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Getting Real with Judy Chicago

The feminist artist's work has taken on added significance in the Age of Trump. Here, she enlightens us on how "pussy power" has become part of the cultural landscape and the significance of human fragility.

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Illustration by Spiros Halaris

Judy Chicago is best known for *The Dinner Party*, a controversial feminist art installation that toured six countries in the late '70s and early '80s. The artwork, now permanently installed at the Brooklyn Museum, consists of 39 place settings commemorating heroic and innovative women throughout the ages. The mostly abstract designs that adorn *The Dinner Party*'s ceramic plates and embroidered runners derive from Chicago's visual studies of female orgasm. Fast forward to today and Chicago is regarded as one of the most pioneering artists of the 20th century. With her emphasis on the representation of the vagina as a means of unifying and empowering women (i.e. "pussy power"), Chicago's work has taken on added significance in the Age of Trump. Here, Chicago sits down with Dr. Sarah Thornton, author of several bestsellers delving into contemporary art, among them *Seven Days in the Art World*.

SARAH THORNTON: You have a long history of working with rainbow colors—even when minimalist restraint was de rigueur and a muddy ochre was considered flamboyant. Why do you think girls are coded pink and boys are coded blue? How have you handled the gendering of color over the years?

JUDY CHICAGO: I have no idea how color and gender became associated, but colors develop meanings through historical association. For example, royalty have been associated with different colors in different times. I incorporated historical colors into some of the place settings of *The Dinner Party*, notably a specific range of blues from Egyptian tomb paintings in the

Hatshepsut plate or the Byzantine royal purple in the Theodora place setting. As to my personal color sense, it has always tended towards the full spectrum. And then, in the late 1960s, I undertook a serious study of color and how to use it to create emotive states and visual effects, like pulsing—as in the orgasmic sensations rendered in my “Pasadena Lifesaver” paintings and drawings. My color study book is now in the collection of the Getty Research Institute, where it joins the work of many other artists who have explored the potential of color, usually for other, more formal purposes (think Josef Albers).

ST: You are a visual artist in everything you do. How would you describe your fashion sense and personal style?

JC: When I was young, I basically had no personal style; I was too busy working 60 hours a week in my studio. In the 1980s, there was a fashion designer named Holly Harp on the board of Through the Flower, my small, non-profit arts organization. She started sending me designer clothes for my openings (mostly her creations, but sometimes her castoffs). I discovered that when you put on an expensive top, it makes you feel like a million bucks. After that, my personal style—which tends towards the glitzy—began to develop. At one point, Elyse Grinstein (a major L.A. collector) said that I was “glamorous,” which is not how I saw myself. But I do like feeling attractive, especially as I age. Like I often say: When I was young, I never wore lipstick, but now that I'm old, it's essential!

ST: Many of the figures depicted in your work are naked. Why?

JC: In my mind, nudity is equated with vulnerability and that is something I have always been interested in—human fragility. A patriarchal mindset emphasizes the invincible and impregnable. One reason I have incorporated nudity is to challenge that mindset and to assert an alternative idea: that vulnerability is to be embraced as it is part of the human condition.

ST: As the mother of “vagina china” and “pussy art,” how do you feel about the recent adoption of “pussy hats” as an emblem of feminism? Did Trump’s comments on the *Access Hollywood* tape inadvertently give the women’s movement an energizing gift?

JC: I do not want to comment on Donald Trump or his actions. The less said about him, the better. As Frank Bruni has pointed out in the *New York Times*, the media has enabled Trump by spending so much time on what he says, which is of no interest to me. But I love the fact that—while *The Dinner Party*'s vulva imagery caused such apoplexy among male art critics—all the “pussy power” around now (including pussy hats) is becoming part of the cultural landscape. In fact, in comparison, my images seem tame.

ST: How have women’s attitudes to their vaginas changed over the course of your career?

JC: I'm not sure if “pussy power” translates into women feeling less shame about their bodies. I hope so, as it's disempowering to feel ashamed about your body, your desires, your aspirations, or your needs.