

OBSERVER

"In Drawings, Serpentine North Maps the Arc of Judy Chicago's Career"

By Alistair MacQueen

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What If Women Ruled The World (2022), made in collaboration with Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova. Photo: Jo Underhill.
Courtesy Judy Chicago and Serpentine

"Revelations" encapsulates almost six decades of trailblazing feminist art, challenging dogmas and elevating women to a higher plain.

The fact that art has been predominantly constructed, practiced, interpreted, celebrated and critiqued by men—and more often than not, has depicted the deeds and successes of that particular gender—has quite rightly provoked a reaction that has, for decades now, been spreading throughout society and culture.

For Judy Chicago (b. 1939), that provocation came in the form of seeing the Sistine Chapel in the early 1980s and realizing that there was only one woman featured in Michelangelo's magnum opus. Compounding the scene was the inference that it was God who gave birth to man, rather than the artwork acknowledging the irrefutable and biological truth. It was this moment that served as the eventual catalyst for her work *And God Created Life* (2023).

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Patriarchal constructs, male-dominant narratives, social injustice and gender-based discrimination are some of the many things that Chicago has worked so passionately and creatively to inveigh against, from her attempts to break into the L.A. art scene in the 1960s to her founding of the first Feminist Art Program at California's Fresno State Art College.



Judy Chicago in 2023. Photo © Donald Woodman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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In fact, Chicago has been a truly disruptive figure in the art world for more than sixty years, and "Judy Chicago: Revelations" at Serpentine North Gallery is something of a landmark moment for the U.S. artist who was born Judy Cohen but adopted the name of the city of her birth. This solo retrospective, which runs through September 1, is the largest of its kind ever hosted by a London institution and a multimedia testament to Chicago's reproof of patriarchy and the marginalization of women.

At the exhibition's foundation is a collection of unpublished manuscripts Chicago created in the early 1970s, which rode tandem with the creation of her iconic piece *The Dinner Party* (1979). The latter's radical retelling of history from a feminist perspective serves as the thematic backbone of the show, situated in the center of the show, around which her numerous other works and periods orbit.

True to its name, "Revelations" is a revealing and unabashed review of Chicago's career, focusing on drawings and early abstract pieces that have never been shown before. With a long-standing engagement with the medium displaying a subtle use of composition and color, pieces and forms such as *Through the Flower* (1972) are juxtaposed with compelling videos of the women-centered art and craft making from the concurrent *Womanhouse* (1972) project.



"Judy Chicago: Revelations," 2024. Installation view, Serpentine North. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Jo Underhill. Courtesy Judy Chicago and Serpentine

