

A New Mexico artist devotes her life to shattering assumptions and stereotypes

Chicago at work on *DoubleHead*, a bronze casting from "Powerplay," at Shidoni Foundry, Tesuque, New Mexico, 1986.

TEXT BY WESLEY PULKKA PHOTOGRAPHS BY DONALD WOODMAN

Judy Chicago looks at least a decade younger than her 66 years, and her warm, open demeanor makes her seem more like a friendly neighbor than someone who has changed the world. An artist, author, educator, feminist, and iconoclast, Chicago launched her breathtaking career in Los Angeles during the early 1970s as a minimalist sculptor. At that time, she met enormous resistance from the male-dominated art establishment, and although critics and other artists recognized her extraordinary talent, Chicago hit the glass ceiling for women artists, who were expected to be supporters of their male counterparts but never their equals or superiors. Her response was to work harder, pushing her art into new areas of exploration, showing it in alternative venues, and helping to establish art programs for women at the university level. Though frustrated at the time, she is philosophical as she looks back on that period.

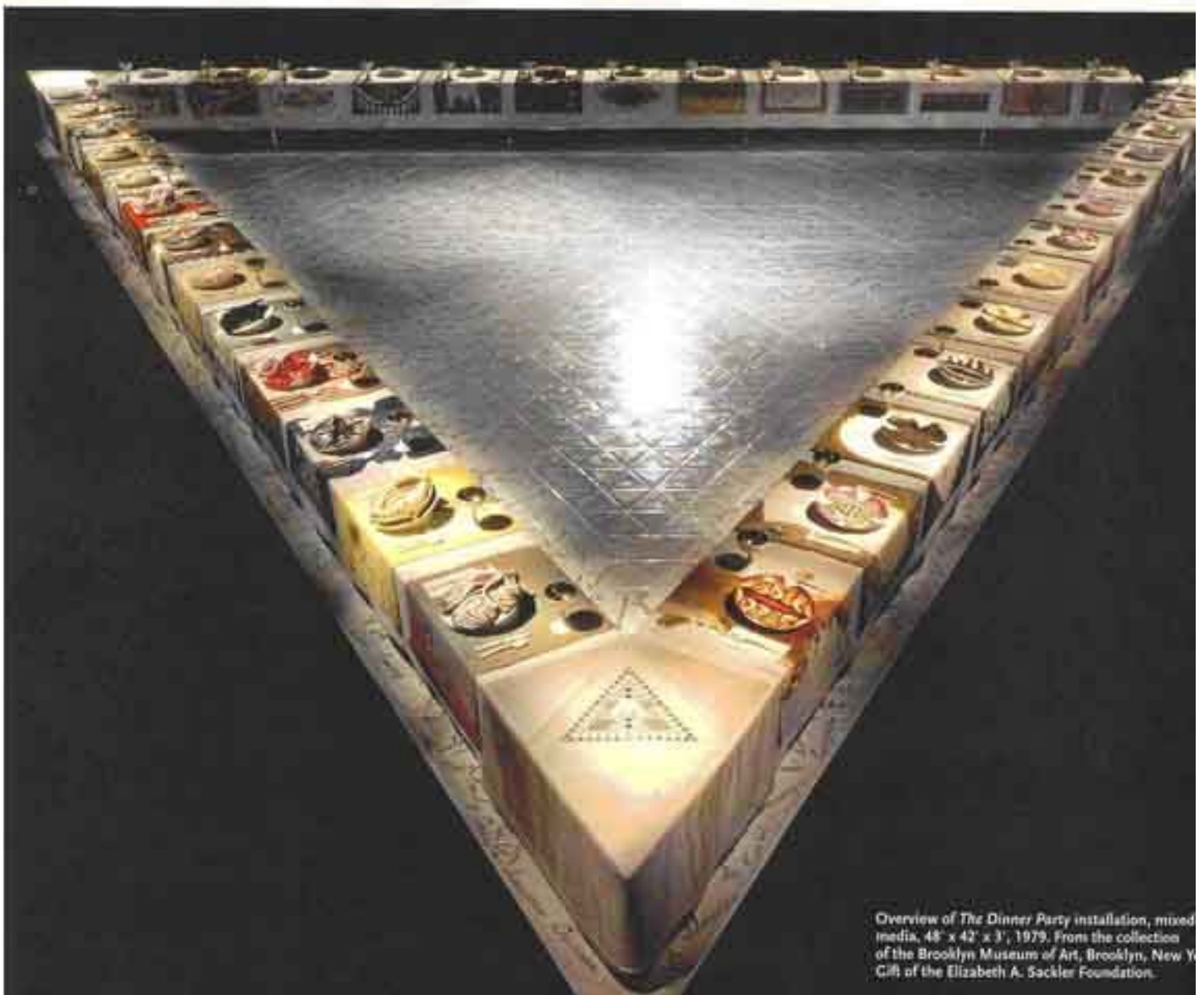
"I've always been dedicated to excellence, so I took courses at an auto-body school to learn spray painting," Chicago says. "And though I loved the minimalist aesthetic, my other passions are content and relevancy. As I developed my personal expression, I included minimalist elements but gave them a story line." She also changed her name, dropping both her maiden name of Cohen and her married name of

