

# Judy Chicago: Jewish Identity

This exhibition features the art of Judy Chicago, who was born Judith Sylvia Cohen on July 20, 1939. She was the first child of May Levinson and Arthur M. Cohen, a couple that typified the secular idealism of a generation that struggled to forge a new brand of Jewish identity, militant not only against injustice in American society, but often against the religious strictures of immigrant parents who themselves had fled Czarist anti-Semitism. Judy's mother was an eldest daughter who sacrificed her own artistic development to help support younger siblings and her father was a rabbi's independent-minded youngest son pampered by older sisters – both reared by energetic mothers who sustained households when husbands proved less able to cope with the new world. Both of her parents grew up in households infused by Yiddish, which her paternal grandmother continued to speak, calling her by her Yiddish name, Yudit Sipke. As a result, Yiddish idiomatic expressions and phrases enlivened Judy's and rest of the family's English-language speech.

Arthur Cohen's pride in descent from the "blue blood" of the Vilna Gaon strongly impressed his daughter: "Totally devoted to my father, I believed him and was mortified when I bled common red when I first cut myself." Known as the Gaon or "Eminence" of Vilna, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797) helped shape modern Jewish history. Learned in the the *Torah* and *Talmud*, the Gaon gained renown both for emending the ancient texts – correcting scribal errors – and for vigorous teaching that dealt also with grammar and such secular subjects as science and mathematics, although virtually no secularizing influence had yet touched Eastern European Jewry. At a time when many women received no formal education, the Gaon, five of

whose eight children were daughters, urged that fathers "train" their daughters, who should read "moral books," especially on the Sabbath.

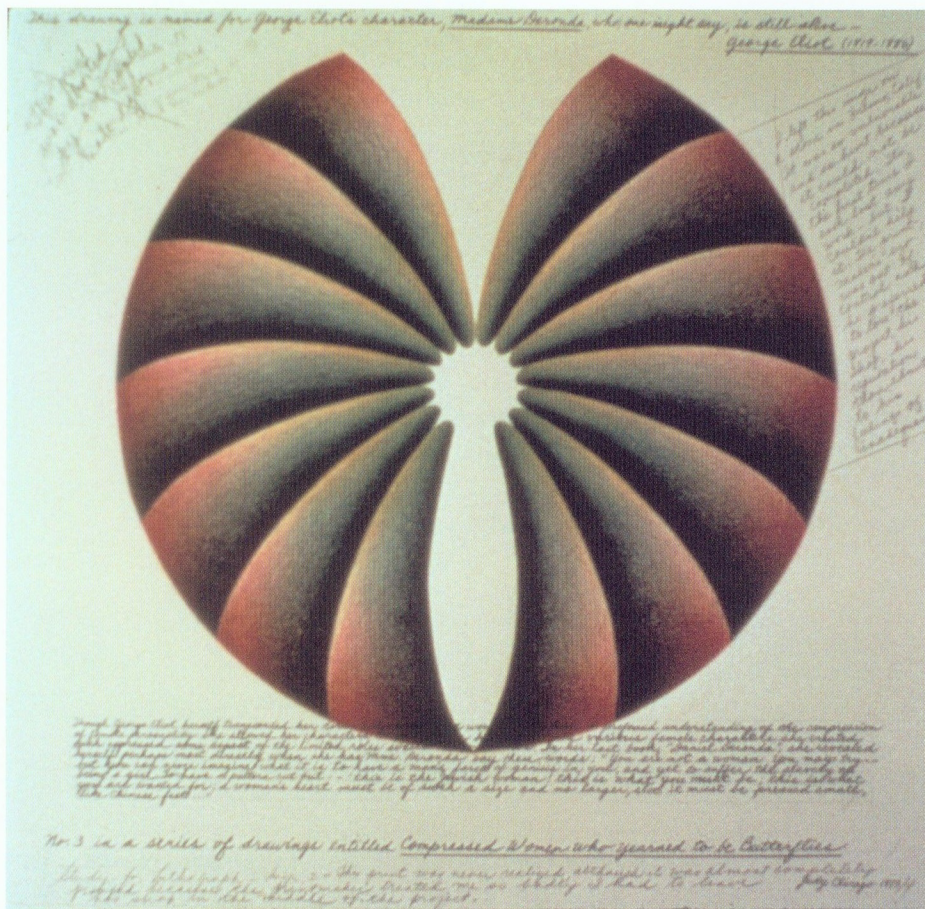
Although Chicago's home did not practice Jewish ritual, "it becomes obvious that I was raised in a household shaped by what might be called Jewish ethical values," she writes, "particularly the concept of *tikkun*, the healing or repairing of the world." Her paternal grandfather, Benjamin Cohen, from Slobodka, a shtetl near Kovna, Lithuania, attended the small town's *yeshiva* (institution for higher learning in Judaism), which came under the influence of religious reform known as the *Musar* (ethics) movement, motivated in part by the secular humanistic challenge of the *Haskalah* or Enlightenment that came to Eastern Europe from Germany in the nineteenth century. *Musar* reformists urged moral and ethical rejuvenation and emphasized the ethical and homiletic strain of teaching and preaching in Jewish tradition. The *Musar's* founder, Israel Lipkin Salanter (1810-1883), stressed humility and taught the precepts of leading a "perfect ethical life, exemplified by compassion for the poor." Benjamin's exposure to such altruistic Judaic humanism, which is acknowledged to contain "potentially radical values," eventually enabled him to pass them on to his children, especially his youngest son Arthur.

