

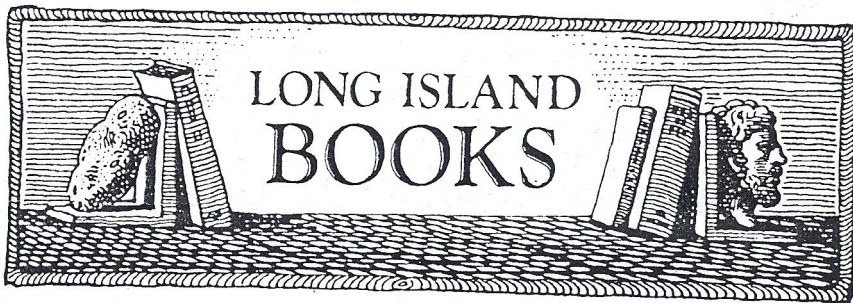


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BY REGINA WEINRICH

What's in a name? A lot, when it comes to the artist-feminist-activist-educator Judy Chicago. In "Becoming Judy Chicago," that question initiates a trajectory from Judy née Cohen, to Gerowitz, to Chicago.

Gail Levin, an art historian, professor at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and part-time Bridgehampton resident, breaks ground on this artist now entering a new phase in her career. Ms. Chicago's famous "The Dinner Party" (1979), a landmark installation in colorful ceramic and fabrics embroidered to celebrate key women in Western civilization, now permanently resides in the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

The biography's publication coincides with this historic event and provides the relevant background to force a reconsideration of why Ms. Chicago's work — often put down as kitsch — matters.

Before she came of age in the '70s, in the second wave of feminism, Judith Sylvia Cohen's early life in Chicago was marked by the death of her father. A union activist and Communist during the "Red scare," he was forced out of work and died in 1953 when Judy was 13. Significantly, he impressed upon her a commitment to making the world a better place.

While not always understanding her motivation, Judy's mother supported and encouraged her art and independence, even her liberated sexuality. Ms. Levin enlivens her account with Yiddishisms: *shadchen* (matchmaker), *kheyder* (traditional Jewish school), *mishagas* (craziness). Judy remained Cohen until the death of Jerry Gerowitz, her first husband, in a car that veered off a cliff. Only then did she take his name.

By 1970, Ms. Chicago had taken classes at the Art Institute of Chicago

from age 5, and in 1957 she enrolled in the College of Applied Art at U.C.L.A. The book's cover photo — Judy, hair cropped, in boxer shorts and gloves, her sweatshirt loudly displaying JUDY CHICAGO — is from a poster advertising her upcoming Cal State Fullerton show.

As the story goes, a photographer, Jerry McMillan, created this fierce, bring-it-on image because he considered Ms. Chicago such a "scrapper." A sign at the exhibit entrance read: "Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name Judy Chicago."