

Judy Chicago, her feminist vision

By MARTHA MUZYCHKA

Judy Chicago's name almost became a household word in Canada when three Canadian cities presented her controversial and acclaimed work, *The Dinner Party*, two years ago. At the time, Chicago started another monumental undertaking, *The Birth Project*, examining the different aspects of childbirth.

Judy Chicago's art assaults middle-class sensibilities with her emphasis on female eroticism. The vibrant, disturbing images of women in childbirth, in sex, or in just being female provide a unique perspective in an art world largely dominated by men.

This collection of drawings, studies and sketches shows Chicago's development as an artist from the 60s to the present. Included in the exhibit are some early works which explore female sexuality, some studies from *The Dinner Party*, and some parts of work done for *The Birth Project*.

One of the striking examples in the collection are the *Large Creation Drawings*. Drawn with pen and ink on paper, Chicago presents a series of deftly executed works, detailing powerful images of women in various stages of childbirth. For Chicago, the image of

creation is a painful, intense effort, moving with many tensions, undercurrents and patterns of a mysterious activity.

The extensive use of black with white outlines serves to illustrate the mystery with which birth has been perceived through time. Chicago herself has said the raw nature of her work comes from real experience shared by other women, since there are no examples of childbirth in Western art.

Chicago explores the process of childbirth and female sexuality with a precision which is almost clinical. Her explicitly sexual drawings of female figures has aroused the ire of some of her critics who perhaps believe female genitalia, albeit in a stylized form, is not a suitable subject for study.

Chicago's *Butterfly Vagina Erotica*, a series of four lithographs portraying heterosexual sex, demonstrates the artist's ability to explore female sexuality as a powerful enveloping force. The delicately tinted pieces are skillfully drawn and the four of them together are complementary in their progress from beginning to end.

The disturbing nature of Chicago's works lies in the undercurrents of themes which change the perspective of Chicago's vision. In the series of drawings *Holding on the Shadow*, *Wrestling with the*

Shadow, and *Pressing Himself Against Her*, one is left with the impression of something threatening happening. There is none of the celebratory aspect of creation found in the other art relating to the *Birth Project*. It is perhaps a negative view, reflective of some of the dangers inherent in being part of an uncontrollable force.

Nevertheless, those particular drawings are notable for their technique. Chicago uses colour sparingly; the muted colours highlight the black shadows, while bold strokes outline the female figure in the act of creating.

Chicago is not always so serious or intense. Her line drawings show whimsy and a discreet sense of humour. Chicago doesn't draw the perfect female form, she draws women as they see themselves—somewhat shapeless perhaps but definitely female. The emphasis on identity as women surfaces in the *Female Landscape 1, 2, 3*, another series of pen and ink drawings. These are highlighted with colour and reiterate a common theme, that of women's affinity with nature.

At her best, Chicago is a terrifyingly good artist. Her non-stereotypical forms are refreshing in

their shapelessness. It should be noted, however, that some of the works presented are rough sketches, basic outlines for ideas, which in the end do not offer much in divining Chicago's perceptions.

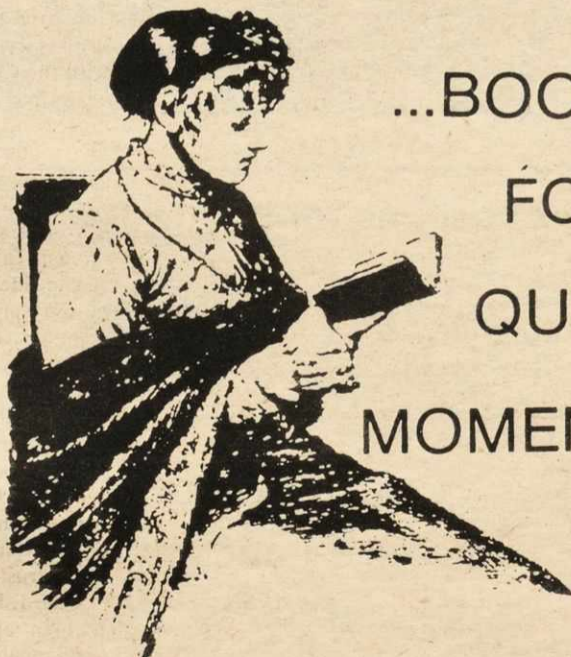
It could be very easy for Chicago to ride on the bouquets she received for *The Dinner Party*, but the exhibit shows that while Chicago has changed her techniques, she has maintained her unique feminist vision. The art world is much better for it. □

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