When Arthur finished high school at the age of sixteen, he had to go to work to support himself. He managed to get hired as a substitute postal clerk, working nights at the Chicago Post Office. At the time of the stock market crash in October

## **Rainbow Shabbat, Holocaust Project**

© Judy Chicago, 1992. Stained glass, 4'6" x 16'. Fabricated by Bob Gomez, Hand Painted by Dorothy Maddy. Photo © Donald Woodman. Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM





**Compressed Women Who Yearned to be Butterflies #3: Mme Deronda**

© Judy Chicago, 1974. Prismacolor on rag paper, 24" x 24".

Collection: Arkansas Art Center

October 1929, when the overwhelming economic downturn took its toll, radical politics made much more sense than religion to Arthur, who was just twenty years old. It was probably at this moment of economic collapse that Arthur Cohen found the American Communist Party, which had its largest impact during the 1930s, when it organized the unemployed, protested evictions and cuts in relief aid, and led hunger marches. In America, both the Communist Party and its sympathizers grew in numbers. Arthur exchanged one orthodoxy for another – his father’s for Marxism. Arthur may have rejected his father’s religious calling, but not the clear humanitarian goals his father drew from the *Musar* movement, his desire to make the world a better place.

Jewish religious observance was practiced in Judy’s extended family. She also experienced Jewish culture and ritual through her mostly Jewish classmates at elementary school. Her father’s death, when she was just thirteen, prompted her to turn to the Jewish religion, despite her secular upbringing. She searched for solace at the *Anshe Emet Synagogue*, a congregation of the Conservative Movement, near her home. She recalls going “on and off to temple in Chicago until I was 16,” for the *Yizkor* memorial service for the dead. Those reciting *Yizkor* promise to do “acts of charity and goodness”

in the memory of the deceased person and to be faithful to their teachings. Although the synagogue’s attempt to raise donations eventually alienated this teenager in mourning, who had no funds to offer, she nonetheless absorbed the lesson of the prayer, taking to heart the humanitarian goals of her father’s prematurely abridged life, which continued to inform her own.

While still in high school, Judy began dating a rabbinical student with whom she would remain in touch for many years, though she quickly realized that she was not cut out to be a rabbi’s wife. Judy attended and graduated from U.C.L.A. In her letters home to her mother, she frequently used Yiddish words in transliteration, a habit of speech that was second nature to her. This unselfconscious use of Yiddish with her mother also suggests comfort with, even pride in, their shared Eastern European Jewish heritage. Following her father’s teachings, during her freshman year at U.C.L.A., Judy became interested in the Civil Rights movement and began to work for the NAACP. She designed posters for

their events and became the corresponding secretary of the Westwood chapter.

That same year Judy met her first love, Leslie Lacy, an African-American student at University of Southern California. He later recalled her in a “fictionalized” memoir, *The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro*, pointing out that he did not then share her radical politics. At the age of twenty-one, she married Jerry Gerowitz, whose Jewish parents had moved to Los Angeles from Chicago. Barely two years later, he died in an auto accident, but she had taken his name during the marriage and continued to be known as Judy Gerowitz after his death in 1963.

