across the entire fourth floor. Titled "City of Ladies," it stages Chicago's work alongside that by some 90 female and nonbinary figures who make up the artist's own "alternative canon" and have influenced her practice. There are some names that are expected: Georgia O'Keeffe, Hilma af Klint, Leonora Carrington and Frida Kahlo. But it's the lesser-known objects and makers that are most captivating for the connections they allow us to discover in the pieces that have come before: the patterns appropriated from Elizabeth S. Clarke's cotton quilt, the palette borrowed from Mary Louise McLaughlin's earthenware vase, the interlocked figures drawn from Käthe Kollwitz's woodcut print. This section, like so much of the exhibition, is a bold reminder that it's impossible to pigeonhole Judy Chicago.

Judy Chicago: Herstory

New Museum, through Jan. 14, 2024

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