



**Judy Chicago**

*Toby Head with Golden Tear*, 2009.

Cast glass, gold leaf, gilding, 16 x 9.5 x 7.5 in.

Photograph © Donald Woodman.

We women have our **own narrative**,  
 so **highlighting that**, making  
**people aware** of that narrative,  
 is one of **the goals** of my work.

## Judy Chicago

With Robert Wilder

Judy Chicago is an artist, author, feminist, educator, and intellectual whose career spans four decades. She is most famous for her 1974–79 mixed-media work *The Dinner Party*, now permanently housed at the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. The piece is an homage to women’s history in the form of a large triangular table with thirty-nine place settings—embroidered runners, gold chalices and utensils, and china-painted porcelain plates—representing famous women from history as guests of honor. The work elevates to heroic scale the contributions of women in a way that has been excluded throughout history.

Other renowned works by Chicago include *The Birth Project* (1980–85), which brought together a national network of skilled needleworkers to explore the subjects of birth and creation; *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light*, a 1993 series of art works in collaboration with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman, examining the Holocaust experience from the victims’ perspective; and the 1994 *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time*, which reinterprets traditional adages in playful images for the future that combine painting and needlework. Her latest body of work, *Chicago in Glass*, seeks to stretch the conventional boundaries of glass art in both subject matter and technique. Chicago’s glass oeuvre includes stained, etched, fused, cast, and painted glass, all of which make use of the medium’s unique surface and light-transmitting properties to add new dimensions to the expressive power of her iconoclastic art.

The New Mexico Museum of Art holds nearly two dozen works by Chicago in its permanent collection. In 2004, Chicago initiated the New Mexico Women’s Cultural Corridor, which encourages travelers to discover the wealth of imagination invested in New Mexico by women of timeless talent. The corridor moves through Belen, Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Abiquiu, and Taos to highlight the achievements of Judy Chicago, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Agnes Martin, Maria Martinez, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Millicent Rogers.

Chicago serves as the artistic director of Through the Flower, a nonprofit arts organization that was created in 1978 to support her work and promote a broad understanding of



**Judy Chicago and *The Dinner Party***, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007.

Photograph by Donald Woodman.

feminist art. Robert Wilder spoke to Chicago at her home and studio, housed in the historic Belen Hotel in Belen, New Mexico.

**Wilder:** I have a thirteen-year-old daughter. From where you're sitting today, how have you seen what you started—feminism in art—change for someone my daughter's age?

**Chicago:** There's been a significant amount of change. Young women can be themselves as artists. Although I have to say in the education section of the *New York Times* there was an article by a young woman telling a story about somebody who'd come to her school, and the visit was a lesson on how it really hadn't changed all that much because [the visitor] was a total sexist pig. He talked down to the girls—it was a girls' school—he was cutting, he didn't take them seriously, and she

was shocked because she thought everything had changed. Yes, she recognized that he was a dinosaur; still it gave her insight into the fact that this change might not be as stable as one would think.

Most certainly, young women artists are working out of their experiences as women in a way that I couldn't do when I was young, and more women are showing at the entry level, but the thing is a lot of people don't look at the permanent records—solo shows at major institutions and permanent collections. There's been very little change there. For example, at the Tate Modern between 2000 and 2005, only two percent of the solo shows were by women. Even SITE Santa Fe, at the last biennial, out of twenty-six artists there were five women, three of whom worked on one project. So there were really only three projects by women out of eighteen projects. There's change and there's not change.

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**Wilder:** So what would you say to that thirteen-year-old girl who wants to be an artist?

**Chicago:** That it's very important to learn her history as a woman, so if she encounters resistance anywhere along the line she has a context in which to understand it. Not understanding it is what defeats women. They take it personally and think it has to do with them, that somehow they're failing. I believe both boys and girls should study women's history, just like we study men's history.

I was raised with the idea that I could do what I wanted. The world didn't go along with that. I wish my parents had warned me that not everyone felt that way. Came as kind of a shock when I discovered it in college. It was my father who was my primary role model. He believed in equal rights for women. It was his behavior, how he modeled that, how he treated women, that had a huge effect on me.

