

Chicago in Class, sculptures and installations by Judy Chicago

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Chicago in Glass, sculptures and installations by Judy CHICAGO

Denis LONGCHAMPS

Internationally known for *The Dinner Party*¹ (first exhibited in 1979), which is now presented permanently in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art of the Brooklyn Museum in New York, Judy Chicago continues to play with multiple layers of meanings as is evidenced in her new exhibition *Chicago in Glass* hosted at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery of Waterloo, Ontario, from September 2007 to January 2008. In her latest endeavours she emphasizes the power of hands, and in this exhibition, glass, the selected medium employed, becomes a metaphor for their strength and fragility. This review is rounded out with excerpts from a telephone conversation I had with the artist last November.

The exhibition opens and closes with two pieces executed in stained glass. They are the two first works Chicago created in glass for her previous project on the Holocaust (*The Holocaust Project: from Darkness into Light*, 1992), where the artist decided to explore the subject of the Holocaust in a contemporary context and to revisit her Jewish heritage with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman. Her most daunting project to date, it took her and Woodman, eight years to complete. The first stained glass presented is triangular and the shape is repeated in various colours bringing to mind the spectrum of the rainbow. However, upon a closer look, I notice that a barbed wire has been embedded in the lead that holds together the piece of the outer triangle. Intrigued by this, I realized that the colours are not those of the rainbow but of the various triangles

worn by the prisoners in Nazi concentration camps during WW II. These inverted triangles served to identify the group to which a prisoner belonged, such as pink for homosexuals, brown for gypsies, red for political dissidents (whose country was identified with a letter on the triangle, such as F for France). The yellow Star of David worn by the Jews is in fact two triangles, one inverted on top of the other. In some cases, the inverted triangle could be of a different colour on top of the yellow one, for example, a pink one on top would identify a homosexual Jew. For this piece, which was the logo of her *Holocaust Project*, Chicago inverted the triangle (in opposition to how it was worn) as a sign of empowerment, as did many homosexual organizations with the pink triangle in the 1970s. All around the outer triangle flames are bursting out, phoenix-like as a symbol of life rising from the ashes.

The other stained glass work is a large triptych 16-feet wide. Titled *Rainbow Shabbat* it references the Friday night celebration in Judaism, the Shabbat or the day of rest. The centre panel is flanked on either side by the Star of David into which a phrase is etched in English and in its Yiddish equivalent. It reads "Heal those broken souls who have no peace and lead us from darkness into light." Chicago mentioned that the phrase is based on a poem by a *Holocaust survivor*. This might be thought of as the invocation of the project, a hope that is symbolized by the rainbow colour bands that traverse the entire triptych. The central panel presents the Friday night Shabbat meal as a metaphor for global sharing. A man sings the praises of his wife, a tradition in observance of this dinner. Both wear the *Tallit* or prayer shawls. The guests are from different religions, races, genders and generations; a dog and a cat sleep underneath the table. Subtitled *A Vision for the Future* here each figure's gesture is important, as they hold onto each other, and at one end of the table a young boy is holding a white dove, the symbol of peace. In the gallery, the installation

includes benches on which viewers can sit to reflect on the meanings and associations presented. The gesture of each one present at the table seems to take on more importance because of what precedes it in the exhibition.

Indeed, this main work follows a series of sculptures and installations around a central theme of hands and gestures. With this new series, Chicago leads the viewer to ponder on the meaning of something that is an integral part of our being and that we take for granted.

I always have been fascinated by the power of body language. Of course, as a good Québécois, I talk a lot with my hands and I realized quite early on in conversation with others that hands are quite telling. Since the beginning of time, hands build, protect, touch, caress, kill and create. Of course, there are some gestures that we all do consciously. We wave our hand to say goodbye or to signal our presence to someone we notice in a crowd, we rudely raise our finger in anger to let someone know what we think, and we hold hands with someone we love or to restrain them from leaving or moving. Furthermore, sign languages were developed to allow communication when verbal language is impossible. When we travel in a foreign country we often use gestures for lack of native words.

Hands have been at the heart of artistic creations since the beginning of time, as is testified by the hand prints in the Lascaux caves. Chicago points out that "hands are at the core of human experience, they are the tools of creation," not only in the visual arts, but in other forms of artistic expression such as in music and in literature. I recall a live model drawing class I took in which most students complained about the difficulties of rendering the hands, yet, on their own hands can express an array of human emotions as Chicago exemplifies in this exhibition.