Gerowitz to become Judy Chicago. The artist says she borrowed the name-change concept from the Black Power movement, whose members, like Muhammad Ali, adopted new monikers to rid themselves of slave identities. "I knew I had the right to my own identity and, thanks to the support expressed by my parents, who made it possible for me to start my art training at age five, I knew that I had a right to be recognized for my talent. My name change was a step toward self-realization," Chicago says.

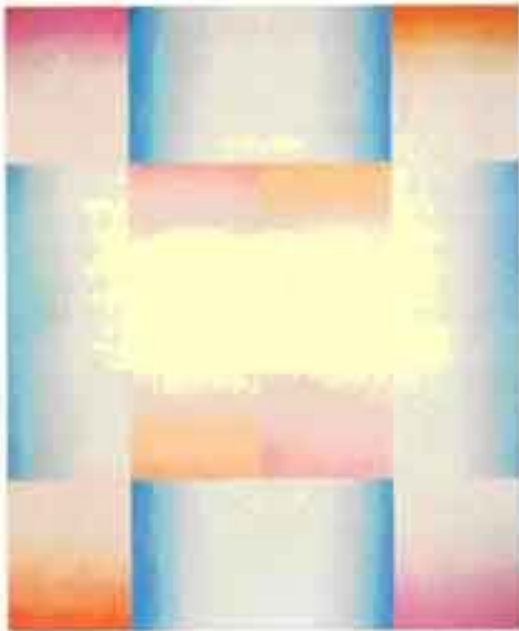
As a gesture of defiance against male oppression, Chicago enlisted Los Angeles gallery owner Jack Glenn to help her create a pugnacious poster of herself wearing boxing gloves and shorts, a pair of men's athletic boots, and a custom-made sweatshirt emblazoned with her new name. The picture was taken in the same boxing ring used by Ali during training sessions. "Jack and I made the poster as a lark to counteract the mucho nature of the L.A. art scene, never imagining that *Artforum* would run it on a full page and turn our picture

into an international emblem," Chicago recalls. The poster also became a symbol of personal toughness that masked the pain that she had endured in her life: As a child she lost her father to complications following surgery, and her first husband, Jerry Gerowitz, died in an automobile accident.

Chicago's self-realization found its first major artistic expression in *The Dinner Party*: an installation celebrating women in history as well as feminine materials, processes, and talents. The triangular work, measuring 48 feet on a side, incorporates symbols of female sexual organs as well as textiles, embroidery, pottery, and paintings contributed by more than 400 female artists. It includes 39 place settings that celebrate the achievements of historic women and goddesses; every setting features an embroidered tablecloth, a ceramic chalice, and a dinner plate depicting milestones in each celebrant's life or story. The materials and techniques are traditionally associated with quotidian "women's work." Begun in 1974, *The Dinner Party*



Overview of *The Dinner Party* installation, mixed media, 48' x 42' x 3', 1979. From the collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York. Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation.



Big Blue Pink from "Flesh Gardens" series, sprayed acrylic lacquer on acrylic, 8' x 8', 1971. Courtesy of LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe.



