

Judy Chicago: Dry Ice, Smoke, and Fireworks Archive

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Artist, feminist, educator, and intellectual, Judy Chicago has become an omnipresent figure in contemporary culture whose prescient work now spans six decades. Although internationally recognized for her iconic feminist artworks, in recent years curators, art historians, and critics have rediscovered Chicago's time-based performances made with unconventional materials, including dry ice, colored smoke and fireworks. These ephemeral works, created from 1967 to 1974, and from 2012 to the present, provide a critical counterpoint and essential context for the work by predominantly male Land Artists working in the deserts of the American West during the 1960s and 70s.

Chicago's first foray into this genre began in 1967 in Southern California, with environments created with dry ice and flares, sited in both indoor and outdoor urban settings. She apprenticed with a pyrotechnics company and began creating *Atmospheres*, using fireworks and colored smoke, sometimes incorporating nude female performers. These works, created in the context of the Vietnam War, resembled both the battlefield and anti-war demonstrations. Soon Chicago was commissioned by museums in the region to mount *Atmospheres*. They were not only an exploration in mixing color in the air, but also a subtle critique of the male-dominated art world that made museum architecture temporarily "disappear" as the smoke enveloped their exteriors. Chicago also created colored smoke performances in remote locations throughout the Northwest Coast. In the mid 1970s, she abandoned her work with fireworks due to mounting costs and the complexity of these projects, which necessitated further training with male pyrotechnicians who resented her intrusion into their world.

All items on view in this exhibition are drawn from the Nevada Museum of Art, Center for Art + Environment, Archive Collections, Judy Chicago: Dry Ice, Smoke, and Fireworks archive.

Twenty-first Century: A Re-Start

Nearly forty years later in 2012, the J. Paul Getty Museum commissioned Chicago to create a series of three new pieces as part of *Pacific Standard Time*, a region-wide series of exhibitions in Southern California. Chicago began working with the Souza family, a six-generation pyrotechnics company that enabled her to achieve the complexity and chromatic range that she dreamed of in the 1960s and 70s. Each of the three performances—a new structural dry ice and flares installation at a Santa Monica art fair; a fireworks performance at a Los Angeles art gallery; and butterfly-shaped pyrotechnics display on a football field at Pomona College—took place in a different location, each within a new critical context. In 2012, her work was also included in a groundbreaking Land Art survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. As one of the few female artists associated with the genre, Chicago's works "softened" the land, rather than physically transforming it, and demonstrated reverence for the natural environment. Interest in Chicago's ephemeral

installations rapidly grew in the following years, and she was commissioned by leading national and international institutions to create new work using dry ice, colored smoke, and fireworks.

In March 2020, when normal life was paused due to the global pandemic, Chicago launched a new series of intimate smoke sculptures in her gardens in New Mexico. In November 2020, Chicago also created *Rainbow AR*, an augmented reality app, which allows global audiences to experience her smoke sculptures virtually. In July 2021, she mounted a large-scale fireworks and colored smoke performance in Belen, New Mexico to celebrate the launch of her new autobiography, *The Flowering*. At age 82, Chicago is now at the height of her fame, having fought for the recognition she deserved. Her time-based ephemeral installations are now acknowledged by art historians and critics as an important chapter in the history of Land Art.

The Fireworks Archive Acquisition

In 2018, the Nevada Museum of Art recognized the significance of this body of work and began working with Judy Chicago to secure the acquisition of her fireworks archive for the Center for Art + Environment Archive Collections. The archive is now situated in the context of work by Earthworks artists including Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer, where it both expands upon and subverts the mainstream definition of Land Art.

Judy Chicago: Dry Ice, Smoke, and Fireworks Archive is the debut exhibition of this archive, and reveals Chicago's process of mounting these performances through materials such as photographs, digital images, slides, 16-mm films, correspondence, drawings, maps, notes, maquettes, clothing, and press coverage. Upon acquiring Judy Chicago's fireworks archive, the Nevada Museum of Art joined Penn State University, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, as the stewards of Judy Chicago's archives.

About the Artist

Born in 1939 in Chicago, Illinois, Judy Cohen attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and earned her B.A. and M.F.A. at the University of California, Los Angeles. She first became known for her minimalist artworks that were created using a rainbow palette. The context for these works was the 1960s art world, which was inhospitable to women. In response, she "toughened up," attended autobody school, mastered the art of the airbrush, and created monumental-scale work. Around this time, she changed her last name to "Chicago," (the city of her birth), a gesture that was intended to reject the patriarchal tradition of changing one's name after marriage. In 1970, she founded the first Feminist Art Program at California State University, Fresno, and soon after she co-founded (with Miriam Schapiro) the Feminist Art Program at California Institute for the Arts in Santa Clarita, California. In 1972, in collaboration with their students, the two artists created *Womanhouse*, which transformed an abandoned building in Hollywood into a series of artist installations that explored women's experiences.

Chicago is perhaps best known for *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), one of the most important artworks of the twentieth century and a feminist touchstone that now resides permanently in the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in New York. This work has generated such attention that it nearly eclipsed the other important works Chicago created over her career—including her dry ice, smoke, and fireworks performances.

Through the decades, Chicago has taken on some of the most important topics in human history, including *The Birth Project* (1980-85), the *Holocaust Project* (1985-1993), and *The End: A Meditation on Death and Extinction* (2012-18). Her work has been collected and exhibited by institutions worldwide, and she has taught and lectured nationally and internationally. Her numerous awards include grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Getty Foundation, and four honorary doctorates. Among other books, she has written three

volumes of autobiography, including her most recent, *The Flowering: The Autobiography of Judy Chicago* (2021). Her legacy as an artist, teacher, writer, and feminist leader fighting the erasure of women's achievements has elevated her to the status of pop culture icon. Chicago lives and works in Belen, New Mexico with her husband and collaborator, photographer Donald Woodman. The first retrospective of her art career, spanning six decades, opens in August 2021 at the de Young Museum in San Francisco.