

Judy Chicago Makes Herstory: Beyond the Ladies of the Dinner Party

By [Melena Ryzik](#) [The New York Times](#) Oct. 12, 2023



The artist Judy Chicago in her studio in Belen, N.M., with her minimalist sculptures, “Moving Parts.” The anatomical shapes echo a feminist theme that still informs her practice today. Credit...Gabriela Campos for The New York Times

Judy Chicago was anxious, unusually so. For most of her six-decade career as a feminist multimedia-ist, she was out of step with the art establishment — occasionally crossing paths with the institutions that canonize cultural weight but mostly zigging off course: a 5-foot-1 dynamo in platform sneakers, doggedly [pursuing her own goals](#). Now, though, the art world is paying attention to what she has been saying: that when art by women is viewed holistically, through the arc of history, it can shake everything — us — to the core.

It is enthralling and unnerving to suddenly have her own work understood this way, she said last week, as she marched in her embroidered denim through [“Herstory,”](#) her first major New York survey — ever — at the New Museum. Spanning four floors, it includes a grounding show-within-a-show of more than 80 artists and thinkers, including Hilma af Klint, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia O’Keeffe, Virginia Woolf and Frida Kahlo, giving their pieces, and hers (twin goddess figures, a triptych collage) an imagined sisterhood. “To see it in the context that I have carried in my heart and in my mind, and it’s sustained me — that’s overwhelming, completely overwhelming,” Chicago said. She never thought she would live to see it; most pioneering women artists don’t.

At 84, [Chicago is busier](#), and more robustly in demand, than ever: Besides the New Museum exhibition, which opened Thursday, she will have her first major London solo, at the influential [Serpentine gallery](#), next summer. The blue chip interest is driven not only by her willingness to adapt to new platforms, like fashion, but by the fact that her foundational obsessions — gender equity and power dynamics, women’s bodies — are yet again in the cross hairs.



“City of Ladies,” a show within a show, puts Chicago’s bronze female figures, banners and triptych collage alongside a sisterhood of more than 80 inspirations, including Florine Stettheimer, Leonora Carrington and Christine de Pisan. Credit...Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Clark Hodgins for The New York Times

Chicago “has built, if you will, the House of American Art, has rebuilt it and reshaped it,” said Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of the New Museum. “You think, oh, this is an artist who is so great, deserves that celebration, she led us in a better place. But then you realize that building she built gets perennially dismantled.”

If she is disillusioned or worn out by this constant churn, it doesn’t show — she may be fueled by it. Chicago and her husband, [Donald Woodman](#), a photographer, live between Albuquerque and tiny Belen, N.M., where she maintains a rigorous studio practice. She’s in the spare, cream-colored space six hours a day, reprising past ideas and perfecting new techniques in high-pressure substances like glass. “Glass seemed to me to be such an incredible metaphor for the human condition — strong and vulnerable,” she told me.

The top floor of the New Museum houses Chicago’s largest interactive digital piece, [a “quilt” of international responses](#) to the 11 questions she posed in a series of embroidered banners, including “What If Women Ruled the World?” Chicago has long positioned herself in the direct-communication sphere of social activists. “She was always aware that she needed to speak to a larger audience because the narrow audience or professional one

wasn't even listening to her," Gioni said. "If she had stuck to the artwork, she would have not found her audience and probably not survived." From her earliest days, Chicago's work communicated through vibrant colors, anatomical and biomorphic shapes, enormous scale, and, for the last few decades, through words, often in her own neat, good-girl cursive.

As "Herstory" lays out, she has, with hardly any fanfare, been part of every major artistic movement since the 1960s: minimalism, land art, conceptual and performance art, identity exploration and environmental justice. She accumulated new skills, apprenticing as a pyrotechnician for her "Atmospheres" series (1968 -1974), sending plumes of pigmented smoke and flares into the ether — staking a claim on space.



"Immolation," 1972. Chicago studied pyrotechnics to make the works. Credit...Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In every shift, her imagery was dismissed as emotional (or sexual) provocation, her color palette “too feminine” — until eventually she unapologetically embraced the gendered reputation. Even as she hewed to formalist techniques in increasingly unforgiving mediums, like bronze and kiln-fired glass, her work shouted: yes, I create — I see! — like a lady.