Two of the works displayed present a larger than life arm raised in the air with a clenched fist. Both *Snake Arm* (2006) and *Flaming Fist* (2006) can be read as symbols of resistance and power. The former slightly

Judy CHICAGO, *Grand Snake Arm*, 2007. Etching, cold work and gold-leaf on cast glass. 21.5" x 6.5" x 7.5". Installed size on plexi-glass stand 23.5" x 24" x 21". Courtesy: Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Photo: Donald Woodman.





Some of the installations are composed of a simple sheet of glass with hands (single or in pairs) etched in and painted, and presented at an angle on a plexiglas stand. These works create an interesting dialogue with the drawings and the studies of various hand gestures and forms that are also part of the exhibition. Other works, similar to the two previously discussed present three dimensional hands in various positions with a high level of realism, including palm lines, nails, and, in one instance, the impression of sweat. In some cases, the hands reveal their inner structures—muscles, bones, nerves and veins, are visible, giving the viewers a glimpse of the composition of their own hands as many other visitors must have, looked at my own hands and compared them with Chicago's work is an attempt to understand the functions of each component (bone, muscle, etc.). As such, Chicago's work brought me to reflect on my own sense of power, vulnerability and mortality.

Two other works fascinated me through their use of four panels that stood facing each other to create a three-dimensional perspective out of a bi-dimensional reality. In one case, *Four-Part Temporal Connection* (2007), created the illusion of hands moving toward each other and trying to grasp the other in order to connect. The other work in four parts, *Arcanum in Shades of Grey* (2000) brings to the fore Chicago's feminist issue with women bodybuilding. Chicago explains:

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Judy CHICAGO, *Arcanum in Shades of Grey*, 2000. Etching and enamel paint on laminated glass. 4 glass panels 29.25" x 19.5" each. Installation size 36" x 32" x 50". Courtesy: Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Photo: Donald Woodman.

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Judy CHICAGO, *Grand Flame Fist*, 2007. Etching and glass paint on cast glass. 20.75" x 6.5" x 7.5". Installed size on plexiglas stand 21.75" x 24" x 21". Courtesy: Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Photo: Donald Woodman.

→→
Judy CHICAGO, *Study #3 for Flayed Arm*, 2003. Etching, silver stain and penwork on flash glass. 11" x 18". Installed size on plexiglas stand. 15" x 22" x 5". Courtesy: Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Photo: Donald Woodman.

Judy CHICAGO, *Large Fused Muscleshand*, 2006. Etching and glass paint on fused glass. 15.25" x 21.25". Installed size on plexiglas stand 19" x 27" x 8". Courtesy: Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Photo: Donald Woodman.

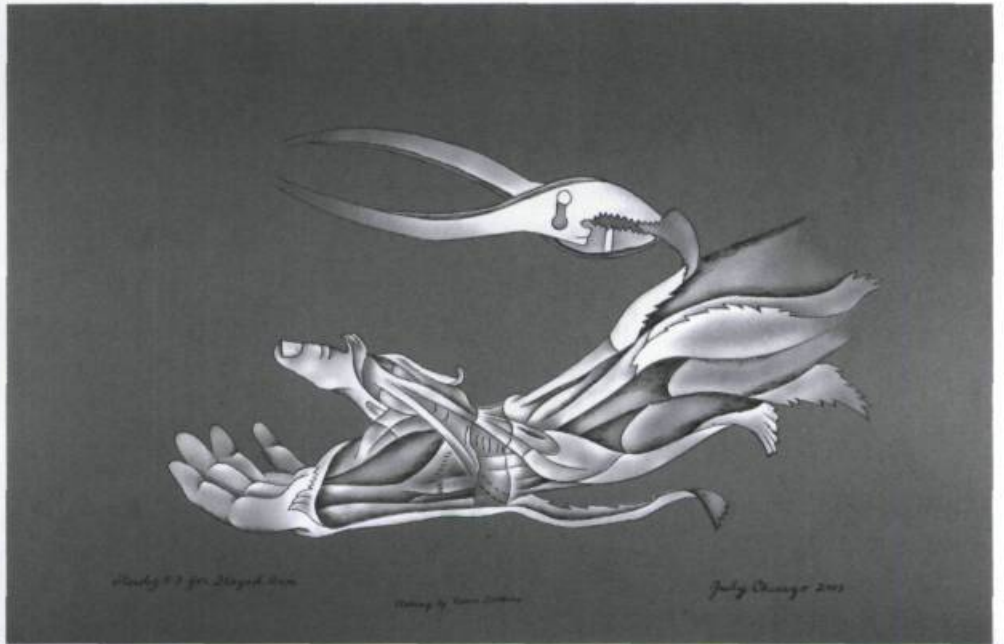
inclined work is dark and shows a snake wrapped around the wrist with its head under the thumb; the latter piece is milky in colour and incorporates bursting flames in red and orange at its base, as though consumed by an inner passion. The clenched fist is a universal symbol often used on posters and in public rallies by politicians and activists as a sign of solidarity and empowerment. The snake is often seen as evil. The fire could perhaps indicate a fist rising in defiance while burning at the stake. Yet, as in most of Chicago's works, other meanings are also possible, such as the snake that sheds its skin as a symbol of a second life, or another chance. Chicago also spoke during our conversation of goddesses, such as the Cretan-Minoan snake goddess and Brigid, the Celtic goddess of fire. Here, the artist pursues her feminist interests first presented in the *Dinner Party*. The mother goddess in Cretan and Minoan culture is often represented holding snakes in both hands or with one coiling around her body. While various interpretations abound, one thing is certain, in this civilization women were respected and worshipped in the form of goddesses. The Celtic goddess was prayed to for her healing powers, and as the goddess of inspiration and the art of metalwork. During the classical Greek period, inspiration, and the burst of creativity it generates, was considered a gift of the gods. Represented by feminine figures, such as the Greek muses, or the aforementioned Brigid, these aspects cannot be ignored when looking at Chicago's work and consequently

