

WHY NOT JUDY CHICAGO?

The exhibition *Why Not Judy Chicago?* is a visual narrative made up of a selection of works and documents providing an overview of the more than 50 years of production by this pioneer of feminist art. By looking at the close relationship between her work as an artist, art educator and writer, the exhibition proposes a holistic approach to her career inasmuch as it retains - with the intention of transforming - the different elements of the structure of the institution of art.

Judy Chicago belongs to the first generation of women who created a feminist art practice and theory within what - in America - is called Second Wave feminism. This generation questions any inherited knowledge as it perpetuates male domination. In this political, social, intellectual and artistic context, Chicago's career is conceived around notions of deficit and disobedience. Her outright rejection of patriarchal rules oppressing women through ideologies that praise their natural inferiority and preach that 'biology is destiny,' will be what actually makes her a radically innovating artist. Her feminist disobedience will urge her to confront the cultural deficit of an active feminine imagery as well as the deficit of narratives that situate women as positive figures in history. Chicago wove these deficits into the two main lines around which her work is structured.

Her first line of work is dedicated to the creation of a feminine and feminist iconography which represents women; revealing, denouncing, and defying the phallogentrism operating as a universal norm in contemporary visual culture. This line begins with the first works produced by the artist in the early 1960s, in which she highlights the fact that sexual difference - understood as the logic supporting the discrimination, oppression and exploitation of women - is also inscribed in visual culture. Gradually, Chicago will begin to produce an abstract imagery based on a central shape, often circular, to give way to an iconography that specifically symbolizes female genitalia. During those years when feminism was incipient in art, the task for the artist was to break the

imposed silence and represent the denied identity, but also to begin an aesthetic exploration of what it means to be a woman from personal experience, from an historical perspective, and also through philosophical reflection.

Her second line of work, which interacts with the first, focuses on history. Chicago's interest in history goes back to her student years, when she realised she was not being taught anything about women in an academic context. She then began a process of researching the history of feminist thought, in order to provide a genealogy of women in art and all areas of activity, which, especially after 1970, directly informs her work. That year she implemented her first art education project, the foundations of which were built on raising feminist awareness through consciousness raising. Although at the beginning it was offered to exclusively female groups, a second stage also included men. In the early 70s she also began a series of collaborative art projects that became landmarks in Feminist Art and gave way to a series of works showcasing the incorporation of techniques, such as china-painting, needlework or embroidery, associated with an exclusively feminine world, and which relate to her preoccupation with the production of a visual history of women. In her search for female references, Chicago not only confirmed the existence of notable women throughout all eras, but also discovered that these figures have been systematically erased by history. For this reason, a large portion of Chicago's artistic production pays tribute, in some cases even in the form of a monument, to the figures and achievements of women which an androcentric history has denied or minimised.

In a new approach to history, the most recent pieces of this exhibition challenges traditional religious texts and reinterprets popular culture, expanding these as historical archives of knowledge, evidencing, in a special way, the richness and complexity of Chicago's feminist gaze. The feminist gaze is the only 'method' of observation of human societies which does not forget that sexual difference is produced in conjunction with race/ethnicity, class and age. That gaze which Chicago

proposes at the beginning of the 21st century is intended to deepen the redefinition and application of a contemporary human rights agenda.

Echoing the feminist maxim, 'the personal is political', the title of the exhibition *Why Not Judy Chicago?* aims towards transcending the dimension of the personal to approach the issue of the (non) recognition of female, and in particular feminist, artists. Although, in its personal dimension the title of the exhibition also reverberates in the form of another question: why has one of the legendary pioneers of Feminist Art, and one of the most popular living artists in the USA, still not received recognition from hegemonic art institutions?

Why Not Judy Chicago? is a co-production by Azkuna Zentroa and CAPC (Musée d'art Contemporain de Bordeaux), with the collaboration of Penn State University, curated by Xabier Arakistain.