All of this culminated in — and to her sometime chagrin, has largely been dwarfed by — [“The Dinner Party,”](#) her monumental installation that sets a place at the table for generations of overlooked women artists. Permanently ensconced at [the Brooklyn Museum](#) since 2007, it’s still one of the most popular exhibits, attracting over 100,000 visitors in the last year, a spokeswoman said. (Gioni did not attempt to beckon it across the river; it is, Woodman joked, a Judy Chicago subway series.)

To represent the constellation of women’s work in “Herstory,” there is “City of Ladies,” the fourth-floor installation of female and genderqueer artists, performers and writers. It is a far-flung and rare grouping, culled partly from private collectors and spanning continents and centuries, starting with [Hildegard von Bingen](#), the 12th-century sainted German mystic, leader [and composer](#). No living artists were included, a decision Gioni — who conceived “Herstory” with Chicago, and with curators Gary Carrion-Murayari, Margot Norton and Madeline Weisburg — described as equal parts practical and political. “The moment you involve living artists, any exclusion would have become much more meaningful,” he said.

For Chicago to be the only working artist represented among the masters is perhaps audacious — but then, so is her whole career. As she put it: “Contemporary art has not stood the test of time yet — except me, because I’ve been here so long.”

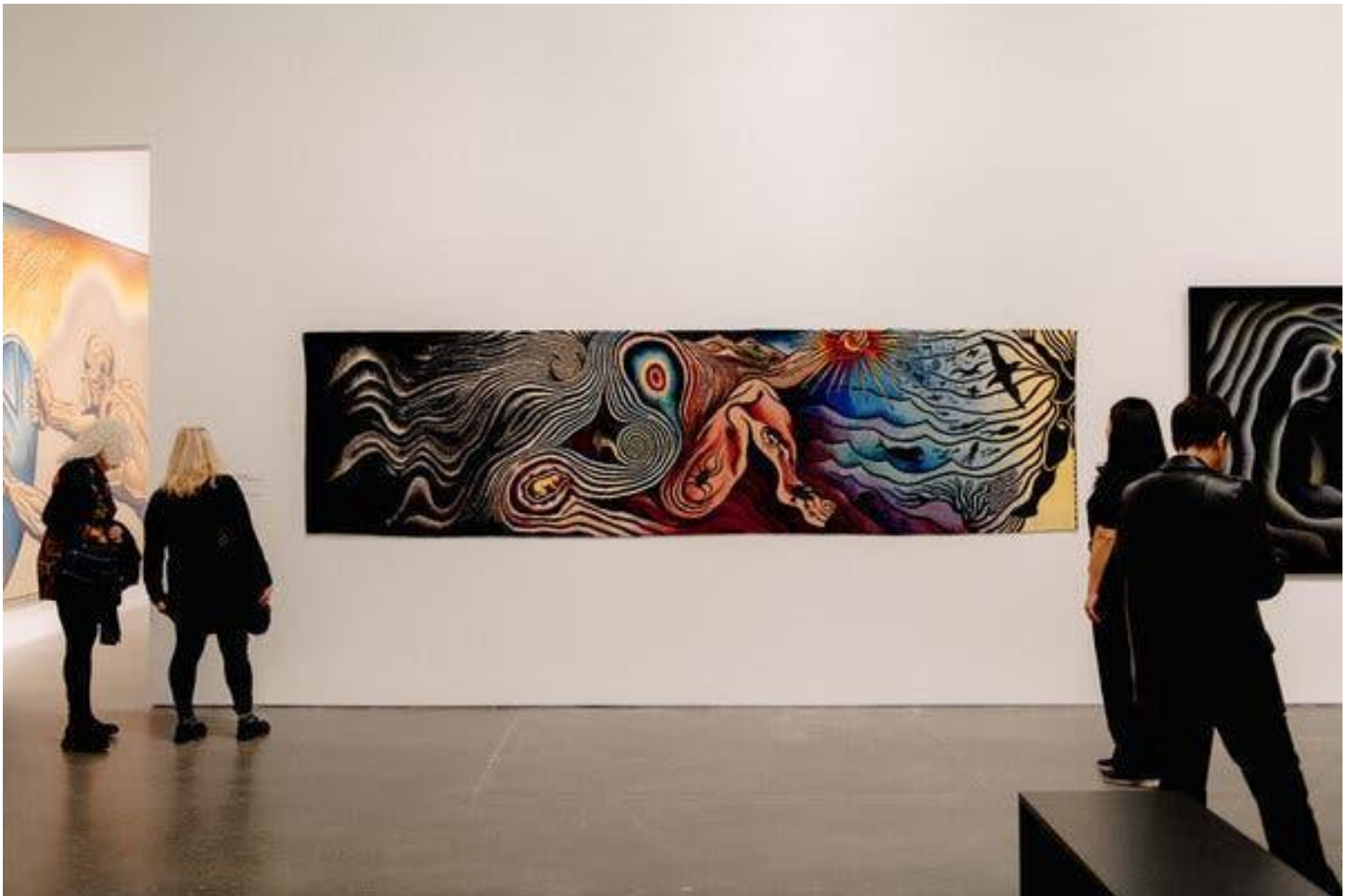


Chicago’s “Driving the World to Destruction,” 1985, at the New Museum. Inspired by Renaissance works, the exaggeratedly muscular figure upends the tradition of the heroic male nude. Credit...Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Clark Hodgin for The New York Times

And in the museum's billing, "City of Ladies" is a catalog of her inspirations, an "introspective" rather than a retrospective. It builds on her decades of research into historical predecessors that helped her feel a sense of community, when compatriots were scarce, and the path she opened for other makers who work in ceramics, china painting ("The Dinner Party") or needlework ("Birth Project") to be considered as more than merely decorative.

Long before major artists acknowledged their assistants or fabricators, Chicago had openly assembled her creative life around collaboration: she made precisely zero of the stitches in her trademark needlework. They are the painstaking work of volunteer artisans like Jacquelyn Moore Alexander, a quilter, stitcher and appliqué expert who started with Chicago around 1980, when she answered an ad in a decorating magazine. "The sample she sent was of a fetus in a uterus — we had to replicate that," she recalled. "It was very cleverly drawn; it had curves and points. She was looking for precision."