Inspired by the feminist movement, Judy went to teach at Fresno State College in early 1970, eager to explore female experience and to find and study earlier women’s art. That summer, she legally changed her name to Judy Chicago, which, inspired by her accent strongly reminiscent of her native city, her Los Angeles art dealer had dubbed her. She took out an ad in *Artforum* announcing why she had made this change: “Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name: Judy Chicago.”

That fall she began to teach only women in what soon came to be called the Feminist Art Program. Chicago moved her program to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia the next academic year so that she could run it together with her friend, the painter, Miriam Schapiro. The two led students in producing *Womanhouse*, an early installation and performance space intended to interrogate the situation of women. The project attracted more than ten thousand visitors and national publicity during February 1972 when it was open.

Chicago left CalArts in 1973 to found the Feminist Studio Workshop with art historian Arlene Raven and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, both of whom, like Schapiro, shared her working-class Jewish background. To house the workshop, the three founded the Woman's Building, which opened on November 28, 1973. The next year, Chicago produced and exhibited drawings for a series of lithographs called *Compressed Women Who Yearned to Be Butterflies*, one of which focuses on *Mme. Deronda*, who grapples with her genius in George Eliot's 1876 novel, *Daniel Deronda*, which features a family of characters called "Cohen." On her drawing (illustration on page 6), Chicago transcribed *Mme. Deronda's* bitter protest: "You are not a woman. You may try – but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out – this is the Jewish woman! This is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet."

In March 1975 Chicago published *Through the Flower*, a widely read manifesto for feminist art and memoir in which she recalls her childhood and development as an artist, expressing pride in having been reared in the secular Jewish culture that figures importantly in the book. She recounts how,

when she was still a small child, her mother's stories of going "to the Jewish People's Institute," where she mingled with "creative people," became the context through which May Cohen encouraged her young daughter's love of drawing and nurtured her desire to become an artist.

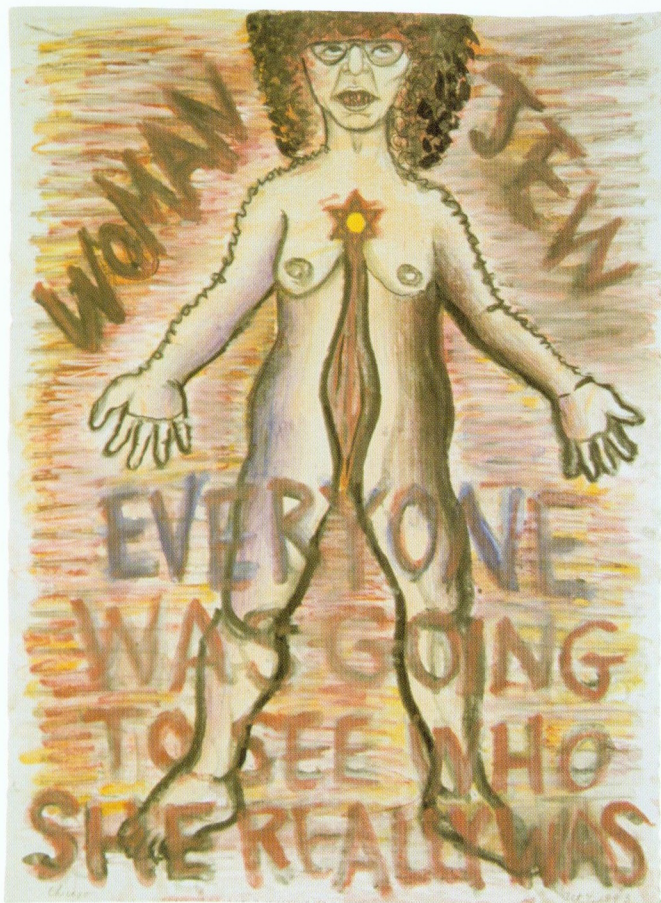
From 1969 until she divorced in 1979, Chicago was married to Lloyd Hamrol, a fellow Jew, an artist, and a close friend, whom she had known since their undergraduate days. This is the same period during which she conceived and executed her major work, *The Dinner Party*, with the help of many, mainly volunteers. Inspired by images of the Last Supper, which was, of course, the Passover *seder*, *The Dinner Party* features thirty-nine place settings around a triangular table, representing women from myth and history of whom only one is Jewish: Judith of the Hebrew Bible. More Jewish women, however, figure among the 999 names inscribed on the porcelain-tiled Heritage floor, from the biblical matriarchs Rachel and Sarah to Golda Meir and Henrietta Szold in modern times (illustration on page 2). More importantly, Chicago made the plates on the third wing rise up physically "as a symbol of women's struggle for freedom," echoing the *seder's* theme of the Jews' passage from slavery to freedom.

