

# Women, Art and the Houses They Built

By **Alix Strauss**

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By the late '60s, Judy Chicago had just turned 30 and was already a fearless and unapologetic artist teaching at California State University at Fresno. There she created a pioneering, yearlong women's art program. In 1971 she took a job teaching art at the California Institute of the Arts, or CalArts. Her groundbreaking curriculum went with her.

A year later, Womanhouse, an innovative and radical illustration of female expression, was up and running. The exhibit was created by Ms. Chicago and another artist and CalArts educator, Miriam Schapiro, who died in 2015.

A new installment, this one called Women House, is arriving this spring, highlighting another generation of contemporary women artists who reflect, dissect and address the same issues as its predecessors, this time in a gallery setting, using photography, sculpture and video.

Through May 28, Women House is on display at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington. Last fall, the show spent three months at Monnaie de Paris, a partner museum. Ms. Chicago and Ms. Schapiro are the only artists to be represented in the original Womanhouse and the current house.



Laurie Simmons' "Walking House" from 1989 is on display at Women House.  
Laurie Simmons and Salon 94, New York



Cindy Sherman's, "Untitled Film Still #84," from 1978 is on display at Women House.  
Cindy Sherman and Metro Pictures, New York

Other global artists featured include Cindy Sherman, Mona Hatoum, Laurie Simmons, Rachel Whiteread and Francesca Woodman, and the exhibit is structured around eight themes. Among them are: Desperate Housewives, showcasing the disillusionment of marriage; Home Is Where It Hurts, on the idea of being caged and trapped; A Room of One's Own, illuminating the home as a place of creativity and generation of ideas; Doll's House, looking at the trope of child's play; and Mobile Homes, highlighting mobility and impermanence.

"Women's place is still a hot topic, and the domestic realm remains a gendered space still associated with women and femininity," said Kathryn Wat, chief curator at the museum. "This show offers new viewpoints on how different, diverse and dynamic the idea of home can be."

In fact, according to Ms. Chicago, she herself coined the term feminist art. "The first time it appears, according to my biographer, Gail Levin, are in my journals in 1971," said the artist, whose works of note include the installation "The Dinner Party." "All these women said they

didn't want to be called that. Now I get emails from young women all over the world who say, 'I'm a feminist artist.' That's what I set out to do."



Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," 1974/1979, at the Brooklyn Museum.  
Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times





Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, “ext.2, Lakeside, Johannesburg,” from 2007 is on display at Women House. Zanele Muholi

The original Womanhouse was set in a 75-year-old abandoned mansion in Hollywood, Calif., and became a home and a feministic artistic endeavor to 21 female students and three established artists, in addition to the creators. It was the first show created by the Feminist Art Program, an extension of CalArts, founded by Ms. Chicago and Ms. Schapiro.

There were mixed-media environments and performances. Familiar rooms — kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and dining room — were re-examined, and the idea of a woman as a “happy homemaker” was questioned. The exhibit prompted the participants and thousands of viewers to explore feminism through the relationship between art and social change, and the complex, often-misunderstood relationship between a woman, her home and domesticity.

Ms. Chicago, now 78, lives in New Mexico with her husband. Following are excerpts from an interview with the artist, which have been edited and condensed.

### **What was the Southern California art scene like in the '70s?**

It was unbelievably macho. I went through tremendous struggles to be taken seriously as a woman artist. I really tried to fit in, both in my art-making and in my persona. After about a decade I got tired of it. I didn't realize what a radical change I was about to make when I went to Fresno, but I knew I was setting out to create two things: a feminist art practice, and a feminist art education so that young women wouldn't have to do what I had to do.



Judy Chicago's "Butterfly Test Plate #2," 1973-1974.  
2018 Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York  
and Salon 94, New York; Photo: Donald Woodman

### **What was the goal when you got to CalArts?**

There was no women's art scene. The goal was to build one. And I knew there was a lot of hunger among women for images that related to our own experience. I taught women to step up. I trained them in what it meant to be professional artists, and to raise their consciousness, among other things. Once I gave these young women permission to make art out of their own experiences as women, it was like an explosion.

### **How would you describe yourself?**

A troublemaker. I've never fit in. In my first decade, I didn't fit in because of my gender. Then, after I made this radical change in my art, I didn't fit in because of the kind of art I was making. Part of the problem is the art world can't fit me into one category. I've done different

subject matters and different techniques. I have tried to make art that's accessible to a broad audience, that doesn't need somebody to stand between me and the audience and explain it, and that's very out of step with the art world.

### **What did people take away from Womanhouse?**

In those days, women were the primary audience for feminist art. That has dramatically changed. Young men now come by themselves to see my work. There's a big shift generationally. Back then men came because their mothers, wives, girlfriends or sisters brought them. Many were uncomfortable because they didn't know how to relate.



The cover of the exhibition catalog for the original Womanhouse exhibition with Ms. Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The cover was designed by Sheila de Bretteville.  
Through the Flower Archive

### **Over the past 46 years what are the biggest changes?**

I'd been told in the '60s that I couldn't be both a woman and an artist. I had to excise any hint of gender from my work in order to be taken seriously in the L.A. art scene. That has completely changed. Young women, artists of color, artists of the range of sexual orientation can now be themselves openly in their work. That's a fabulous change.

### **What do you hope this new show accomplishes?**

I hope it kicks ass, shakes people up, and opens their eyes. That it gives them new experiences and helps them understand more about the range of women's experiences and their views.