

Q&A: Judy Chicago

Her L.A. days in the '60s and '70s, when she helped to establish the city's reputation for art, are revisited in several Pacific Standard Time exhibitions.

October 30, 2011 | By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times

In the great game of word-image association that is art history, when people say Judy Chicago, they picture "The Dinner Party." An installation with dozens of hand-painted table settings dedicated to important women throughout history, the 1970s work elicited impassioned debate, fast becoming a national symbol for feminist art in all of its disruptive power.

But before she painted a single vulval-looking plate and even before she co-founded the groundbreaking Woman's Building in Los Angeles in 1973, Chicago had begun a serious career in L.A., making works that are prime examples of Finish Fetish, Light and Space and earthworks. And she often outdid her male colleagues with her level of training and commitment: She went to auto-body school to learn how to spray paint car hoods, and she went to pyrotechnics classes to learn how to work with fireworks.

Several of these early works, made during the 1960s and early '70s, are now on view at several venues as part of the Getty-funded museum initiative Pacific Standard Time. The Getty's "Crosscurrents" exhibition has a Corvair car hood spray painted with a bold design by Chicago. And the museum at Pomona College has included in its show, which revisits its institutional history circa 1970, photographs documenting the fireworks-based pieces she did by placing flares on Mt. Baldy.

In January, Chicago will return to town from her home in New Mexico to help kick off the PST performance art festival. Expect a bit of spectacle: For one of her works, she will revisit an early fireworks piece and attempt to "blow up," in husband Donald Woodman's words, the Pomona College football field.

To learn more about this early, sometimes explosive, work, The Times visited the Getty earlier this month with the artist, who is 72, and Rebecca McGrew, who co-curated the Pomona show.

What do you think visitors coming to these various shows will learn about your work?

Judy Chicago: I was just talking about this [at a lecture] in Long Beach, how there are many forms of censorship. I said that is another form of censorship I have experienced: covert censorship, where the only work of mine allowed to see the light of day in terms of real visibility is "The Dinner Party." My roots in Southern California and my participation in the art scene here have been erased. But I was very active in the Southern California scene. I did my first print at Sam Francis' print shop. I hung out with John Chamberlain and that's how I ended up going to auto-body school to learn to spray paint. I was not really one of the boys, but I sure hung out with the boys.

From everything I've heard, the L.A. art scene at that time was as macho as could be — extremely inhospitable for women. Were there exceptions? Were there men in positions of power who went to bat for you?

JC: Absolutely. I did have support of individuals — Rolf Nelson, my first dealer; John Coplans, the curator [at the Pasadena Museum of Art]; and my first patrons, who I met in 1969, were Stanley and Elyse Grinstein. What I didn't have, and saw my male peers having, is systemic support, where their careers would be moved along. For me it would be: I finally get some attention and it would have no implications. The work doesn't get sold, it doesn't catapult my career. I get my work in a major show at the Jewish Museum ["Primary Structures" in 1966], and then nothing happens. I'm not asked to be in a New York gallery. I don't get opportunities. ... Because of my marginal status as a woman artist, none of the guys said to me: 'When you have a piece in a major show in New York, you get on an airplane and go to New York.' I didn't know that.

Rebecca McGrew: In researching our show, we came across the typed transcript for the lecture that [museum director] Hal Glicksman invited Judy to give at Pomona in 1970, which I think is an incredibly fabulous example of a woman finding an authentic voice about her struggle to be an artist during such a male-dominated moment. Judy talked about growing up in such a supportive household and not realizing that you couldn't do what you wanted as a woman until she got to school at UCLA. She talked about the lack of women's representation in art history. And then she said she would not take any questions from men in the audience.

JC: The audience went crazy.

RM: There was one moment in the transcripts in brackets where it said, "fight." You could just picture it, and this was in conservative Claremont.

JC: One of the interesting things that's happened because of Pacific Standard Time is that I've seen all the guys — Billy Al [Bengston], Bob Irwin. I've been blown away at how they are proud of me. Bob said the funniest thing at one of the openings: 'I want you to know how great it is that I think you are finally getting long-overdue recognition. We all know what a hard time you had.' But then he said, 'After what we put you through, if you could survive that, you could survive anything.' [Laughs and shakes her head.] But I appreciate finally being accepted by them as one of them. That's what I always wanted. I just wanted to be seen as an artist among artists.

