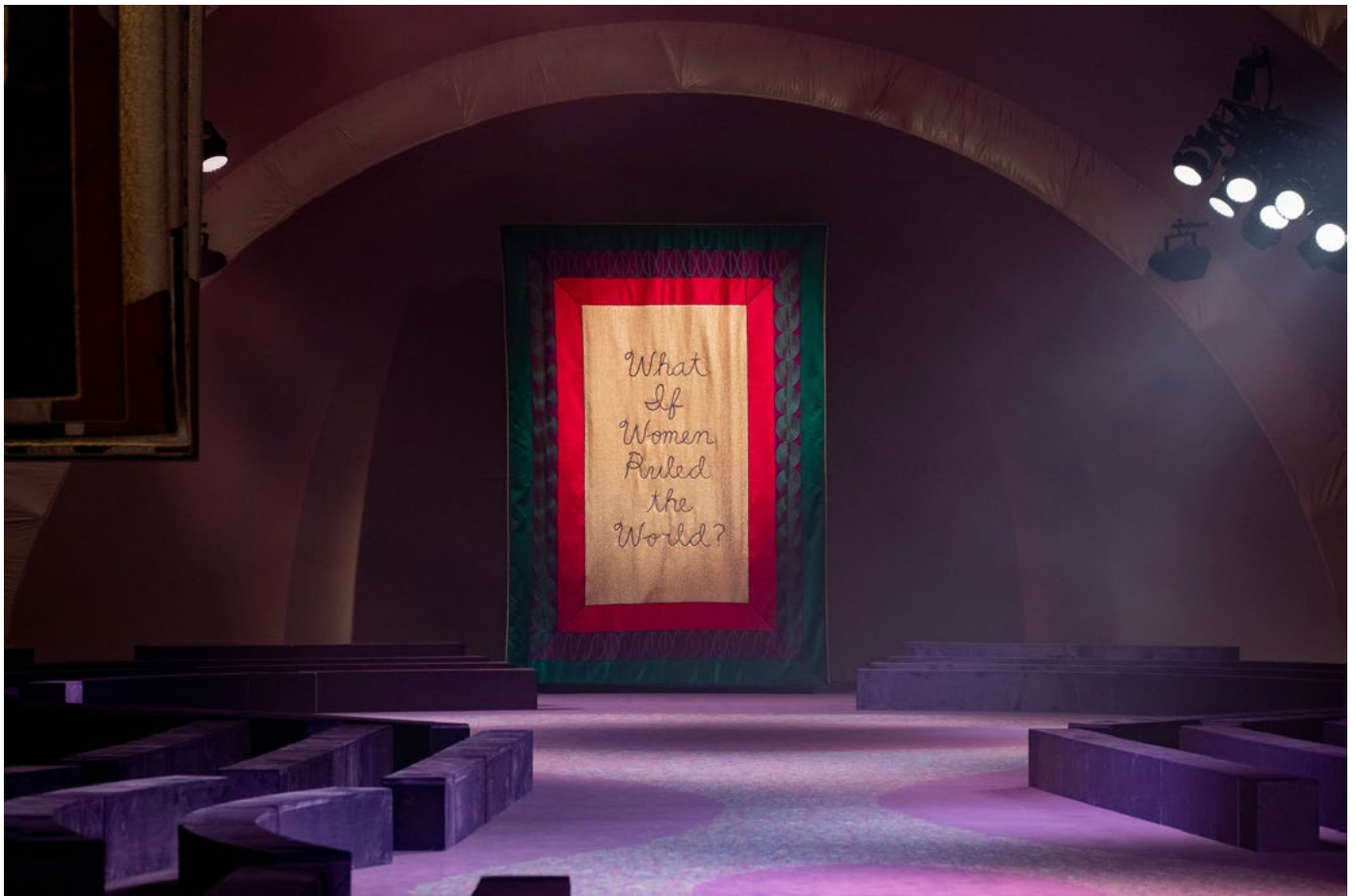


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Inside Judy Chicago's Monumental Goddess Sculpture for Dior
Alice Cavanagh
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The pioneering artist discusses "The Female Divine," the vast immersive work she created for the French house's latest couture show.

