

When Women Rule the World: Judy Chicago in Thread
The Textile Museum of Canada, info@textilemuseum.ca, Feb 11, 2009 - Sep 7, 2009

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When Women Rule the World: Judy Chicago in Thread

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Feb 11, 2009 - Sep 7, 2009



The Creation, 1984
Modified Aubusson tapestry, wool,
silk and gold threads, 104.7 x 426.7 cm
woven by Audrey Cowan, collection of Audrey
and Robert Cowan, showing at the Textile
Museum of Canada

There is a generational migration acknowledging the respect for Judy Chicago at the Textile Museum where a co-current exhibition, curated by Allison Mitchell, titled *She Will Always be Younger than Us* brings forth textile works by six young female artists: Orly Cogan, Lupypciw, Cat Mazza, Gillian Strong and Ginger Brooks Takahachi, (whose ages would place them as Chicago's 'granddaughters in art'). These women have been able to step into position without being fraught by impediments and inequity, stitching their way into museums, on grounds prepared by Judy Chicago.

Chicago is introduced as an artist, a writer, an intellectual. It is not only the rigorous research that she has conducted into the lives, rights and sociological constructs of women, nor the intellectual property that became the monumental pieces for which she is most famous but her single minded dedication to the flowering of women, that has distinguished her career. She has lived a life of service towards a vision based on her personal perception of the rights of women having been undermined by lack of support and erasure. In the process, she has not become a rich woman and that this was not her goal flies in

the face of the American dream. Perhaps this is the root of the insouciant reception that her work has received within the market and the answer to the unasked question. She has not done this for herself. She is working for a principal that is greater than mere individual recognition, although that recognition has come as well. Her work has been said to be iconographic, but many would postulate that Judy Chicago, herself, has become an icon, held dear especially in the hearts and minds of women.

The ephemeral nature of women's work, fragile, private and as quotidian as domesticity was positioned in opposition to enduring monumentality. Chicago, with *The Dinner Party*, made a grand intellectual jump up a ladder sequestered for centuries in the inner sanctum of a men's club. How she found access to it, how she imagined her ascent and how she accomplished it, make up a story that has, undeniably, made a difference. *The Dinner Party* with grand scale reinforcing the verity of her vision could not be ignored. But the reception to her achievement was not the expected full ovation that such a daring center-stage performance usually evokes.

Just as the menstrual period has been perceived as, and even named, 'the curse', women have historically been relegated to a space that affords limited access to opportunity and stunts their potential for long lasting achievements. Unless the issues that continue to feed this disadvantage are brought to the light, society's internalised idea of women remains in tact – complete with outmoded boundaries. Chicago acknowledges that the dominant sociological systems that constrict the flowering of women are held in stasis by *both* men and women. She asserts that this status quo will remain unless the thinking patterns determining that which is important are changed. And change can only be brought about by awareness.

Communal effort, collaboration and co-operation are the underlying frameworks upon which this new awareness is built and fleshed out. As the physical bearers of life, women understand that birthing is hard work, labour pains, and that life is a gift supported through nurturing rather than competition (success by negation, winner versus loser). *The Birth Project*, through collaboration and monumentality edifies women's arts and subject matter.

How far have women come? Chicago cites statistics claiming that young women artists are now earning ninety cents on the male's dollar but mature female artists are still hovering in the unstable reality of sixty-two cents. This makes for a frightening future prospect for young female artists. Is the commoditisation of women's work still seen as an aspect of their physical allure or is the cult of youth present in today's commercial marketing more influential than gender related skewing?

Chicago's litany of inequities has underpinned the advancement of feminist art and the flowering of women. She is adored, as was evidenced by the crowds that attended the events leading up to and including the Valentine's Day opening at Rouge Contemporary Projects. Audrey Cowan and Penny Davidson Harris, two of the weavers who had worked with Chicago were in attendance.

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However, though it is a charming city, Victoria does not resonate with the wisdom that we respect and even fear in the face of a wise elder or the face of an old city. For this reason, Berman regularly escapes to New York. The drawing, *Requiem for Harlem*, is an example of the hard inner life of that urban world. The drawing is a view of old and near-derelict residential and commercial buildings along 108th Street. Berman unveils the city as a soiled skin across the face of the paper. The drawing, on ordinary craft paper, is graphite stick, oil paint and beeswax, materials that suggest metaphors of ancient grime, grease, staining, and the unexpected preservation of abandoned memory. The composition is panoramic, just high enough on the building facades to eliminate street life and the possibility of nature, such as a tree. On the other hand, the view is low enough to block out the sky; its glaring presence is evident in the sharp shadows across the buildings to the left like an intrusion on the private sadness of old urban misery.

There are no people in this drawing, an odd act of deliberate exclusion for an essentially figurative artist. However, in *Requiem for Harlem*, the city itself becomes the private body of its citizenry, and the face it reluctantly displays in the inquiring harsh light is proud, old, wise and gritty with memory. □

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The themes of the exhibition follow Van Dongen's rich and varied career from Rotterdam to Paris, where he remained a central figure of the modern era.

From North to South, from Symbolism to Neo-impressionism (1885-1904) presents early works executed in Holland, which reflect the art that inspired Van Dongen, from Rembrandt to the Neo-Impressionists; *Van Dongen Illustrator* (1895-1904) focuses on the important role graphic work played in his art; *Van Dongen Fauve* (1904-1912) shows how his style evolved under the influence of avant-garde artists of his day, and circle, like Matisse and Picasso, as well as how he became notorious after his participation in the Salon d'Automne in 1905, and his growing interest in portraiture. This section

also shows his fascination with the worlds of the cabaret and the circus and his obsession with women. *Exoticism and Orientalism* (1910-1917) looks at how his trips to Spain, Morocco and Egypt inspired van Dongen to create a new palette of colours and to explore a different purity of line. *The Artist's Studio: A Social Venue* (1914-1930) focuses on the period when the now famous, or perhaps infamous, Van Dongen frequented Paris high society and painted a gallery of portraits that represent a chronicle of the Roaring Twenties. The final section, *Landscapes* (the 1950s), is a collection of works as well as archival documents and photographs that reach for themes and styles that characterized the artist's early years.

Van Dongen was a fascinating personality, a great individualist and an unabashed explorer of art and life. Fauvism itself was shocking at the time, challenging as it did the convention within established genres, parodying the academic style, and what followed, its social function. Van Dongen took it further, both artistically and morally, subverting the Fauve style in the process.

His works are as shocking as they are titillating, and the *frisson* they evoke will stay with the viewer for a long time, and delightful it is... □

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Judy Chicago is an energetic force, disciplined and concentrated on a larger vision. *When Women Rule the World* is a title as prescient as the advancement of women's rights for the verbal obeisance paid is well deserved – the evidence is in the artwork.

Chicago in Glass is scheduled at the Musée des Maîtres et Artisans du Québec from September 15, 2010 to January 9, 2011. Virginia Eichhorn is curating *Judy Chicago: Dauntless – Fifty Years of Art Making and Other Acts of Courage*. It will be travelling to Europe, the US and Canada beginning in 2011 and is the first major travelling survey exhibition of Chicago's work. The tour is being coordinated by Exhibits Development Group (Washington, DC) in partnership with ACA Galleries (NYC). □

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