During the early 1980s, Chicago worked on the *Birth Project*, another engagement with volunteers who executed her needlework designs. Included were several different renditions of *Creation*, which take birth as a metaphor for creation itself. When an interviewer inquired whether the idea of God fit into her life, she responded: "Yes. . . . I believe in God. I believe that . . . I'm part of this whole, large fabric of life and it's a miracle and that's God for me."

**Creation of the World, Scroll #6, Birth Project**

© Judy Chicago, 1981-83; Hand-colored lithograph, 34" x 96".  
 Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM





**Everyone Was Going to See Who She Really Was, from *Autobiography of A Year***

© Judy Chicago, Oct. 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993. Mixed media on Magnani Paper, 15" x 11".

Photo © Donald Woodman. Collection: Artist

By 1985, when Chicago met and married photographer Donald Woodman, who shared her Eastern European Jewish heritage, she was already exploring her Jewish identity and considering a major project dealing with the Holocaust. Woodman became her collaborator on both the research and the execution of the project, finished in 1993. In daring to represent imagined scenes from the Holocaust, Chicago and Woodman agree with those, including the Israeli scholar Adi Ophir, who believe that it is necessary to “concretize the horror. Honor its intricate details.” Rather than serve as a memorial, this approach seeks to educate the public.

In *Double Jeopardy*, Chicago and Woodman presented the story of the Holocaust as usually recounted, using familiar photographs as illustration. Chicago then painted in what she considered “the untold story of women’s experiences of those same events.” *Arbeit Macht Frei/Work Makes Who Free?* is an examination of race, class, and oppression in terms of Nazi slave labor and takes up the history of African-American

slavery in the United States (illustration on page 10). Chicago’s decision to close the Holocaust Project with the hopeful vision expressed in *Rainbow Shabbat* is controversial for some, but for others it stands in opposition to the writer and survivor Primo Levi’s suicide (illustration on page 5 and back cover).

Chicago produced *Everybody Was Going to See Who She Really Was* on October 4, 1993, as part of a suite of drawings she called *Autobiography of a Year*. In this self-portrait, she depicts herself stripped bare, nude, with a Jewish star visible on her chest, from which she is bleeding, a mark of the emotional anguish she felt at revealing herself. To make absolutely certain that the viewer got her message, she had written the work’s title across her legs and the words “woman” and “Jew” above her right and left arms. The event that prompted this drawing was her anxiety over the impending debut of the *Holocaust Project* at the Spertus Museum of Judaica in Chicago.



**Resistance, study for *Double Jeopardy*, Holocaust Project**

© Judy Chicago, 1990. Prismacolor on rag paper, 29 ¾" x 22".