The stitchers did piecework solo and assembled them in Belen for critiques. Moore Alexander, 85, saw herself as a "transitionalist," a link between traditional and contemporary notions of womanhood. She quilted the 11-foot-long black-and-white "Earth Birth," which gave a birthing body undulating, heroic energy. "It lived on my kitchen table for a year," she said, covered in a sheet that no one could touch, annoying her family. But when her daughter saw it finished, hanging in a museum, "she started to cry," Moore Alexander recalled. "She saw it as art. My most cherished experience."



"The Creation," 1984, from Chicago's "Birth Project" series, is an Aubusson-style tapestry with weaving by Audrey Cowan. She collaborated with more than 150 needleworkers during the project. Credit...Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Clark Hodgin for The New York Times

In projects like the 1972 installation [“Womanhouse”](#) — where Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and other young artists restored a falling-to-pieces Hollywood mansion as workshop and performance space — she also helped develop a framework for female-centered education and engagement. “When you think of her world, she’s at least 20 years ahead of the thinking in so many ways,” said [Karen Keifer-Boyd](#), professor of art education and women’s gender, and sexuality studies at Penn State, which houses [Chicago’s ever-expanding teaching archives](#). “The notion is, it’s generative — it grows by its use,” Keifer-Boyd said of the collection.

“Womanhouse” and “The Dinner Party” are still minting new fans, like Maria Grazia Chiuri, the [slyly radical creative director of Dior](#) with whom Chicago has collaborated since 2020. The embroidered “What If Women Ruled the World?” banners were created for [one of their fashion shows](#), in what turned out to be an enduring partnership. (Dior is a sponsor of the New Museum exhibition.) “Judy furthered my understanding of how urgent and how relevant our commitment to promoting and communicating feminism is in all industries, especially in fashion,” Chiuri wrote in an email. “She leads by example and she has taught us the importance of coherence, of resistance, of commitment.”

Chicago is still quick to rile. Her early work was revolutionary, partly because it upset rigid beliefs about men and women; she wanted to upend that thinking. Now that our understanding of gender is vastly expanded — a spectrum, not a binary — how, I asked her, could her artistic message fit in? She fired up immediately. “We also have a worldwide pushback against all the changes that have grown out of our new understanding,” she said. “It is incredibly powerful, and the outcome is unknown.” There was still room — there was still need — for art that challenged every norm. “If my work can contribute to the awakening,” she said, “then it’s doing its job.”



