ARTFORUM

"Judy Chicago New Museum"
By Jan Avgikos
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View of "The City of Ladies," 2023–24, New Museum, New York.
Photo: Dario Lasagni. © Donald Woodman/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Margot Norton, and Madeline Weisburg

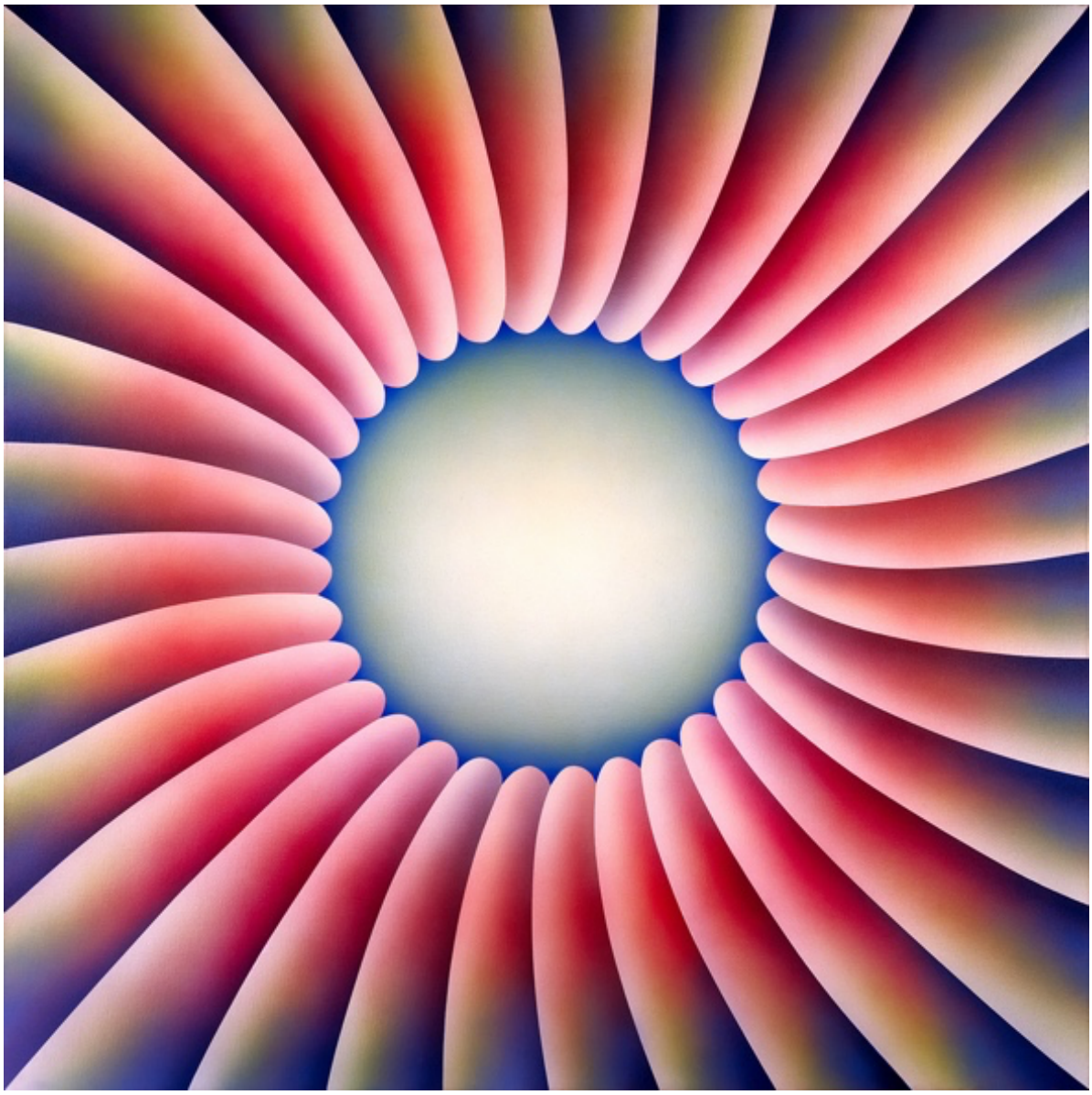
REVISIONIST HISTORY 2.0, fully dialed up over the past few decades, is once again on a mission to rediscover the many significant artists who were marginalized and never given their due. Patriarchal bias led the charge in discounting certain artists because of their gender, skin color, sexuality, or cultural identity, as straight white men ruled the canon and owned virtually every piece of modernist art real estate in the twentieth century. Clearing away the muck of misinformation, waking up to forms of serial discrimination perpetrated by all our reputable institutions, retrofitting the historical record to reflect the diversity that flourished beneath the story of art's "official" veneer—indeed, the amount of excavation and correction required is exhausting and seemingly endless.

