

ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

\$15.00



Installed on the wall opposite *hymns hubbub heard* was the painting *once were wild*, a florid garden scene populated by highly stylized ferns and flowering plants emerging from a dry-brushed purple ground littered with small sticks and flat, frontally oriented leaves. The silhouette of a black cat with dull brown eyes occupies the center of the painting, its vertical tail visually mimicking the upward gestures of the exotic vegetation around it. Outlined in glowing orange and lacking any definitive modeling, the feline functions as an anomalous cutout shape within a field of graphic inventions—resisting participation in any sort of pictorial narrative. The scene is framed on three sides by narrow, chalky-pink bands interrupted with diagonal lines. Whereas the decorative borders in *hymns hubbub heard* serve to gild the lily, they do little to enhance the already fantastical landscape in *once were wild*. Nor do the borders spatially reposition the scenery as a window-framed vista or a painting on an interior wall.

In the center of the gallery McAllister erected an architectural folly (titled *clouds sugared silence*) constructed from three curved, free-standing canvas- and burlap-covered folding panels. The outside surfaces of the panels are embellished with vertical pink and purple stripes, while the inside walls depict landscapes with horizons broken up by dangling, blossoming willow boughs and erect conifers. Each of the interior landscapes boasts hot-pink edges. The positioning of these panels also operated as a framing conceit; as the viewer circled around the outside of the structure, the bowed walls cropped views of the paintings adorning the inside of the folly. When one stands inside the volume, the gaps between the panels function as viewfinders, recontextualizing the paintings hanging on the gallery's perimeter walls. While each work in the exhibition earnestly strove to balance the visual seduction of color and pattern with spatial intelligence, McAllister's compositional formula is too dependent on framing devices that yield to a visual lexicon of ornament. Any nods to the psychological complexity of the genres invoked were ultimately outmaneuvered by the commingling of vivid pinks and purples, flattened organic motifs, and geometric patterns.

—Michelle Grabner

SAN FRANCISCO

Judy Chicago

JESSICA SILVERMAN GALLERY

"Pussies," Judy Chicago's first solo exhibition in San Francisco since her iconic installation *The Dinner Party* premiered there in 1979, presented paintings, drawings, and ceramic plates made between 1968 and 2004, many of which exemplified the feminist art practices pioneered by the artist in the 1960s and '70s. The show felt timely not only because it occurred during a time of ongoing legalized sexism in the United States, but also because it was staged in the wake of recent allegations of sexual harassment leveled against powerful men across cultural spheres (including at this magazine)—making it clear that the fight for gender equality waged by Chicago's generation is far from over. Yet the careful, quiet selection of works also offered viewers an opportunity to reassess the profound formal strength and significance of Chicago's practice—a fuller understanding of which does not necessarily preclude its politics but may rather enhance and amplify them.

Morning Fan, from the series "Fresno Fans," 1971, is a large, mesmerizing grid of pastel gradients that radiate from the painting's central horizontal and vertical axes. Although Sol LeWitt—like in its reductive structure and serial logic, *Morning Fan* nonetheless flouts the stern, austere demeanor of Minimalism with its sherbet hues and glassy, luminous surface (which the artist achieved by spraying translucent layers



Judy Chicago.
Morning Fan, 1971,
sprayed acrylic on
acrylic, 60 × 120".

of acrylic onto acrylic—a technique she learned in auto-body school). Chicago's facility with color (Lucy Lippard once called the artist a "mistress-colorist") was also evident in several meticulously rendered and exquisitely shaded Prismacolor drawings—including *Dome Drawing* and *Study for Whirling Donuts*, both 1968; *3 Star Cunts*, 1969; and *Through the Flower Darkly*, 1973—based on circular, or "central core," imagery, which Chicago increasingly saw as a cipher for female identity and sexuality.

Chicago's quest to affirm women's agency and history reached its apotheosis in *The Dinner Party*, represented here with three drawn studies (*Study for Judith Plate*, 1974–75; *Study for Untitled Test Plate*, 1974–75; and *Notes for Hildegard*, 1977) and three porcelain test plates portraying the tenth-century German poet Hrosvitha, which exemplify Chicago's signature butterfly forms resembling female genitalia. Seen in isolation from the monumental installation, these works shed light on the artist's painstaking process and reveal the refined elegance of her porcelain sculpture—especially evident in the sleek, all-white *Hrosvitha Test Plate #2*, 1975–78. While *The Dinner Party* was criticized in its day for its biological essentialism, and also (rightly) for its Eurocentrism, this show suggests that Chicago's struggle to forge a gendered visual language was more complex and ambiguous than is often acknowledged.

For example, three nearly monochromatic abstract drawings titled *Potent Pussy/Homage to Lamont 1, 2, and 3*, all 1973, consist of concentric, striated rings that appear to pulsate, alternately contracting and dilating outward. The works' titles suggest these are representations of the female orgasm, but they could just as easily depict feline eyes (Lamont was the name of Chicago's cat). The artist would return to the latter theme in a series of 1999–2004 watercolor portraits of her many feline companions (also on view) that were inspired by illuminations in medieval books of hours. Such deliberate semiotic slippage belies the accusations of literalness and naïveté sometimes leveled against Chicago's work, insisting instead on the very instability of visual, no less than linguistic, signifiers. This is something that the pussy-hat protestors of the 2017 Women's March also understood, seizing upon the unruly polysemy of words and images to tactically disrupt the language wielded to degrade and abuse women, reclaiming it as a symbol of solidarity and empowerment. Indeed, perhaps it is outside the confines of the art world that Chicago's legacy resonates most strongly today: She expressed an aspiration to do exactly that in *Journal Study for Potent Pussy*, 1973, a single sheet of paper containing two small graphite sketches surrounded by the artist's looped cursive, one line of which reads: "I want [the *Potent Pussy* drawings] to be clear & accessible to women, even those without art backgrounds."

—Gwen Allen