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Interview with Judy Chicago

On the occasion of her 75th birthday and a country-wide celebration of her career, the artist famous for her controversial installation *The Dinner Party* (1979) talks to us about the Los Angeles art scene of the 1960s, her lifelong love affair with spray paint, and how the process of making art continues to inspire her.

Your exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum is open now, entitled 'Chicago in LA: Judy Chicago's Early Work 1963–1974'. Can you begin by telling us about the show and how it came about?

Although I was very gratified by all the attention that *The Dinner Party* brought me, for a very long time it blocked out all the rest of my work. Pacific Standard Time [an initiative begun in 2002 by the Getty Research Institute to preserve and document post-war art in Los Angeles] began to blow open that blockage. Suddenly, there began to be interest in my work from across my career. Out of that grew 'Celebration 2014', which is this celebration of my 75th birthday all over the USA, with exhibitions and various events, and the publication of two books. And 'Chicago in LA' is part of that. In a way, I'm having a national retrospective.

What do you anticipate the revelations of the Brooklyn Museum show will be?

Probably the same thing that was revelatory to people as a result of the Pacific Standard Time shows in LA, and the three recent shows of my early work in London: people have just been completely blown away by it, because they knew nothing about all this work, about the scale or extent of it. Andrew Perchuk, the deputy director of the Getty Research Center and one of the curators of Pacific Standard Time, said to me when he was researching: 'Everywhere I look, Judy, you were there.' In an article he wrote: 'Judy Chicago was the only woman taken seriously in the LA art scene of the 1960s', and that then I was sort of erased. Now that has been completely changed.

You studied at UCLA between 1957 and 1964. Your burgeoning feminist social and artistic sensibilities are said to have clashed with the art department at UCLA, but you graduated Phi Beta Kappa and went on to complete a Master's degree in painting and sculpture. What kind of work were you producing at art college and how was it received?

One of the things I made at college was my paintings on car hoods. For a long time, I thought I'd only done one; it was shown at Rolf Nelson Gallery and bought by someone who held onto it for

almost four decades, and then sold it at auction to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Then, in preparation for Pacific Standard Time I started going through all the work that we had brought from southern California, and I discovered that I had started three other car hoods, showing the imagery that I was using at graduate school, which was very biomorphic. I never finished them because I faced so much hostility about the imagery, so I finished them for the Pacific Standard Time shows. *Bigamy Hood* and *Flight Hood* are on display now at the Nyehaus show and *Birth Hood* is in the Brooklyn Museum show.

I'm really glad I finished them because I had destroyed the paintings on which they were based. When I finished them, I looked at them and said to myself 'there was never anything wrong with this imagery'. It was just very female-centric, and because I ran into so much resistance over the imagery, I backed away from it, and my work became more minimal during the 1960s. By the end of the 1960s I was tired of not being myself and that's when I made a radical change in my iconography and set out to create a feminist art practice, or a female-centred art practice.

After graduation, you enrolled at auto-body [car painting] school. How did that experience impact on your work?

I used to hang around at Barney's Beanery with boys from the Ferus Gallery [one of the first major LA galleries]. My hanging with them was kind of conditional, because they were always putting women down and I was definitely the only woman. John Chamberlain was living in LA then, Sam Francis was around too. John always used to say: 'Well, I should really go to auto-body school and learn how to spray paint, those are the guys who can *really* paint.' He never did, but when I got out of graduate school I went to auto-body school. Me and 250 men – that was an experience! But I really learned a lot. I was not raised with a familiarity with tools and mechanical things, so this was the first time I was really exposed to the reality that, in making painting and sculpture, I was making physical objects. I developed a tremendous love for craft at that point, a love for well-made pieces, and that has really served me throughout my career. On top of that, I've sprayed everything: lacquer, fabric paint, china paint, glass paint. I've used my airbrush throughout my life and so, those two months lay the groundwork for the rest of my career, in terms of technique, colour and approach to materials.

'Finish Fetish' is a phrase that comes up in reference to your work, and to this period in Los Angeles more generally. Do you identify with this term?

The Finish Fetish School really refers to that group of guys from the Ferus Gallery. The LA art scene in the 1960s was very early, very new, and there was a lot of freedom and invention in southern California. There's a great story about a major New York critic coming to LA and being taken to the home of a collector where the Ferus boys hung out. So they were all draped around this white furniture in the sunken living room. One of the lead Ferus boys was a very macho artist called Billy Al Bengston, and the critic came in, looked at this scene, and said, 'Ah! Looks like a Delacroix!' and Billy Al turned around and said, 'Who the fuck is Delacroix?' That was the kind of attitude in LA.