Photo © Donald Woodman. Courtesy: LewAllen Contemporary, Santa Fe, NM

### Merger Poem

© Judy Chicago, 1988. Lithograph, 20" x 30". Collection: Through the Flower

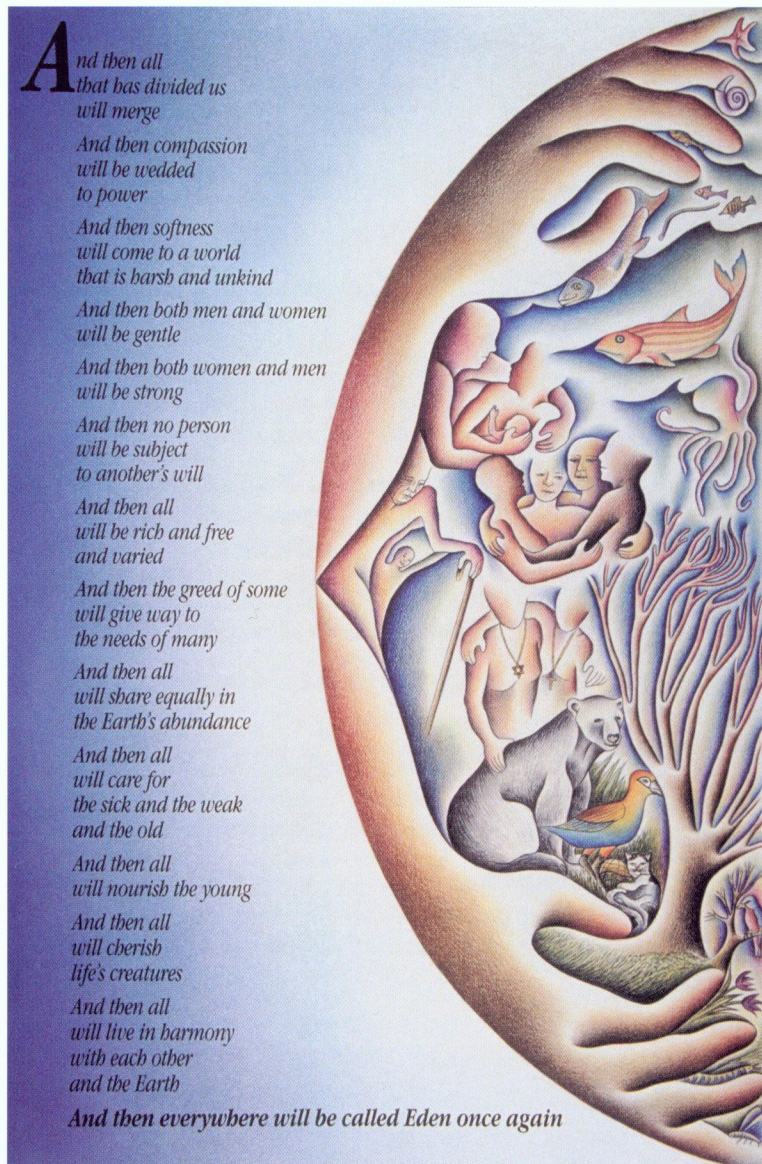
In 1999, in the context of her current marriage, Chicago created *Voices from the Song of Songs*, a suite of prints to illustrate a new translation from the Hebrew Bible by Marsha Falk, which emphasizes shared pleasure between husband and wife and reflects Jewish tradition, which encourages free expression of a woman's sexuality to her own husband. Chicago's *Merger Poem* about "merging the masculine and feminine" was set to music by Bonia Shur, the director emeritus of liturgical arts at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, and has been included in many prayer books. A feminist vision inspires Chicago and Woodman in their celebration of Passover each spring, when they travel from their home in Belen, New Mexico, to nearby Santa Fe, to join friends at a *seder* conducted with a *Haggadah* of her own design.

Following the Jewish mandate to choose life, *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* (2000) was Chicago's attempt to build on the hopeful note in *Rainbow Shabbat* at the end of the *Holocaust Project*. Working with women needleworkers, most of



**Bury the Hatchet, Resolutions: A Stitch in Time**

© Judy Chicago, 2000. Painting, needlepoint, appliqué & embroidery, 24" x 18". Needlework by Lynda Paterson. Assisted by Jane Thompson & Mary Ewanoski. Photo © Donald Woodman. Collection: Artist and Needleworkers



whom returned from earlier projects, she designed pieces that emphasized seven themes necessary for human survival: "Family, Responsibility, Conservation, Tolerance, Human Rights, Hope, and Change." In Chicago's radical and perhaps utopian image, *Bury the Hatchet*, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic clergymen literally grasp the handle of a hatchet, metaphorically coming together to end their disagreements. Inspired by the social ideals of her father that have their roots in Jewish teachings, Chicago, in the words of the writer Phyllis Chesler, is "a profoundly Jewish-American artist."

Dr. Gail Levin, *Exhibition Co-Curator and Professor of Art History, American Studies, and Women's Studies, Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.*

This essay is adapted from *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (Harmony Books, New York, 2007). © Gail Levin 2007

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