View of "Judy Chicago: Herstory," 2023–24, New Museum, New York.
Photo: Dario Lasagni. © Donald Woodman/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

If ever there were an artist deserving of recuperation, someone whose work has been consistently dismissed, stereotyped, and neglected—and, paradoxically, is vital to understanding so many trajectories of contemporary practice—it's Judy Chicago. We come face-to-face with the challenge in "Herstory," her revelatory retrospective at the New Museum. Covering six decades, it features more than 250 works across painting, sculpture, drawing, installation, printmaking, photography, glasswork, and textiles, as well as loads of documentation from collaborative installations and performances. There's also "The City of Ladies," a show-within-a-show that presents eighty-five women artists, writers, and philosophers who might be considered Chicago's spiritual sisters. The artist's protean creativity rocks four of the museum's floors, and the congregation of objects and experiences produced over a lifetime makes clear that while Chicago was one of the most important pioneers of first-wave feminist art, she was not contained by that movement—or any other. Rather, she forged links with virtually all the prevailing major idioms of practice from the second half of the twentieth century that were conventionally seen to be antithetical to feminist concerns, such as Pop and Minimalism.

Judy Chicago, *Primordial Goddess*, 1978, pen and ink on paper, 11 1⁄2 × 14 1⁄2″. From the 39-part suite *Plate Line Drawings*, 1977–78. © Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society (ARS).

Thirty-nine pen-and-ink works from Chicago's *Plate Line Drawings* suite, 1977–78, acknowledge the import of her monumental collaborative installation *The Dinner Party*, which debuted in 1979 and is on permanent view at New York's Brooklyn Museum. But the expansive ambition of "Herstory" far and away supersedes that piece, which heretofore had been the defining work of her career. Before Chicago discovered feminism in the late 1960s, her penchant was for experimentation with nontraditional materials. Catalyzed in affiliation with California's Light and Space movement, she inaugurated "Atmospheres," 1968–74, a series of large-scale ephemeral events utilizing colored smoke. Her *Santa Barbara Museum Atmosphere*, 1969, effectively simulated the destruction of the institution by fire via clouds of blazing orange, but most of these ephemeral pieces were produced in the desert and activated the power and vastness of the natural world. Photographs document the artist's evanescent plumes on the beach, as we see in *Purple Atmosphere*, 1969, or in more deciduous settings such as *Pink Atmosphere*, 1970, where a pastel haze gently drifts and dissipates over a verdant field. Performers eventually come into these tableaux in 1972, evoking earthly goddesses and other mythic beings in what might arguably be credited as one of the earliest manifestations of ecofeminism in art.



Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 1973, sprayed acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60". © Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society (ARS).

In 1964, prior to gaining an interest in dematerialized forms, Chicago enrolled in auto body school to learn how to spray-paint like a pro. Made on Chevrolet Corvair car hoods, works like *Birth Hood* and *Flight Hood*, both 1965, became the perfect "macho" substrates for her flamboyant style of Pop female body iconography. That same decade, in response to the influence of Minimalism, Chicago worked extensively with industrial materials and serialized forms. She fitted sheets of fiberglass over cardboard tubes to produce *10 Part Cylinders*, 1966; she used candy-colored polyurethane paint on stainless steel to produce geometric sculptures, including *Rainbow Pickett*, and *Trinity*, both 1965; and she continued to explore modularity and movable elements in a group of game boards with variable pieces. *Moving Parts*, 1967, has thirteen acrylic forms arranged on a mirror square, while *Aluminum Rearrangeable Game Board*, 1965, includes twelve objects and a base manufactured in sandblasted aluminum.

View of "Judy Chicago: Herstory," 2023–24, New Museum, New York. From left: *10 Part Cylinders*, 1966/2019; *Pasadena Lifesavers Red Series #2*, 1969–70. Photo: Dario Lasagni. © Donald Woodman/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Chicago's extended involvement with hard-edge painting and the mesmerizing motifs of Op art undermines the notion that abstraction was an exclusively male form. From the late '60s through the early '70s, she sprayed acrylic lacquer on canvas and transparent plastic panels. Her "Pasadena Lifesavers" series, 1969–70, executed in red, blue, and yellow, is a group of immaculate translucencies that play retinal games with circular patterns that seem to pulsate and shimmer in and out of view. By 1973, the paintings have transformed into radiant mandalas with provocative titles—*Through the Flower*, *Let It All Hang Out*, and *Heaven Is for White Men Only*—that introduce new discursive content.

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View of "Judy Chicago: Herstory," 2023–24, New Museum, New York. From left: *Trinity*, 1965/2019; *Birth Hood*, 1965/2011; *Car Hood*, 1964; *Flight Hood*, 1965/2011; *Rainbow Pickett*, 1965/2021. Photo: Dario Lasagni. © Donald Woodman/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The feminist agenda Chicago inaugurated in her studio practice during the early '70s was too radical for the art establishment. What drew the most ire can be attributed in part to her deployment of text as a new and defining feature in her art and the unabashedly gynocentric contents it extolled. Her unbridled narratives valorized women's experiences, catalyzed visions of feminine freedom and sexuality, and embraced Great Goddess theory. It was as if membership in the ranks of radical feminism meant you couldn't belong anywhere else—but that was a price Chicago was willing to pay. Nothing was off-limits: Her 1972 *Menstruation Bathroom*, an installation crammed with actual menstrual pads and paraphernalia that was part of the legendary "Womanhouse" exhibition of that same year—proved it. As we reexamine the role of anima in modern and contemporary art, let's pay special attention to Chicago, whose example allows us to envision artistic, spiritual, and critical practices of resistance and empowerment and to raise our voices in celebration of the eternal feminine.

Judy Chicago, *Purple Atmosphere*, 1969, ink-jet print, 20 × 24″. © Judy Chicago/Artist Rights Society (ARS).