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JUDY CHICAGO

The Woman Who Threw The World A Dinner Party

By Kathryn M Davis

Judy Chicago identifies herself as an artist, author, and educator. The artist, of course, is best known for her iconic work, *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), now—nearly 30 years after its first exhibition—permanently housed in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. Having published twelve books—most recently “Frida Kahlo: Face to Face” (with Frances Borzello, Prestel, 2010)—Chicago certainly deserves the title of author, although, as she explained at a recent interview at her home at Belen, New Mexico, she started writing out of necessity. “I’m an accidental writer. My writing came out of my frustration with the fact that I couldn’t get anybody to write about my own work... I had seen that writing could be a vehicle for my ideas.”

As an educator, Chicago started the first Feminist Art program at California State University at Fresno—a program that was quickly picked up by California Institute of the Arts, where she team-taught with another luminary of women’s art, Miriam Shapiro.

Womanhouse, the month-long artwork that, in 1972, was one of the world’s first openly female-centered art installations, would come out of the fact that CalArts didn’t yet have the Feminist Studio Workshop

in the Women’s Building ready for classes, so participants were meeting in homes around the Los Angeles area. Why not make art in a soon-to-be-condemned house? Over the years since CalArts, Chicago has conducted countless workshops across the country and team-taught with her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman. One item that can be checked off her bucket list is the development and implementation of *The Dinner Party* Curriculum Project for K-12. Finally, teachers can go to the non-profit organization Through the Flower’s web site and find appropriate lesson plans based on Chicago’s iconic work. A far cry from those early days when *The Dinner Party* was being researched, and virtually no women (artists or otherwise) were to be found in the dusty shelves holding the

ABOVE:
JUDY CHICAGO IN HER STUDIO

OPPOSITE:
“TWO FACED TOBY HEAD,” 2010
SILVER GILDING ON CAST GLASS
INSTALLED SIZE: 18" x 18½" x 18½"
PHOTO: © DONALD WOODMAN





history books. If nothing else, Chicago's near manic research into important women throughout history has changed all that; in 2005 she was selected as one of the first feminist artists to be included in that benchmark of art-history texts, "Janson's Basic History of Western Art." The respected tome also now credits her "as a forerunner of the late 20th-century movement known as Post-Modernism."

Resting on her laurels is hardly Chicago's style; her incorrigible curiosity about life in general and art specifically covers art mediums, processes, and paradoxically, her commitment to pure surface as much as to narrative content. She's taken herself down paths that include etching on glass; lithography; cast bronze, paper and glass; and designing for needlework; as well as drawing and painting. Since 2003, she's been primarily focused on the challenges of working in fused, etched, cast, and painted glass, and completed a residency at the renowned Pilchuck Glass School in Washington State. (Trained as an artist, Chicago received her MA from the University of California, Los Angeles.) The woman's energy level defies her petite size. Not only does she travel incessantly from exhibition to lecture to yet another exhibition, her daily routine is just as daunting: up by 6:00 a.m., Chicago works out for about 90 minutes six or seven days a week, and after that, she's off and running until bedtime. Used to be, she says, she saw sleep as "a waste of time; now I think it's a miracle."

Despite the work's celebrity status, Chicago's career as an artist continued to flourish—largely due to her insatiable drive—after the end of the exhibition of *The Dinner Party* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979. Indeed, her recent retrospective exhibition, "Surveying Judy Chicago: 1970-2010" at ACA Galleries in New York, reveals a rich and prodigious array of artworks, with selections from various series including *Powerplay* (1982-1987), an exploration into the cruelty of arbitrarily enforcing "masculine" roles, such as the notion that "boys don't cry," for example; *The Birth Project* (1980-

"BIRTH TEAR/TEAR," 1982

EMBROIDERY ON SILK

20" x 27½"

COLLECTION OF THE ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY

PHOTO: © DONALD WOODMAN

1985), a narrative of birth at its crowning—literally—moment, and as a labor of pain and love; *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light* (1993-2002); and a show of adages sewn into needlework images, *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* (1994-2000). ACA declared that attendance for the opening of Chicago's first retrospective show was the greatest they've witnessed in their 75-year history.

"Surveying Judy Chicago" offered some pleasant surprises for fans of and newcomers to her work, beginning with her *Pasadena Lifesavers* series (1969-1970): flattened and abstracted discs in candy colors. A close look reveals Chicago's early and abiding concerns with color, seriality, and the circular form that would become her signature as a feminist artist. In the early '60s during her first decade of practice, however, she was doing everything she could to "excise [her] gender while remaining authentic" to her own aesthetic choices. *The Liberation of the Great Ladies* (1973) straddles all three of the above elements that marked Chicago's early work, while broadly hinting at what was to come later that decade.