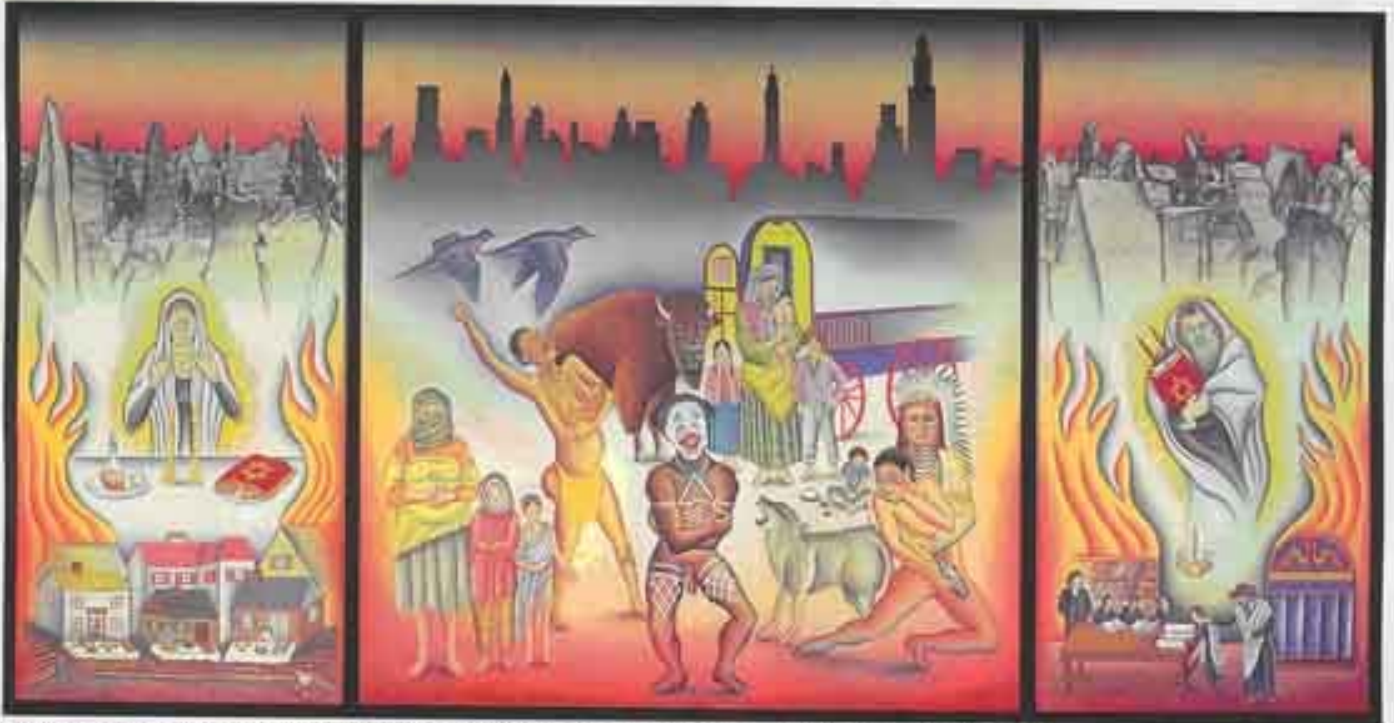
"Jack and I made the poster as a lark to counteract the macho nature of the L.A. art scene, never imagining that Artforum would run it on a full page and turn our picture into an international emblem," Chicago recalls.



Rainbow Flicker, latex paint on canvas and covered plywood, 10'6" x 9'2", 1965/2004 (left); Trinity, canvas, plywood, and sprayed lacquer, 60" x 128" x 63", 1965. Both from the exhibition "A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968," at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, March 2004.



The Creation, modified Aubusson tapestry, 42" x 14", 1984. Weaving by Audrey Cowan. From the collection of Bob and Audrey Cowan, Santa Monica, California.



Treblická/Genocide, sprayed acrylic, oil, and photography on photo linen, 42" x 88", 1988. Courtesy of LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe.



The Fall, modified Aubusson tapestry, 54" x 18", 1995. Weaving by Audrey Cowan. Courtesy of LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe.

