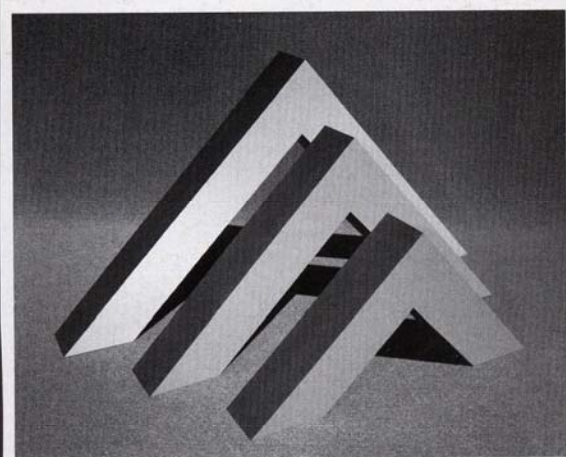


# ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2004

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



Judy Chicago, *Trinity*, 1965, canvas, plywood, and sprayed acrylic, 5' 4" x 10' 7" x 5'.

BEST OF 2004

SANTA FE, NM

## JUDY CHICAGO

LEWALLEN CONTEMPORARY

At the very beginning of her career, Judy Chicago married Minimalism's repetition

compulsion with an illusionistic approach to material and color. Considering her one-note reputation based on her feminist landmark, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79, this exhibit, which assembled about sixty-one of Chicago's earlier paintings, drawings, and sculptures, presented viewers with a girls-too revue of Minimalism and a more comprehensive look at an artist most often seen as the high priestess of feminist kitsch.

The inclusion of twenty-five works on paper revealed the scope of Chicago's formal experimentation. Using Prismacolor or sprayed acrylic, she formed domes, doughnuts, and lattices in grids or alone on the page. Chicago extended her concern with two-dimensional surface into three-dimensional space when she translated the drawn domes into hemispheres upended on mirrored glass tables. The metallic luster of these acrylic forms suggests that they might even have the power to communicate with aliens and recalls the supernaturally flawless surfaces of Chicago's peer, John McCracken.

"Starcunts," 1968, marks one of the artist's first uses of the C-word in titles describing forms of the kind that, for male Minimalists, were genderless in both name and appearance. *Five Click Cunts*, 1969, drawings in Prismacolor on muslin, resemble daisy-wheel specula or labial viewfinders, the bodily associations of which are emphasized by their title's verbal cue. These dilated apertures present a telescopic view through the works' vacant centers, and suggest individual worlds within a vast cosmic body.

Many of these works evoke Robert Irwin's formal experiments with light and shadow-play, as manifest in his edgeless convex discs of 1965 to 1969. Yet while Irwin's distilled light effects established

a relationship between the convex disc, whose edges appeared to dissolve, and the wall, Chicago, in her flat panels, carefully teases color into smooth pastel grids that appear to fan out into ruffled edges.

This look at Chicago's early work finds the artist apparently setting the stage for *The Dinner Party*, which celebrated handwork in the context of high art. Chicago's bold move into the lavish ceramics and textiles that characterized her own take on Finish Fetish was signposted by her earlier use of industrial processes. In this exhibition, one found an aggressive pursuit of intense color and fine surfaces combined with a drive to feminize those associations. The result looks like an auto-body shop remade with diaphragms and cervical caps.

The electric *Pasadena Lifesavers Blue Series #1*, 1969–70, is one of a series of fifteen paintings that each feature four circular forms in one of the primary colors. It hung in a room near *Rainbow Pickett*, 1965/2004, a sculpture in painted canvas over plywood that riffs on Robert Morris's "L-Beams," 1965–67. But each of Chicago's pastel beams imposes a self-consciously feminine overtone onto the straight-ahead form. Elsewhere, a plasma screen TV played videos of thirteen of the "Atmospheres," performances that Chicago staged in California public parks using enough colored smoke, roman candles and gem-hued pyrotechnics to warm Dennis Oppenheim's fire-loving heart. If this exhibition revealed, in retrospect, Chicago's uneasy relationship to Minimalism, it also highlighted the fact that her full range—as a woman artist who strove at once to be among male peers and remain distinct from them—has been too often overlooked.

—Ellen Berkovitch