From left, “Birth Hood,” 1965/2011; “Flight Hood,” 1965/2011; “Car Hood,” 1964, New Museum. Chicago has been fascinated by car culture, its fusion of color and surface, which became a hallmark of her work. The image

at right is of a butterfly. Credit...Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Clark Hodgin for The New York Times

Born Judith Cohen, she has played with self-image since she rechristened herself Judy Chicago — after her hometown — in 1970, to eschew patriarchal influence. (Her earliest work is credited to Judy Gerowitz, a married name.) She dressed and acted macho when she was trying to fit into the crew of artist dudes she started out with in California — “even when I almost lost a breast in the table saw, I wouldn’t ask for help,” she wrote in her 2021 autobiography, “The Flowering.”

Her most profound technical learning came after she earned her M.F.A. at the University of California in Los Angeles, when she enrolled in auto body school, to learn how to spray paint. Fusing color and surface, the symmetrical sprayed car hoods she made in that moment are [organic, personal and flowery](#) — a flounce atop the macho.

Visiting her in Belen, an industrial blip that’s a rail switching hub, her vibe reminded me of a veteran post-punk rocker: leather jacket, cobalt blue glasses, lipstick the color of a well-enjoyed cabernet, and nail polish that matches her wavy hair (lately it’s a glittery gold). Woodman, her husband of nearly 38 years, coordinates his manicure to his rainbow-swirl glasses — they go to the salon together.



Chicago with her piece “Grand Bronze Head with Golden Tongue” in her gallery and studio in Belen, N.M. Credit...Gabriela Campos for The New York Times

He is a frequent collaborator with his wife, most notably on “Holocaust Project,” which started in 1985 out of interest in their shared Jewish heritage, and merges his photography with her painting and stained glass. It took them eight years of research and prototyping, during which they never considered its marketability. “I said,

‘Honey, do you realize neither of us ever said, once in all those eight years, I wonder if anybody will ever buy this work?’” Chicago recalled. (It was exhibited at Jewish and secular regional museums; during a preview for “Herstory” on Tuesday, someone wept in front of it.)

Theirs is a #couplesgoals romance. As they recounted to me, tag-teaming the story over chips and queso at dinner, they married three months after an encounter at a Santa Fe festival. “We ignited,” Chicago said. They remain mutually captivated renegades. (Asked what attracted him to New Mexico, Woodman, 78, said: “It’s where the outlaws ended up.”)

Neither had children. Woodman trained as an architect — it was at his urging, and with his handiwork, that they now have a growing network of properties in New Mexico, including [Through the Flower](#), a nonprofit education center that Chicago started in the aftermath of “The Dinner Party.”

During the pandemic, they reprised her smoke blasts around their garden — their local fire chief “became an art critic after about the second one,” Chicago said, laughing; a clarion peal that sounds like someone who knows how to have fun. She has fairly new gallerists, in [Jessica Silverman](#) and [Jeffrey Deitch](#), and the Whitney Museum of American Art purchased its first Chicago work, [“Trinity,” a minimalist sculpture](#), just last year. The “Atmospheres” series had already been selling out with collectors.



“Garden Smoke,” 2020. During the pandemic, Chicago and her husband, Donald Woodman, reprised her smoke blasts around their garden. Credit...Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Clark Hodgin for The New York Times

The home in Belen, a former railroad boardinghouse, is decorated with her portraits, on paper and in ceramics, of the couple’s many cats. In her studio, beneath a color spectrum annotated in her script — “carmine lustre,” “fir green” — she puzzles out how to tackle intense subjects like “The End,” a series on mortality she made

after a health scare a few years ago. The images are small, painted on black glass in luxe colors, purposefully made in her own hand. She wanted them to be intimate and pretty. “The function of beauty is to help us look at subjects that otherwise would be unbearable,” she said.

For the last two months, she has been holed up, alone, in her Albuquerque home, working on a project for “Revelations,” next year’s Serpentine gallery exhibition. “Just me in my drawing studio and my colored pencils — drawing, drawing, drawing,” she said. “I’ve totally loved it.”

Chicago has been studying art since she was five, and documented every work she made, on index cards and slides, since the ’60s; they are neatly organized in a warehouse in Belen. After she discovered “the erasure of women’s cultural heritage,” she made a vow: “It’s not going to happen to me, if I can help it.”

Visibility; recognition; context; pizzazz: they matter. At the opening for “Herstory,” she was resplendent in a Dior suit and pink and purple hair, painted to match her early palette. The scene was frenzied. But after all her worry, she glided through, smoothly articulating, in the “City of Ladies” gallery, about the value of women getting fully seen. I complimented her on her calm. “What I learned in auto body school,” she said, gleefully. “Presentation is all.”