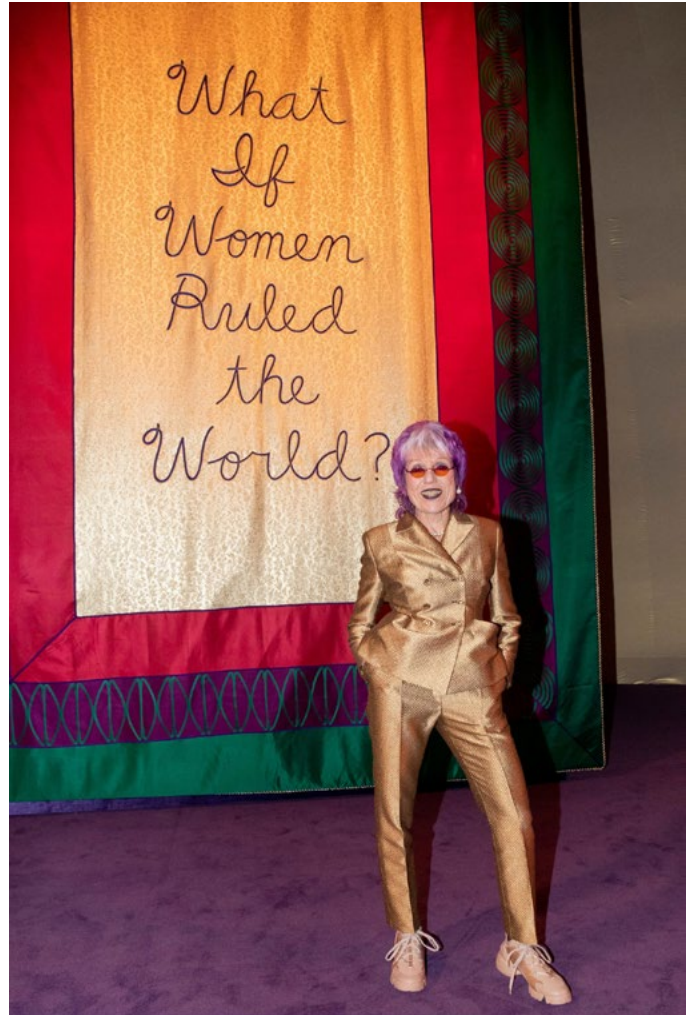


The set at the Christian Dior spring 2020 haute couture show in Paris today, which included 21 embroidered banners by the American artist Judy Chicago. Kevin Tachman

At Christian Dior's spring 2020 haute couture show in Paris today, attendees were ushered inside an enormous womblike chamber, with a curved mauve ceiling and soft lilac carpeting. The space was part of a 225-foot-long and 45-foot-high inflatable anthropomorphic sculpture, installed in the gardens of the Musée Rodin, by the pioneering American artist Judy Chicago. The 80-year-old first designed the structure, which represents a goddess figure with round feminine forms, in the late 1970s, though it was never realized in three dimensions. "I'm just glad I've lived long enough to see it," she said before the show, dressed in a custom gold Dior suit, her hair dyed a regal purple.



The entrance to Chicago's inflatable sculpture in the gardens of the Musée Rodin. Kevin Tachman



Chicago, in front of one of her banners inside the show space. Kevin Tachman

The work, titled “The Female Divine,” served as the show venue and also contained 21 vividly colored, hand-appliquéd and embroidered velvet banners that lined the runway. Each was stitched with a query that related to the work’s driving proposition, which was written across a central banner: “What If Women Ruled the World?” The prompts ranged from the material — “Would Buildings Resemble Wombs?” — to the political and social: “Would God Be Female?” and “Would There Be Violence?” They were all questions that have been present in Chicago’s work since she began her practice in the 1960s. “I’m 40 years past ‘The Dinner Party,’” she says of her monumental 1974-79 work, a 48-foot-wide ceremonial banquet scene that celebrates 39 female icons, from the ancient poet Sappho to the artist Georgia O’Keeffe, and was produced in collaboration with a cohort of textile and ceramic artisans. “But the issue of changing attitudes toward women and imagining ‘the female divine’ is something that hasn’t happened yet, has it?”

“These are big questions,” Maria Grazia Chiuri, Dior’s creative director, said backstage after the show in reference to Chicago’s banners. “But women have a different relationship with power; we have more of a community attitude. I saw this with Judy’s work ‘The Dinner Party,’ which she realized with many women around the world.” The tapestries, which are almost 10 feet tall and 7 feet wide, illuminated this in a spectacular fashion: Each of them was handmade by female



Chicago, in front of one of her banners inside the show space. Kevin Tachman

students from the Chanakya School of Craft, a nonprofit organization based in Mumbai, India, that teaches women artisanal techniques that were traditionally practiced by men. "I spent a lot of time working on 'The Dinner Party,' trying to infuse women and women's history with a sense of the sacred and the valuable, because there are all these things associated with women that have been devalued: our bodies, our crafts, our history," said Chicago. "I tried to bring the same thing to bear on this work."

Through collaborations with prominent female artists — the American photographer Cindy Sherman and the British-born Surrealist artist Penny Slinger have both previously made work for Dior — Chiuri is on a mission to explore a connection between feminist thought and fashion. But when Chicago and Chiuri first discussed this project, last July at Dior's fall 2019 haute couture show, the artist knew she wanted to do something very specific. "I was sitting in the show and I was thinking, 'Can art have any real place here, other than just as a background?' There have been a lot of artists who have worked with fashion brands, but they have largely been commercial ventures," she said, pausing to look at the work around her, "We made art." Asked whether she had answers to any of the questions posed on banners, she replied with a laugh, "I'm an artist. It's my job to create."