**Wilder:** How do you feel about *The Dinner Party* being permanently housed at the Brooklyn Museum?

**Chicago:** It was my goal. I wasn't finished with *The Dinner Party* until it was permanently housed. A lot of people used to get on my case on why I stayed involved with it, but I stayed involved for the history it represents. I saw what it did, how it empowered people, so I couldn't walk away from it until it was permanently housed. It wasn't just making the piece and having it exhibited, it was contributing to breaking the cycle of erasure that it recounts. That couldn't have happened unless it was permanently housed. Otherwise, it would have been just a photo in an art book and the memories that people have until they die. It was very interesting when it opened; all the young women who have studied it were weeping because they thought they understood it until they saw it. It's not the same being in *The Dinner Party's* presence as it is studying it. I feel very gratified that a goal I set over thirty years ago was finally realized.

**Wilder:** Do you think all of your art has that same intent or impact?

**Chicago:** My work has explored a variety of themes in multiple media, but few people understand its breadth because there's never been a real retrospective of my work. My hope is that before I die a retrospective will happen and *The Dinner Party* will be seen as one work in a much larger body of work, but that's not for me to say. I've certainly seen the impact of other

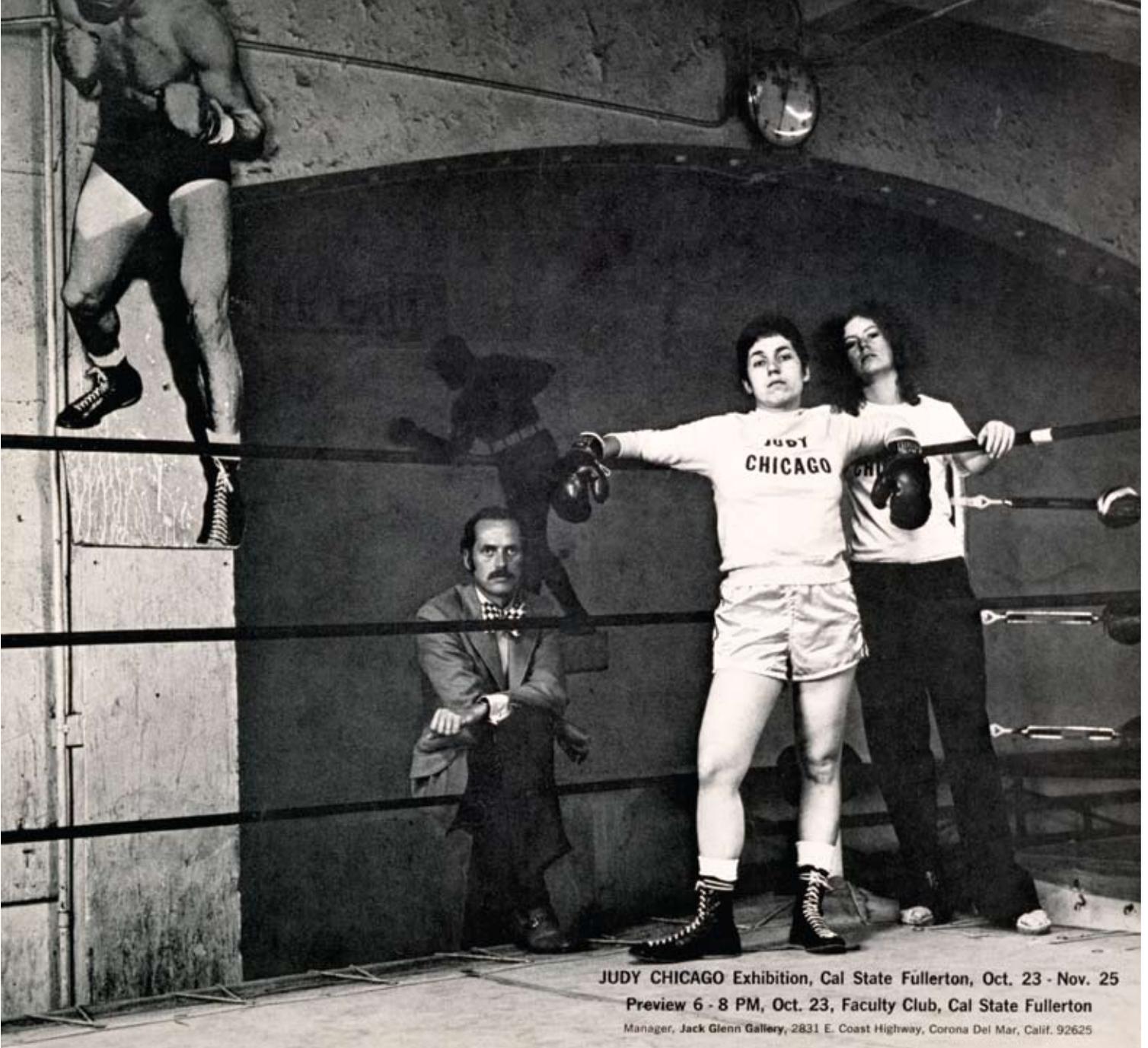


**Judy Chicago** sprays the cartoon for *The Fall* from *The Holocaust Project*, 1987. Photograph by Donald Woodman.

works of mine on audience, but on the other hand, after I went through what I went through with *The Dinner Party*—how difficult it was to get it exhibited, the cost of storing it, the responsibility of it, the effort to preserve it—I wasn't about to take that particular task on for any other work, so I didn't structure other projects the same way. For example, when Donald and I did *The Holocaust Project*, a lot of people said, "It should be kept together," and my answer was, "You want to buy it and keep it together?" because I'm not prepared to take on another task of that magnitude.

**Wilder:** It sounds like you have a healthy—if I can use that word—relationship to such a pivotal piece while constantly creating new work. How does one balance something of such importance in the culture like *The Dinner Party* and continue to create something new?

**Chicago:** When *The Dinner Party* opened in San Francisco and was such a hit, I had no idea what was in store. The museum director started talking about *The Dinner Party* as the culmination of my career, and I'm like, "I'm not even forty years old, excuse me?" I've just had such a strong creative drive my whole life. I was fortunate with *The Dinner Party* that there was a whole crew of people dedicated to it who handled a lot of the logistics. I've been fortunate with the people who come to work with me who've taken a lot off my shoulders



JUDY CHICAGO Exhibition, Cal State Fullerton, Oct. 23 - Nov. 25  
Preview 6 - 8 PM, Oct. 23, Faculty Club, Cal State Fullerton  