A telling example of just how "completely impossible [it was] to allow any aspects of one's gender, as a woman, to inflect one's art" is *Rainbow Pickett* (the spelling references singer Wilson Pickett). During a studio visit, Walter Hopps, Pasadena Art Museum director and a central figure in the early days of LA's art scene, wouldn't even look at the proto-Minimalist work, according to Chicago, because of the fact that its maker was a woman. *Pickett* mingled the artist's connection to California's reigning "Finish Fetish" with her use of a spectral palette that moved beyond Minimalism's chromophobia to

reference a glowing femininity, and a pre-postmodern willingness to go beyond the accepted constructs and limitations of art-movement theories. Back on the East Coast in 1966, the art critic of his day, Clement Greenburg, preferred *Pickett* over many other pieces in the show "Primary Structures" at the Jewish Museum. Chicago, however, experienced the rejection of her early works with enough downheartedness that she destroyed the piece; it was reconstructed for LA MOCA's 2004 group retrospective, "A Minimal Future? Art as Object, 1958-1968," where it underwent a hugely popular revival.

This roller coaster of acceptance and rejection by her contemporaries would prove to be a familiar pattern in Chicago's career trajectory. Despite the fact that *The Dinner Party* was exhibited with great success in San Francisco to some 100,000 viewers, afterward the artist had less than nothing to show for her work. "People don't know this... [But] the exhibition tour collapsed, [and] I lost everything: my studio, my staff, my marriage; I was in debt. And I basically had to start all over again." Despite the bludgeoning she experienced after having invested her whole self into *The Dinner Party's* continuance, Chicago conjectures that "if this hadn't happened, perhaps my art-making life would have gone in a different direction."

Nonetheless, her indomitable spirit led her to spend the last three decades exploring her greatest love: reworking mediums in service of a brand new context. While she has never returned to making nonobjective work, she continues to be fascinated by surface in all its manifestations—reflective, flat, or responsive—and this formal quality remains a unifying factor in much of Judy Chicago's art.

Eventually, says Chicago, "*The Dinner Party*... traveled the world, to sixteen venues, six countries, three continents, to a viewing audience of a million people, but it was done completely alternatively, through grass-roots groups [with logistical assistance from Through the Flower]... first in America, then in Canada, then in Europe and Australia. Imagine: *The Dinner Party* is traveling, and the revenues that are coming in through the exhibition fees go to Through the Flower, which couldn't give any money to me but was supporting the installation crew. I have never been paid by Through the Flower, ever. I've worked [since its inception] for nothing, as their artistic director."

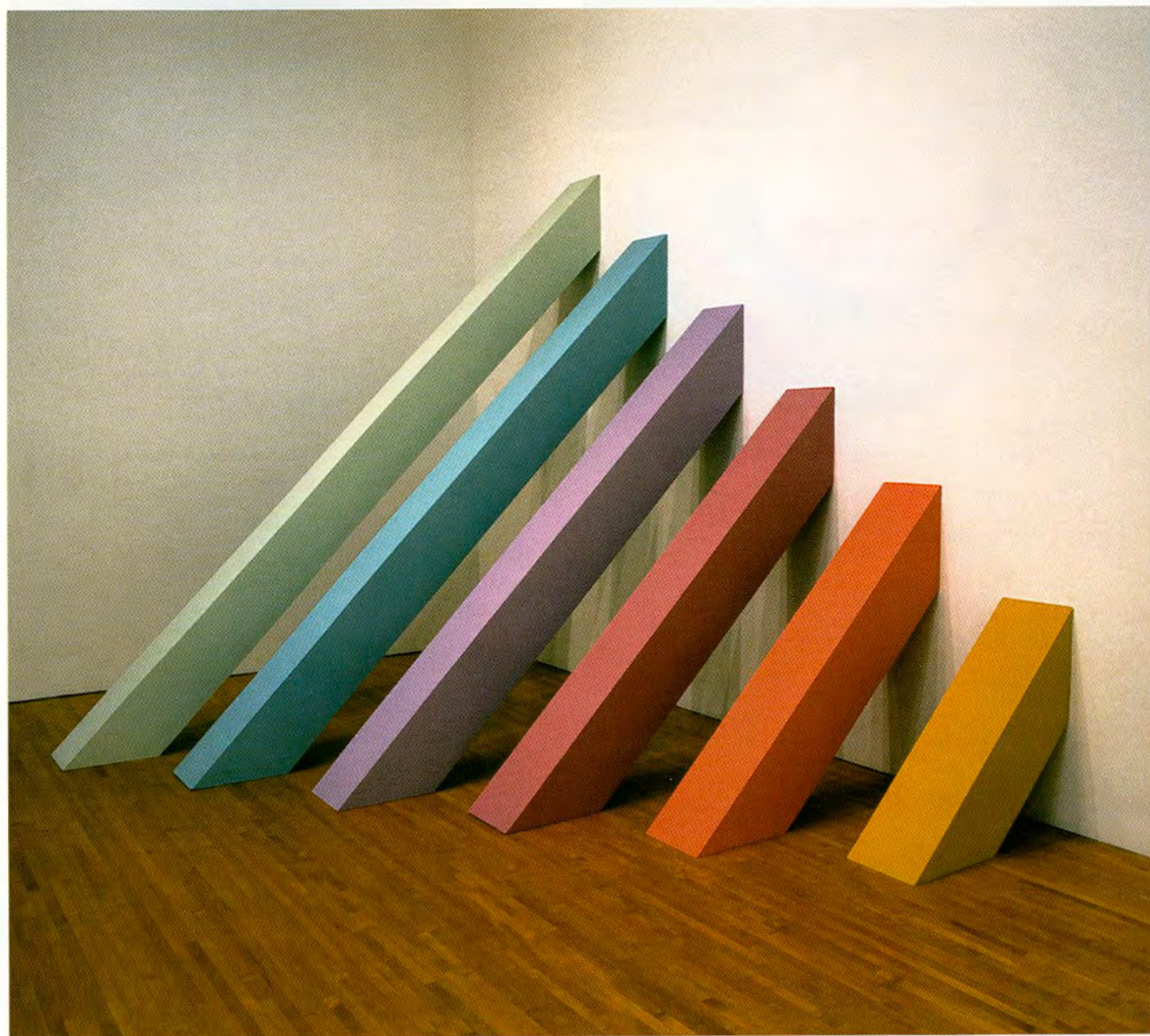
"RAINBOW PICKETT"

