

TimeOut

"Judy Chicago: 'Revelations'"

By Eddy Frankel

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Judy Chicago, © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY

Time Out says 4 out of 5 stars

Erased, forgotten, overlooked, subjugated and dominated; Judy Chicago saw what history, what society, had done to women, and she did something about it. The pioneering American feminist has spent decades using her art to call out injustice at the hands of the patriarchy. She's most well known for smoke-based desert performances and 'The Dinner Party', a hugely influential installation celebrating thousands of overlooked women. Both are represented here in slightly disappointing documentary form, but this show focuses instead on her drawings and paintings.

She has a distinct aesthetic; heady, psychedelic, swirling and geometric. The earliest works here are pulsating, spiralling drawings that seem to throb and glow. The works are heavily symbolic: 'assertiveness through harsh colours, receptiveness through softer, swirling colour [and] the state of orgasm through colour that dissolves'. They're beautiful, gentle images, but their messaging is undeniably subtle.

So she made it more obvious. Those abstracts eventually are accompanied by texts talking about rejection and identity, and Chicago starts hammering the point home a little more clearly. Cracked tiles talk about being 'nearly free', 'dying to fly' and 'full of hope'.

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But it wasn't enough, and she soon ditched abstraction entirely. Now the works show men pissing on nature, draining women's souls or with faces contorted and disfigured by the evils of power. Chicago sees society being destroyed, nature being eviscerated and women being exploited; her art is her response, and it's a vicious, technicolour, satirical attack on the patriarchy, shot through with ecological activism.

After a weirdly heavy-handed focus on a collaboration with Dior, the final work is a vast tapestry filled with quotes from people answering the question: 'what if women ruled the world?' The answers, from people all over the world, imagine a society where 'there would be considerably less violence' and 'our culture would reward gentleness', a world without private property or war or environmental destruction.

Ignoring Margaret Thatcher and Marine le Pen and plenty of other women who have done bad things, the idea that women are intrinsically good and men intrinsically bad just feels simplistic, naive and ignorant. If women ruled the world it would probably be just as shit, but in a different way.

Because Chicago's real issue, her real target, is power; who wields it, who is oppressed by it. And when she's got it in her sights, she's pretty unstoppable.

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