Manager, Jack Glenn Gallery, 2831 E. Coast Highway, Corona Del Mar, Calif. 92625

**The artist as a boxer** in a 1970 *Art Forum* ad announcing the artist's name change from Judy Gerowitz to Judy Chicago and exhibition at Cal State Fullerton. Photograph by Jerry McMillan.

so I could keep working. After all, the more I did, the more responsibility there was for me for all that work. The most important thing to me is to keep working. It's not very complicated. I'm just not happy unless I'm in my studio working.

One of the biggest challenges for young artists now is having a long, productive career because when I came up, people didn't make art for money. Nobody thought they were going to make a lot of money. So now, when you're plucked out of graduate school, or somebody buys out your whole graduate show, well, I've never had those kinds of experiences. It's always been the opposite for me. I've always had to fight

against all of this resistance and all this lack of support. I had to fuel my own career at every level. Which, I suppose, has created this work ethic and idea that you can never rest and you always have to fight.

**Wilder:** So, for you, the reward is in the creation of the work?

**Chicago:** Right. And because I hadn't gotten any traditional rewards like money or time after *The Dinner Party*, *The Birth Project*, or *The Holocaust Project*, the only thing I had, the only reward for me, the only way I could handle a lot of what

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happened, was to go back into my studio. You really have to love to work if you're going to have a sustained career. You have to work because of the joy and meaning of the work, not for anything else. The only good thing about our recent economic downturn is that people are looking at work like Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull and Jeff Koons's inflated baubles and seeing what they've always appeared to me as: inflated objects, status symbols, like your Prada shoes and Vuitton bag. It has to do with excess and greed and conspicuous consumption, nothing to do with art. Maybe there will be a washing out of that, a refocusing on what art is supposed to be.

**Wilder:** Why did you and Donald decide to buy an old hotel and live in Belen, New Mexico?

**Chicago:** Donald wanted to stay in New Mexico. I wanted to go back to California. I never actually moved to New Mexico. I just started coming to New Mexico to paint. It's such a typical New Mexico story. I started coming to Santa Fe for two weeks, then two months, then I was living here but my stuff was all in California. Then I met Donald and we got married after knowing each other for four months. By the time we got married, Donald and I were already working on *The Holocaust Project*. Donald was tired of building darkrooms and building studios in places he didn't own, and he wanted a place. I never had a place of my own, I never wanted a place of my own. I didn't want the responsibility, I didn't want a mortgage. My parents had never had a place of their own. I was fine. Rent, paint, store. Out of sight, out of mind. Donald said, "No. This has to end." He wanted to stay in New Mexico.