1964/2004

LATEX PAINT ON CANVAS-COVERED PLYWOOD

10'6" x 10'6" x 9'2"

PHOTO: © DONALD WOODMAN



A close look reveals Chicago's early and abiding concerns with color, seriality, and the circular form that would become her signature as a feminist artist.



"Meanwhile," she continues, "I had this burning desire to make art, so... I came up with [*The Birth Project*]. We got so many letters from people who wanted to work with me... at one point, there were 150 birth project works going on. It was on a different model: Instead of everybody working in my studio, they worked in their own homes, and I traveled around, looking at the work, reviewing it and supervising it. Similarly, we designed an exhibition strategy where anybody could exhibit *Birth Project* work. We sent it around with documentation panels that could be push-pinned... We even sent white gloves with the installation drawings. There were 100 *Birth Project* exhibitions and about 250,000 people saw *Birth Project* work." Depictions of actual birth have been neglected in a mostly male pantheon of art history; Chicago's project serves to graphically present the subject within the greater metaphor of a goddess-based cosmology. A graphic illustration of this highly allegorical artwork, included in her New York survey, is *Earth Birth* (1983).

In recent years, and in particular since the early 2000s, the medium of glass has continued to earn the artist's focused attention. One of her current exhibitions, "Chicago In Glass/En Verre" at Montreal's Musée des Maitres et Artisans du Quebec, features the glorious triptych *Rainbow Shabbat* (1992), fittingly in juxtaposition with the former church's original stained-glass windows. The narrative of *Shabbat* is an ongoing one for Chicago: it speaks to the need for compassion in this world, as well as the roles of gender with parameters that transcend definitions of what is "male" or "female" in order to allow for individual dignity. The subject seems a natural one for the maker of one of the first works of feminist art; Chicago's feminism is, truly, humanist in its values. She and her husband traveled in Europe and Eastern Europe to uncover their own Jewish history and its accompanying tragedy. Out of those travels would come the *Holocaust Project*, a deeply personal investigation into the systematic slaughter of millions of Jews by Germany's Nazi party during World War II.

Most recently, Chicago has indulged her love of "a fusion of color and surface"—a notable factor from her earliest artworks—in the form of a series of cast glass (and occasionally, bronze) heads named after her female model: *The Toby Heads*. The heads, like other body parts Chicago has cast, take on the function of a secular reliquary that crosses from decorative to sculptural with its small, tabletop scale. These are intimate, but hardly cozy, works. "I got completely absorbed in that head because of its shape, its expression, and also because I wanted to see how the different materials would mediate the image."

In between traveling for a recent spate of exhibitions, Chicago lives in an old restored railroad hotel built—by a woman—in 1907, and "renovated and restored from 1993 to 1996 by Donald with the help of a low-interest loan from the National Trust for the Preservation of Historic Sites." The lovely two-story, 7,000-square-foot Victorian brick building affords Chicago and Woodman studio and office space, where they live with their six cats, each as individual as her countless artworks. In addition, the artist is currently nearing completion of a suite of lithographs called *A Retrospective in a Box*, at Santa Fe's Landfall Press. "I call it a 'starter kit' for my collectors," Chicago explains. "My galleries say that collectors, when they see the breadth and range of my work, don't know where to start."

OPPOSITE:
 "PASADENA LIFESAVERS YELLOW SERIES #2"
 1969-1970
 SPRAYED ACRYLIC ON ACRYLIC
 60" x 60"
 PHOTO: COURTESY ACA GALLERIES, NY AND THE ARTIST



David Kapp: *Walker*, 2010, oil on linen, 70" x 60"

DAVID KAPP
 SOOJUNG PARK

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Soojung Park: *June Paige*, 2010, ink on plexiglass, 19" x 14" (Detail)

