



Chicago, Judy (b. 1939)

by Kelly A. Wacker

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Judy Chicago, née Cohen, the ardent feminist painter and sculptor who changed her name to reflect her birthplace, was born into a Jewish family in 1939. She graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1964 and developed the first feminist art program, the Female Art Class, at Fresno State College in 1970.

In 1971, Chicago co-founded, with painter Miriam Schapiro, the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of Arts, Valencia. The program's primary project--to restore a Los Angeles mansion--culminated in the groundbreaking installation, *Womanhouse*, in 1972. Her subsequent best known projects include *The Dinner Party* (1974-1979), *Birth Project* (1980), *PowerPlay* (1983-1986), and *Holocaust Project* (1993).

By going beyond traditional painting techniques and exploring embroidery and ceramics, and by utilizing a workshop of women, Chicago has critiqued Western misogynistic beliefs about the production of art versus craft. She has also sought to create new female centered themes and imagery by developing what she calls "central core," or vaginal, imagery.

Although she does not identify as a lesbian or a bisexual, Chicago has contributed to gay and lesbian culture through her feminist critique of heterosexuality and patriarchy.

Chicago received wide recognition, praise, and criticism for *The Dinner Party*. Conceived as a method of teaching women's history through art and designed by Chicago as a triangular *Last Supper*, this multi-media piece was executed by hundreds of volunteers who wove and embroidered place settings, sculpted and painted ceramic plates, and created tiles that included the names of historical and mythological women.

The ceramic plates and settings representing women from history clearly evoke vaginal imagery and were criticized by conservatives as pornographic and by feminists as essentialist (that is, defining women's experience as purely biological). The piece, although widely accepted as a significant work of late twentieth-century art, has been offered to and refused by major art institutions and is in need of conservation.

In *Birth Project*, Chicago continued to work collaboratively with female needleworkers. The series portrays a variety of approaches to birth, from symbolic and mythological themes to physical realities, such as pain and lactation. The embroidered pieces mark a shift in Chicago's designs from the abstract to the figurative.

In her next series, *PowerPlay*, Chicago stopped working collaboratively, in part because of criticism that she was not a "real" artist. *PowerPlay* includes drawings and paintings and, instead of focusing on women, explores the construction of masculinity and how this construction has affected the world, including men themselves.

While working on *PowerPlay*, Chicago was also studying the Holocaust; and in 1993 she exhibited the *Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light*, which she had worked on with her husband, photographer

Donald Woodman.

This mixed media project, which includes tapestries, drawings, paintings, and photographs, takes a specifically feminist approach to understand the Holocaust as the result of a systemic Western, patriarchal, Christian, heterosexual, hierarchy of power that sought to destroy the "other"--Jews and homosexuals, in particular.

Two of the panels deal specifically with the persecution of homosexuals: *Pansy Crucifixion*, which subverts the derogative use of the word "pansy" and refers to the contemporary AIDS crisis; and *Lesbian Triangle*, which depicts lesbian culture before World War II, the cruelty of the concentration camps, and women comforting each other.

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