ARTIST'S STUDIO



Chicago in her studio preparing cast-glass pieces for painting, 2006 (top). Study for *Flaming Fist*, watercolor, 12" x 9", 2006, with *Cruel Flaming Fist*, cast glass, 22" x 8" x 8", 2006. Cast, etched, and painted glass, 8" x 8" x 5". Firing and etching by Dobbins Studio. Courtesy of LewAllen Contemporary.



View from atop the central staircase (left) of the Belen Hotel (right), built in 1907, which houses the home and studios of Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman.

was first shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979 and will reopen in 2007 as part of the permanent collection at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Throughout her career as both an artist and a university teacher, Chicago has confronted male-dominated subject matter like the female nude and depictions of historic events. Her solo exhibitions and community-oriented art projects that challenge the accepted view span four decades. Additional highlights are *The Birth Project*, 1980–1985; *The Holocaust Project*, 1985–1993; *The International Chilling Bee*, 1980–1996; and *Revolutions: A Stitch in Time*, 1994–2000. All of her major projects became traveling exhibitions that achieved national stature.

"The name Judy Chicago has become synonymous with the feminist art movement," says Laura Addison, contemporary art curator at New Mexico's Museum of Fine Arts. "Though she's best known for *The Dinner Party*, her significance extends far beyond one project. She's a provocateur who pushes whatever topic she takes on to its limits, giving it epic import. She has tackled biblical themes, birth and motherhood, women's work, the Holocaust—always working with ideas much larger than herself or any given viewer. She denies the fallibility of memory by writing people into their rightful place in history." Addison also cites Chicago's lasting impact on male-dominated Minimalism, noting that her beautifully crafted minimalist work, like *Rainbow Picket*, is now being recognized more than 30 years after the works were completed.

"Judy Chicago is magnificent," concurs Ken Marvel, co-owner of LewAllen Contemporary in Santa Fe. "She quietly works through her art to improve the status of women in our society. Judy has remained resolute about the seriousness of her work and, despite resistance from others and debates in the United States Congress over *The Dinner Party*, for goodness' sake, she remains one of the most cheerful, intelligent, highly skilled, and positive people I've known." (Congress became involved with *The Dinner Party* when several arts institutions sought public funding to display the installation.)

Chicago says she was seduced by New Mexico during a series of short trips to Santa Fe to see friends. The visits became longer until she finally settled here. Chicago makes her home—the first she's ever owned—in Belen with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman, and their six cats. Formerly the Belen Hotel, the property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and exudes Victorian grace.

"After finishing *The Holocaust Project*, we were exhausted and in debt," recalls Chicago. "There was no rational way for us to get this property, but we fell in love with it while we were looking for a place close to the airport." She credits Woodman, who once built a studio and residence for Agnes Martin, with the beautiful renovation that restored the hotel to its turn-of-the-century flavor. Her spacious studio occupies a portion of the ground floor that has variously served as a restaurant, a bar, a meat market, and a sitting room for the town's schoolteachers. Upstairs is her drawing studio.

Chicago is currently working on a series of fused-, cast-, and painted-glass sculptures dedicated to the inner structure of the human figure. Her work is related to so-called shamanic x-ray drawings and other sources. She is working with glass experts in Prague, in the Czech Republic; glass etchers Norm and Ruth Dobbins in Santa Fe; and the staff at Pilchuck Glass Studios in Washington State. Her new work is a clear-eyed expression of the state of our world—both troubled and filled with hope. Other major projects in progress include the expansion and development of Through the Flower Foundation, Chicago's private nonprofit organization dedicated to women in the arts. Her hotel and the property across the street will become a permanent educational center and will feature exhibitions of feminist art, including the artist's own.

Chicago was recognized recently in *Reform Judaism* magazine as one of eight women who have changed the world, alongside Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and co-founder of the National Organization for Women. Chicago also is included in the seventh edition of *A Basic History of Western Art*, a university textbook that has traditionally excluded women artists.

"I believe most of the controversy about Judy's work is the result of her being a strong woman artist," says Woodman. "She does what she believes in and wants to have a positive influence on our messy world. She doesn't seek notoriety."

"I am a content-driven artist," explains Chicago, who is known for her single-minded thoroughness and devotion to detail. "When I take on a project, I need to know everything about the materials and techniques, and the history of the subject, and I find some way to get it done even if I have to invent one." ♦

Judy Chicago is represented by LewAllen Contemporary in Santa Fe.