A lot of the guys were interested in paint; they were surfers, and Billy Al raced motorcycles, so they were familiar with surfboard paint and car painting and motorcycle painting. I was not, but I was exposed to it when I went to auto-body school. There was also a lot of interest in new technology. I became interested in plastics, and I worked with boat builders on a piece for a big show at LACMA called 'American Sculpture of the 60s' in 1967. I was always interested in new materials and fringe materials, because new materials allow new content.

Colour seems to be a crucial aspect of your work. From where does the colour palette originate in your work?

For the Brooklyn Museum show, the curator Catherine Morris has borrowed my colour book from the Getty Research Institute, which they bought after Pacific Standard Time. In the 1960s, I did dozens and dozens of colour studies to develop a palette that conveys emotion. I was really interested in a very different approach to colour from, say, Joseph Albers whose approach is much more intellectual. I was interested in exploring how to create emotive states through colour.

Not only did my painting professors at UCLA hate my imagery, they also hated my colour. At that time the UCLA art department was dominated by an affinity for earth tones, and here I come into the department and I like cream and pink and turquoise, and they hated it! So for a while I backed-off from colour, but then I came back to it with a much more rigorous investigation of how to use it in very specific ways. That really provided the underpinning for my practice.

How important are practical making skills to you?

When I made this big radical change in my work at the end of the 1960s, when I set up the first feminist art program [at California State University, Fresno] and I set out to create a feminist art practice, I played around with performance and video. There were all these new forms that became available that weren't really prevalent when I was coming up as a young artist, with a classical training. So, for a little while I thought about moving away from painting and sculpture. But then I realised that I really love to make objects. Also, from very early on, I wanted to be part of art history, and art history is primarily composed of physical, tangible art icons.

After auto-body school, as I said, making became very important to me. I would never want to have a studio where other people make my work. It's one thing to collaborate and have assistants doing specific tasks, but the more art moves towards outsourcing and factory production, the more I'm taking it back. Now I work entirely by myself again. And that's because the process of making art, for me, allows for discovery, and that's what art is about. As long as one is alive, there are always discoveries to be made, about life, and the meaning of life – and it's those discoveries that inspire me.

How do you feel about being most frequently described as a feminist artist, as opposed to an artist?

Well, Jackson Pollock is always referred to as an abstract expressionist and Donald Judd is often referred to as a minimalist. There was no term 'feminist art' until the 1970s and I helped create that term. I think the reason it's flawed – which it is – is because of the attitudes towards feminism in general and the idea that somehow feminism, or feminist art, isn't every bit as important as abstract expressionism or minimalism. I'm proud of my history as a feminist. I think feminist history should be incorporated into all courses on the history of western civilisation because feminism changed the face of the world.

You now live in New Mexico. Has that had an impact on your work?

I never expected to end up in New Mexico, but now I've lived here for 30 years – longer than I lived in LA. The upcoming show at the New Mexico Museum of Art ['Local Colour: Judy Chicago in New Mexico 1984–2014' 6 June–7 September] looks at the way in which New Mexico impacted on my work. I think that being in the west, and the southwest in particular, definitely affected my work. In New Mexico, there are only 2 million people in the entire state, and there are big broad vistas, lots of empty space and huge skies. There's still the kind of cheap space that used to be available in LA when I was younger. My husband and I live in a restored railroad hotel in 7,000 square feet – it's a beautiful old Victorian building. Having space and quiet, and the quality of light here, have all definitely allowed me to pursue my own vision as an artist. I have pursued a lot of subject matter that's kind of outside the traditional focus of art, I've worked with a lot of materials that are outside the traditional media of art, and the openness that was in LA when I was young, is here in New Mexico too.

How does it feel to be so celebrated on your 75th birthday?

My friends say, 'Oh it's so wonderful that Judy's still with us so we don't have to stand around and say, oh Judy would've loved this if she'd lived long enough!' So it's fantastic – and tiring, and confusing, because some of the same work that was vilified and rejected is now being celebrated. As I've said recently, I put my faith in art history and in the end art history seems to be coming through for me. I feel very, very fortunate; I've been able to work, in my studio, uninterrupted for five decades. I've lived with nothing, I never had a house of my own until I was 60, I've never had any security – but I didn't care because I didn't become an artist to make a lot of money, I became an artist because I had a lot to say, and I had a passionate belief in the power of art.