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(03/09/2007)

‘All Roads Lead To Judy Chicago’

Celebrated in two New York exhibits, the feminist artist is also the subject of a compelling biography that explores her Jewishness.

Sandee Brawarsky - Jewish Week Book Critic

Born in 1939, Judith Sylvia Cohen was called Yudit Spike in Yiddish by her grandmother. The woman who would become the artist Judy Chicago first signed her pieces Judy Cohen, and then after a first marriage as Judy Gerowitz. In 1970, upon the opening of a show of her work at California State College at Fullerton, she declared that she “hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name, Judy Chicago.”

“I’m a nice Jewish girl from Chicago,” she told an interviewer about her name change, as Gail Levin reports in a compelling biography, “Becoming Judy Chicago” (Harmony). A Midwestern art dealer first gave her this name, emphasizing her pronounced Midwestern accent. Judy Chicago announced the legal name change with a quotation from George Eliot’s 1876 novel “Daniel Deronda,” noted for its sympathetic portrayal of Jews, including a family named Cohen (and later the subject of a Chicago illustration).

Chicago was accused of hiding her ethnic identity with her name change, but Levin asserts the opposite: that Chicago was a proud and confident Jew, whose growing self-consciousness of her religion is reflected in her art.

Always outspoken and energetic, the 67-year-old artist has challenged conventional thinking about art and about the role of women. Her life’s work has involved making certain that women are no longer written out of history.

This is Judy Chicago season in New York. “The Dinner Party,” her monumental project, which has been exhibited around the country for the past 20 years to both acclaim and controversy, is being given a permanent home in the new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. And, an exhibition of Chicago’s work highlighting her Jewish identity is now on view at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum in New York. A catalog, “Judy Chicago: Jewish Identity,” accompanies the show.

In addition, Chicago’s book “The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation (Merrell Publishers) is being reissued, featuring an essay by Chicago and hundreds of color photographs by her husband, Donald Woodman.

In researching the biography, Levin had complete access to Chicago's personal letters, diaries and unpublished writings, and interviewed Chicago, those closest to her and many others who knew her. Levin, a professor of art history, American studies and women's studies at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of City University of New York, tracked down more than 250 people who knew Chicago, including several who never connected the Judy Cohen they knew with the artist Judy Chicago.

This is not an authorized biography — their agreement was that Levin would show Chicago an early draft, and the artist could make comments and suggestions, but Levin was not obliged to follow them. In an interview with *The Jewish Week*, she mentions Chicago's comment after reading: "It's painful but it's my life."

Levin was inspired to take on the challenge of writing about this living artist after completing her award winning biography of the painter Edward Hopper. Through that work and others, she tried to re-inscribe Hopper's wife into history. Josephine Nivison Hopper's artwork, which Levin believes was of high quality, was literally thrown out. The biographer responded by wanting to write about a feminist artist who would never be a victim, who was very strong.

"All roads lead to Judy Chicago," Levin says.

She dedicates "Becoming Judy Chicago" to her husband and Josephine Nivison Hopper and "all the other erased women artists."

Levin started working on the biography in 1996, when "The Dinner Party" was "still homeless." Once the Brooklyn Museum purchase was made and the exhibition schedule confirmed, she was under pressure to complete the book to achieve the confluence of Judy Chicago media events happening now.

The detailed biography goes back further than the artist's childhood in Chicago, to the lives of her ancestors in Eastern Europe. She is related to the Vilna Gaon, and her grandfather was the 23rd in an unbroken line of rabbis. Her father broke the chain. He was a union activist and Communist; the family embraced leftist politics, humane values and a non-materialistic, secular lifestyle, with an underlying sense of Jewish culture and Jewish values.

Close to her father, the artist was devastated by his death when she was 13. As Levin writes, "her father's legacy was, you have to go out and repair the world."

"I got interested in her Eastern European Jewish heritage, in part because it is my own," Levin says, noting that she never had studied Judaism as a culture before. "The deeper I got into Jewish culture, the more I understand myself, my family and my upbringing." Levin, who grew up in Atlanta, explained that she grew to understand "what was Eastern European and what was Southern" in her own background.

Chicago began drawing when she was 3 and began attending art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago when she was 5. After her father's death, her Saturday trips to the Art Institute became the center of her life.

"I never met a more goal-oriented person, a driven person who, from childhood, wanted to be inscribed in the history of art," Levin says, noting that Chicago has worked with "ferocious intensity" throughout her career and continues to do so.

"On many levels, Judy is important — as an artist, an educator and an activist. Her combination of these things is extraordinary," Laura Kruger, director of the HUC-JIR Museum, said. Kruger, who co-curated the show there with Levin, has known Chicago for more than 18 years and has long been a strong proponent of her work.

In the 1970s, Chicago pioneered programs to help young women artists, working to form a female art community and to make female art more visible. Chicago's themes, whether women's sexuality and power, menstruation, childbirth, men's abuse of power or the Holocaust, have been groundbreaking.

From 1974 to 1979, she worked with hundreds of women to complete the multimedia "The Dinner Party." Widely referred to as the first epic feminist artwork, the project — based on the Passover seder — features 39 symbolically painted dinner plates arranged on embroidered cloths, representing mythical and historical women as though they were guests of honor sitting down to share a meal. Each setting is embroidered with the woman's names in gold threads, illustrated with themes of her life and highlighting women's creativity and power. The boldly painted plates feature imagery suggestive of female forms, flowers and butterflies. In addition, the names of 999 additional heroic women are inscribed on tiles.

Since its opening in 1979, the project has been viewed by more than one million people on three continents. As Levin points out, the latest edition of the classic Janssen college art textbook features "The Dinner Party" for the first time.

Levin sees Chicago as a profoundly Jewish artist, who became increasingly aware of her Judaism in the 1980s. In those years, she kept a separate Jewish journal, apart from her other writings, from which Levin quotes.

The HUC show includes a photograph of the biblical Judith place setting at "The Dinner Party" and then focuses on other projects the artist has been involved with spanning 30 years, including the "Birth Project," illustrated lines from the "Song of Songs," a haggadah, other art relating to Jewish themes and a major work of the late 1980s and early 1990s, "The Holocaust Project," intended not as a memorial but an educational project.

"I wanted to show this other work," Kruger says. "She's not a one-note artist." The work in the show is very powerful, "with nothing quiet or sanitized." The Holocaust material

may cause some to turn their heads, but Chicago has always meant to instigate and provoke, to make viewers think and rethink.