In the Getty catalog for "Crosscurrents" they call you Judy Gerowitz instead of Judy Chicago, as if to distinguish between your early work and your explicitly feminist work that began around 1970, when you took your current name. Do you think that's a fair distinction?

JC: They wanted to do it for historic reasons. I thought it was weird. I didn't like it for one of the same reasons I changed my name in the first place. I started out using my maiden name, Judy Cohen, but then I noted there were too many Cohens showing art. So then I decided to use my first husband Jerry's last name, Gerowitz, because it was more unusual. Then Jerry was killed. So I'm 23, I'm a widow, people are coming up to me saying I know your parents — but they were his parents, and I felt like I didn't have a name. So [my dealer] Rolf Nelson had started calling me Judy Chicago because of my accent, and he always wanted me to change my name. A lot of artists had underground names at the time: Larry Bell was Ben Luxe and Ed Ruscha was Eddie Russia, and we all listed our phones under our other names. So when I decided I wasn't going to put up with this any more, I wasn't going to try to make art like a man anymore, I wasn't going to be in drag anymore, the hell with it, I was going to be myself, I wanted to do some sort of symbolic gesture announcing it. So I decided to take Judy Chicago. Everyone called me Judy Chicago anyway.

In your 1975 book, "Through the Flower," you sounded ambivalent about your early work, writing about how you suppressed more feminine or personal content to make the sort of slick, abstract, minimal forms valued by men at the time.. Do you still feel torn about that work?

JC: I think some of that work is really strong. Even though I did it for the wrong reasons, by stripping my work down as I did to its formal elements, I discovered a lot of formal control. And in the early '70s when I was thinking maybe I wanted to give up painting and sculpture for performance, I decided not to. I had spent 10 years developing that work, and I didn't want to give it up. I wanted to figure out how to fuse it with my real content.

So tell me about the "atmospheres," and why they're worth revisiting this January.

RM: I think they are incredibly interesting as a more fluid or feminist sort of earthwork. After the flares are placed in the ground and lit, the smoke dissipates through the space and starts to blur and feminize the landscape. Instead of the rough, hard edges of the rock forms you get with other artists, these pieces are really softening the landscape. Instead of excising, cutting into the land like James Turrell has been doing with Roden Crater — moving things around with big equipment, Judy is working with the landscape. She's modifying the land instead of obliterating it.

Can you talk about how you got involved with fireworks in the first place?

JC: I can remember exactly where I was when I thought of doing the first fireworks piece. My studio in Pasadena was on the corner of Raymond and Colorado, so the Rose Parade went right by us, underneath our windows, and we'd always have a New Year's Eve party there. So I thought, wouldn't it be nice to do something for all the people on the street? So we blocked off Raymond Avenue for one full block and did this big, collaborative street piece on New Year's Eve — it must have been 1967. I don't remember where I got the idea to line the street with fog machines, but it was a way of trying to bring the whole street together. We put screens on the buildings, the group Single Wing Turquoise Bird did projections, and people did performances — the street was filled with all this activity. I remember mounting a big color wheel on one of the klieg lights, so now we've fogged the street and the smoke rising up into the air is colored from the color wheel on the klieg lights. When I saw this colored light in the air, I thought: I am going to do these fireworks.

Everyone calls you a painter, but you've made so many types of work: painting and sculpture, performance and installation, and works that hinge between these.

JC: I think I select a particular technique for an expressive purpose. When I wanted to have color in the air, how else would I do it except fireworks? When I wanted to work with the brush and still fuse color and surface I discovered china painting, where you actually fire the color on. When I wanted to deal with the way the Holocaust grew out of the very fabric of Western civilization, I dealt with tapestry. Because I'm a content-based artist, I go from content to form.

RM: That's what's so fascinating: getting rid of the idea that painting is on the wall or sculpture is on a pedestal and blurring those boundaries. Thinking about the Pomona show, you can look at an Irwin disc that seems to float off the wall and wonder what it is.

JC: That's one of the biggest differences between 1960s art in L.A. and New York. L.A. art at the time crosses genres in a way New York art doesn't. In New York, it was all painting or sculpture. Here there's this whole calling into question of what is a painting. You talk about Craig Kauffman's "paintings" or Billy Al's "paintings" — crumpled metal, out from the wall. They are paintings that are not paintings — I don't think I've read anything about how different the work is out here, purely technically.

jori.finkel@latimes.com