add a layer of ambiguity to the understanding of her practice.

In *Snake Arm*, the dark coloured glass reflects reddish tones, which under appropriate lighting conditions add a passionate dimension to the already complex work. The gold leaf gilding of the snake makes it more precious and seems to contradict its devilish overtones. In *Grand Flame Fist*, the milky colour of the glass

endows the piece with a lifeless feeling, albeit in the presence of the burning flames. In both works, we are confronted by multiple layers of meaning, but, as Chicago points out, underneath the sign of power remains the presence of vulnerability and mortality. Like the glass work itself, which is only strong and hard in appearance, life can be shattered in one swift movement.





...there was a myth (among men) that women could not build muscles... therefore the apparition of female bodybuilding in the early 1980s brought a shift in gender construct and power (physical and moral) that became a threat to men ... which resulted in the withdrawal of the money that supported female bodybuilding shows and contests. The absence of it in public space (it became an underground practice) brought a level of secrecy around it and a fetishization of female bodybuilders' muscle worshiping, including the "lift and carry" where a female bodybuilder lifts a man and carries him. To punctuate the piece, words, such as power, amazons, and perversion, are etched in the glass.

Like the title suggests, there is no clear cut meaning, it is neither white nor black, but many shades of grey depending on where one stands; more so when the issue is embedded in mysteries and controversy.

Another work caught my attention because of its resemblance to a plate

included in the *Dinner Party*. A quick look at the label, *Sappho in Glass* (2006) confirmed my first impression as Sappho was a guest at the table of Chicago's 1979 seminal work. The Greek poet was ignored by Christian medieval scribes for her "shamed friendships." In fact, the only thing one could find Sappho guilty of is being transparent in her own writings, of clearly underlining the celebration of her love and desire for women. Chicago wanted to reinterpret Sappho's plate, originally made of painted porcelain, and translated it successfully into glass. The medium here allows for a transparency that could not be attained with porcelain.

Chicago in Glass is faithful to the artist's vision and brings the artist within the realm of the universal language of hands. Chicago has always explored a variety of techniques to achieve different expressions. Art is a process of discovery through which Chicago continues to explore form and content in search for the best way to bring the two together. Citing

Virginia Woolf, she remarks that "truth begins with the body," yet, upon engaging with the various pieces presented in the exhibition, there is a tension between the simplicity of forms and the multiple layers of meaning. It is within these ambiguities that Chicago's mastery fully embodies and illuminates the complexities of life and human relationships. ←

Judy Chicago, *Chicago in Glass*
Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery,
Waterloo, Ontario
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NOTE

1. *The Dinner Party* is an installation of three long tables forming a triangle, with 39 place settings for just as many women, all of who marked history but were omitted from the history books. It is mounted on a ceramic floor done with triangular tiles upon which the names of 999 other notable women are inscribed.

Judy CHICAGO, *Rainbow Shabbat*, 1992. Stained glass. 54" x 192". Courtesy: Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. Photo: Donald Woodman.