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33



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6 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN  
21 THE TALK OF THE TOWN  
*Amy Davidson on WikiLeaks; poet, Iggy Pop; oysters, Judy Chicago.*

Alec Wilkinson 26 PROFILES  
*New York Is Killing Me: What ever happened to Gil Scott-Heron?*

David Sedaris 33 PERSONAL HISTORY  
*Standing By: Our unfriendly skies.*

Larry Doyle 36 SHOUTS & MURMURS  
*Sleeper Camp*

George Packer 38 THE POLITICAL SCENE  
*The Empty Chamber: Is the Senate beyond hope?*

Nicholson Baker 52 ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY  
*Painkiller Deathstreak: Adventures in video games.*

David Bezmozgis 60 FICTION  
*"The Train of Their Departure"*

THE CRITICS  
BOOKS  
Jill Lepore 70 *On the trail of Charlie Chan.*  
75 Briefly Noted  
Alex Ross 76 MUSICAL EVENTS  
*Recordings for Chopin's bicentennial.*

Paul Goldberger 78 THE SKY LINE  
*Reinventing the parking garage.*

Anthony Lane 80 THE CURRENT CINEMA  
*"Get Low," "Life During Wartime."*

POEMS  
Dana Goodyear 34 "Dormant"  
Justin Quinn 48 "Russian Girl on Patizski"  
Robert N. Watson 56 "Winter in the Summer House"

COVER "Dropped Call," by Christoph Niemann DRAWINGS Michael Shoru, John O'Brien, Farley Katz, Joe Dator, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Frank Cotham, Guban Wilson, Drew Dermacich, P. C. Vey, Michael Crawford, J. C. Duffy, Jack Ziegler, Kim Warp, David Sipress, Tom Toro, Danny Shavaboun, Barbara Smaller SPOTS Richard McGuire

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## THE ARTISTIC LIFE PARTY GIRL



In the sixty-eight years that Judy Chicago has been making art (which does not include a dormant period that lasted until age three), she has worked in watercolor, embroidery, bronze, porcelain, pyrotechnics, performance art, plastics, oils, and tapestry, and lately she has been focussing on glass. But when people think of her they think of just one thing: "The Dinner Party," her massive, and often maligned, installation, completed in 1979, of a triangle of tables with elaborate, personalized place settings for thirty-nine historical female figures, from Ishtar to Virginia Woolf. Although no artist likes to see her life's work reduced to a single piece, Chicago allows that, if it had to be just one, "The Dinner Party" is a pretty good choice. "It has a certain validity in terms of who I am and what I've fought for," she said one recent afternoon as she walked through an exhibition of women's work at the American Folk Art Museum.

Chicago, who is seventy-one, has

bright-orange hair and was wearing gold sneakers, purple glasses, and a top with gauzy hot-pink sleeves that fluttered over her muscular arms. She recalled a conversation from a decade ago: "A woman says to me, 'You're in really good shape!' I said, 'Not bad for sixty.' She said, 'What's your secret?' I said, 'Hard work, sex, and exercise.' There was a long pause. Then she said, 'Do you think it would help if I took up one of them?'"

She stopped in front of a watercolor depicting a cemetery amid weeping willows and grazing sheep, one of a series of mourning pictures made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. "It's a completely authentic women's form," she said. "Mourning pictures were invented by women, and they were done by women; I don't think there's anything comparable." She smiled at the picture, and then turned to a pair of samplers from the seventeenth-seventies. Chicago squinted at the rows of letters rendered in tiny stitches. "As much as it taught the skill, it taught women how to think: small."

Chicago, who was born Judy Cohen in her namesake city, has often thought very, very big. One of her early pieces—or "Atmospheres," as she called them—was an enormous, exploding butterfly made from twenty-five hundred dollars' worth of fireworks on the shores of Lake Merritt, in Oakland. "The Dinner Party" takes up an entire room in the Brooklyn Museum and required years of work by dozens of artisans, who helped Chicago craft the plates (Emily Dickinson's resembles a three-dimensional vulva framed with lace) and embroidered the runners (the astronomer Caroline Herschel's name is stitched against a celestial sky). One of the criticisms of the piece came from feminists, who considered it patriarchal for Chicago to dictate the artistic output of a group of underlings.

Remembering that grievance made Chicago smirk. "It's like when that stupid Robert Hughes wrote in *Time*, 'If only the needleworkers could've done their own designs.' He had no knowledge of the form! There would be designs, and people would stitch from them—we were drawing from a tradition." Chicago considers herself part of a long line of female artists misunderstood by the establishment. "Georgia O'Keeffe, in the twenties critics described her work as emanating directly from her womb," she said. "As if

it weren't mediated by her brain and her brush!" But Chicago claims to be impervious to critics. "I was talking to a group of Asian women artists once, and they were very freaked out about bad reviews," she said, fluffing her hair. "I said to them, 'Girls, I've probably gotten the worst reviews of any human being on the planet. And here I am, walking and talking.'"

Chicago keeps very busy. She has two gallery shows coming up in Manhattan, and her work will appear in an exhibition at the Jewish Museum this fall. She recently finished her twelfth book, written with the art historian Frances Borzello, about Frida Kahlo. And, in conjunction with a team of academics, she has come up with lesson plans for schools on women in history called the Dinner Party Curriculum; she was in New York to present an award to the teacher who had best implemented them.

She contemplated a wild quilt made in the eighteen-eighties, a sea of stars and pentagons in shades of bright blue, or-



Judy Chicago

ange, and lime green. "If the woman who made this had access to a studio and training, imagine what this person could've done!" she said. "What's the difference between this kind of abstraction and the abstraction at MOMA?" She had considered spending the afternoon at the Museum of Modern Art, next door, but she knew that she would have spent the whole time grumbling about the dearth of work by women there. "This was better," she said, heading out onto Fifty-third Street. "I'm not into kvetching. I'm into changing the world."

—Ariel Levy