You have to understand that, after *The Holocaust Project*, we had \$55,000 of debt on our credit cards. So, we're going to get a place of our own? I went to two banks with Donald and they laughed at us. So I said, "That's it. I'm going back to my studio." Donald went to every bank in the state. He's very persistent, Donald, and was determined that we should have our own place. It was sheer grit and persistence on his part. The only thing, when I turned sixty, for the first time I had a mortgage. As to why we moved to Belen, at that time, it was the only place we could afford.

**Wilder:** How did you get the idea for the New Mexico Women's Cultural Corridor?

**Chicago:** It just occurred to me that nobody had paid a lot of attention to the fact that there were all these sights in New

Mexico devoted to women. Part of *Through the Flower's* mission is to highlight the achievements of women, and it was actually quite simple to do. It was more a matter of realizing it and promoting it. We've had people come from as far away as eastern Canada to go along the corridor.

**Wilder:** So there needed to be someone to connect these great New Mexico women? I'm sure people in Taos saw Mabel Dodge as their own, and people in Galisteo claimed Agnes Martin. So you decided to link them?

**Chicago:** I have a broader sense of women's history and the context, and I understood that New Mexico was a place that attracted women because there was a kind of freedom here.

**Wilder:** Why is it important to make these connections?

**Chicago:** Why is it important to have a narrative of our history, or a narrative of Western civilization, where you see how achievements build on each other? That's a narrative that women have been left out of. We women have our own narrative, so highlighting that, making people aware of that narrative, is one of the goals of my work. One of the goals of my life is to be a gadfly and point out that there are all these alternative narratives that are every bit as important—not just women—people of color, Hispanic, Native American. We don't have a diversity of narratives in our institutions, in our history classes, or our museums. That's why I like Joe Traugott's permanent exhibition at the New Mexico Museum of Art because it is a multiple narrative. He shows how different peoples, artists of different persuasions, gender, and color and culture were working at similar times. It's a richer history.

**Wilder:** How did you start your nonprofit, *Through the Flower*?

**Chicago:** *Through the Flower* started by accident while I was working on *The Dinner Party*. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was going to tour the show so they set up a project account in the museum so people could make donations to help me finish, because as you get closer and closer to the end of a big project like that you just eat money. The museum director came down to visit me and he said, "We can't accept donations for the project anymore." I asked, "Why not?" He said, "We're used to getting fifty- or a hundred-thousand-dollar donations and we're getting five- and ten-dollar donations, and it's costing more to process it than it's worth. Start

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your own nonprofit.”

Through the Flower ended up touring *The Dinner Party* and, for many years, it was the only support structure that I had. It provided me with a framework in which to create *The Birth Project*. It toured *The Birth Project* to 100 venues, then toured *The Holocaust Project*. By the nineties, Through the Flower was getting tapped out—it’s still a very small organization—so the board set out to change the organization and create a more stable infrastructure. Then, with the permanent housing of *The Dinner Party*, we all decided to turn our attention toward education and public programming.

Over the years, a lot of people have used *The Dinner Party* in their classes. We’ve gotten pictures of all these kids making plates and runners, and I always thought it was so charming. Then when Donald and I were teaching at Vanderbilt, there was this article about this teacher who meant well, but I didn’t think the project was a good use of *The Dinner Party* because what it ended up being was autobiography plates. There’s nothing wrong with doing a project of autobiography plates, it’s just the intention of *The Dinner Party* was to teach women’s history and help girls in particular think beyond themselves because girls often get lost in the personal. I thought that there maybe should be some guidelines about doing this.

Last May, we launched a comprehensive K-through-12 *Dinner Party*, which is available as a series of free, downloadable PDF files on Through the Flower’s website. Now we are planning training programs around the country, including some here in New Mexico. When we started, I thought that I’d be happy if 100 teachers began using the curriculum. However, hundreds of teachers around the world are already accessing the curriculum. Just imagine, if they all taught for twenty or thirty years, that would be a lot of kids who would grow up with a different model of history. ■

**A new glass series by Judy Chicago, *The Toby Heads***, will be on exhibition at LewAllen Gallery in the Santa Fe Railyard from June 18 to July 25. For more information on Judy Chicago, visit [judychicago.com](http://judychicago.com).

**Robert Wilder** is the author of two critically acclaimed books of essays: *Tales from the Teachers’ Lounge* and *Daddy Needs a Drink*. Wilder’s column, also titled “Daddy Needs a Drink,” appears monthly in the *Santa Fe Reporter*. He was awarded the 2009 Innovations in Reading Prize by the National Book Foundation. Wilder lives in Santa Fe with his wife, Lala, and their two children, Poppy and London. Visit his website at [robertwilder.com](http://robertwilder.com).