



SALON 94

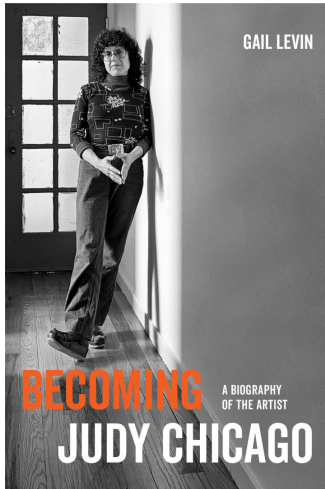
HYPERALLERGIC

A Captivating Biography Chronicles the Important Life and Work of Judy Chicago

Levin conducted 250 interviews with Chicago and her friends, family, colleagues, admirers, and critics, and had access to Chicago's diaries and letters.

Ilana Novick

April 8, 2019



Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist by Gail Levin (image courtesy University of California Press)

“You know, Judy,” an ex-boyfriend told artist Judy Chicago early in her career, “you have to decide whether you’re going to be a woman or an artist.” This comment touched a nerve for the artist on two levels: the implication that Chicago might have to choose between traditional gender roles and a successful career, and that whether or not she chose her career, her work, with its frequent representations of female biology, would so often be considered in the context of her gender, sometimes to Chicago’s frustration.

Those tensions are at the heart of *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (University of California Press, 2007, paperback 2018), art historian, professor, and curator Gail Levin’s biography of the artist. The book is meticulously detailed and extensively documented. Levin conducted 250 interviews with Chicago and her friends, family, colleagues, admirers, and critics, and had access to Chicago’s diaries and letters.

The sheer amount of detail is at times excessive, especially when it comes to the sections on Chicago’s childhood, growing up as Judy Cohen in Chicago. Understanding the impact

of her parent's politics on her future work, even on the decision to change her name from Gerowitz (her first husband's last name), to that of her city is no doubt important to understanding Chicago's own artistic journey. Still, the detours to describe the family histories of both her parents are so detailed that at first, I thought I'd learn more about both sides of her family's journey from Eastern Europe and their political leanings than I would about Chicago's art training at The Art Institute of Chicago or her experience at the College of Applied Arts at UCLA in California.

The sections of the book covering Chicago's artistic feminist awakening, how her teaching career coincided with that awakening, and the making of "The Dinner Party" are the best kind of biography — both juicy and educational, full of social and historical context, but also just a dash of gossip (open marriages, feuds with other artists, affairs).

Those of us who know Chicago only as a feminist artists and through visits to "The Dinner Party" at its permanent home at the Brooklyn museum might be surprised to learn that in art school, Chicago, then known as Judy Cohen, strained to be one of the guys. "I began to wear boots and smoke cigars," she's said. She attended auto body school to better emulate the spray paint and shiny surfaces of the "finish fetish" school popular in Los Angeles at the time. Her early career is filled with sculptures and paintings that paired minimalist shapes with bright colors. As the women's movement gained steam, however, Chicago realized, as Levin quotes, "I could no longer pretend in my art that being a woman had no meaning." That realization would represent a breakthrough in Chicago's art, leading her away from the abstract shapes to the works explicitly dealing with female identity, anatomy, and oppression.

The details occasionally weigh down other gripping sections. Chicago, with fellow artist Miriam Schapiro, developed a program at Cal State Fresno in the late 1960s to teach women to become artists, training them in everything from critical theory to carpentry, before moving the program to Cal Arts in 1971.

Chicago struggled with her attempts to build her teaching career along with her artistic practice and desire to have a life outside of work. It's entirely understandable that Chicago would question her decisions, go back and forth between keeping a friend or a lover, and question her life choices entirely. These questions don't have to be interesting only to those going through these troubles, but I'm not convinced Levin needed to include every argument with Schapiro, every time Chicago got angry with her students, every conflict

with a romantic partner, every time Chicago wondered if she should give up teaching in favor of a life devoted simply to making art in her studio.

The narrative picks up again when it comes to the creation and critical reception of “The Dinner Party,” a work that took five years and dozens of assistants to make. It was mired in controversy from the beginning. Some of those assistants claimed that Chicago “enslaved” her workers, who helped her create the plates and embroidered placemats that combined explicitly vaginal imagery with flowers, butterflies, and other feminine symbols. Others called it a life-changing experience. Chicago’s feminist critics saw a sense of gender essentialism in her art, arguing that Chicago’s vaginal images were disempowering for reducing women to their biological parts. Other art critics, including men like Hilton Kramer of *The New York Times* said the piece was “very bad art” and “mired in the pieties of a political cause.”

Still, by the time the exhibit found a permanent home in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, over a million people had seen it. When it opened at The Brooklyn Museum in 2002, Roberta Smith, who was and still is a co-chief critic, wrote, “Call it what you will: kitsch, pornography, artifact, feminist propaganda or a major work of 20th-century art. It doesn’t make much difference. ‘The Dinner Party’ ... is important.”

Judy Chicago regularly exhibits all over the world, proving perhaps, what Levin quotes her as saying years earlier, “Our culture is illiterate about women; what better way to teach them than through art.”

Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist (2007, 2018) is published by University of California Press. It is available for purchase on Amazon and other online retailers.