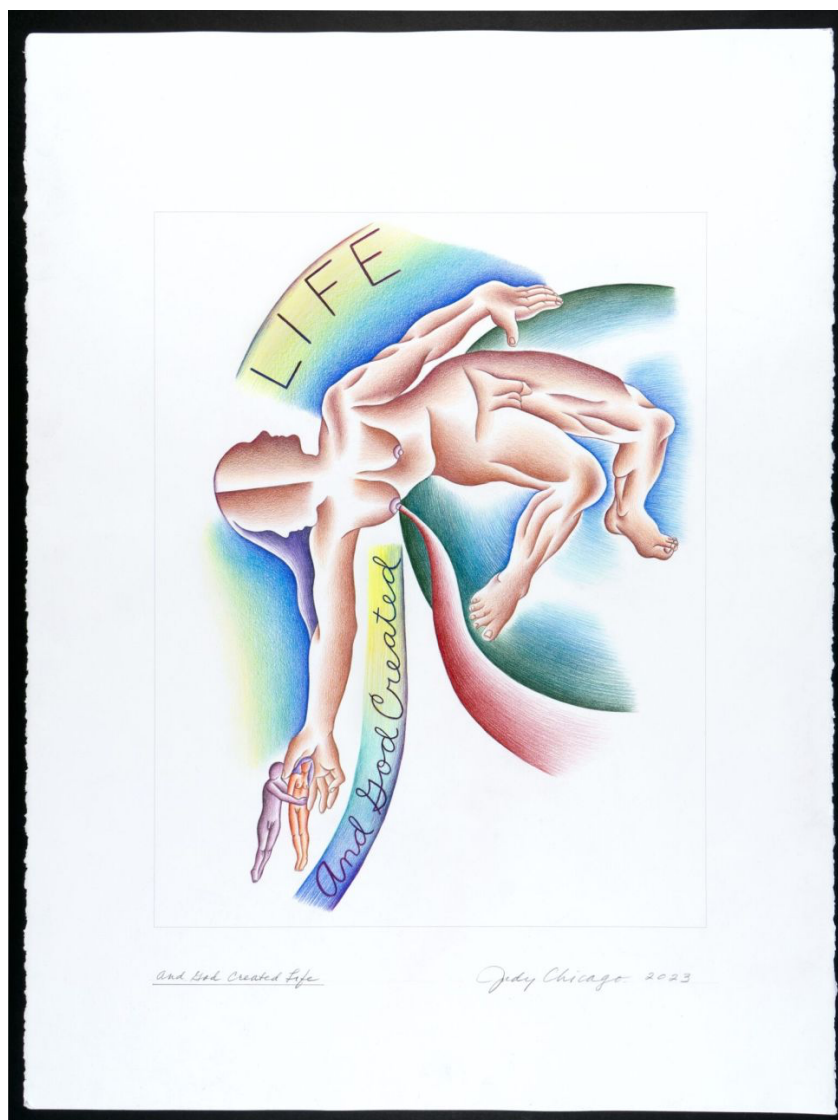
Bigger themes are definitely (and defiantly) brought to the fore throughout the show, from the Greenpeace-commissioned *Rainbow Warrior* (1980/2023) to *Study for Stranded* (2013), a reaction

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to, and part of a campaign dealing with, the environmental crises for #CreateArtforEarth. *What If Women Ruled The World* (2022) and its expansive quilt, made in collaboration with Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova, is part of an ongoing project that boldly imagines an alternative world seen through the lens of those not concerned with profits, pugilism or power.

Bigger also typifies Chicago's output in terms of scale for *The Female Divine* (2020). This goddess structure, created for Dior's 2020 spring/summer haute couture show at Paris' Musée Rodin, served as the venue for the event. Featuring banners made by 150 students from the Chanakya School of Craft in Mumbai (and seen on a video at the exhibition), it deftly weaves together the aspects of women's history, artisan skill, empowerment and self-worth, which the artist feels have often been at risk from dominant male narratives, now made manifest in a bold and all-encompassing format.



Judy Chicago *And God Created Life* (detail), 2023 Prismacolor on paper 30 x 22.25 in. (76.2 x 56.52 cm) © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY Courtesy of the artist

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Chicago's taste for continuous experimentation and adaptation of various art practices to suit her own is also another recurring trope of her work. This is most overtly manifested in *Atmospheres*—a selection of works that saw Chicago explore pyrotechnics to utilize in filmic performances such as *Woman Creating Fire from Women and Smoke* (1971-1972), where naked, female bodies dance and meditate in primal, ritualistic fashion across the Californian desert. For Chicago, women are the magic: the goddesses, the myth makers and the celebrated. Other devices on hand at the exhibition include a video-recording booth and an augmented reality app to augment the visual treasures on show.

If anything, this all-embracing retrospective is a dynamic unfolding of Chicago's past achievements and influence on contemporary issues and displays an uncanny ability to tap into ongoing dialogues and weighty concerns with ease and versatility. She is, as Serpentine curator and self-confessed Chicago fan Hans Ulrich Obrist described at the opening of her show, an "artistic polymath," and as her Instagram bio so appositely surmises, a "general badass." As accolades go, it definitely beats 'Old Master.'

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