

Levin, Gail
BECOMING JUDY
CHICAGO: *A Biography of
the Artist*
Harmony (496 pp.)
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An engrossing, vivid study of the life and work of one of America's most important feminist artists. Levin (Art/Baruch Coll. and The Graduate Center, CUNY; *Edward Hooper: An Intimate Biography*, 2005, etc.) turns her attention to Judy Chicago (born in 1939), tracing Chicago's early interest in art, exploring her psychological reaction to her father's early death and chronicling her first brief marriage. The artist's commitment to feminism was forged in that marriage: Long before it was fashionable, Chicago insisted that spouses share housework, once exclaiming to her husband, "What makes you think that because, by a biological accident, I was born with a cunt, I am supposed to pick up your socks?" Those feminist convictions soon found expression in her work. Her first major work of feminist art was her 1972 *Womanhouse*, a multimedia installation that explored the ways in which women have been oppressed by domestic expectations. The author strikes just the right balance between Chicago's oeuvre and her life, offering frank discussion of Chicago's complex second marriage, careful attention to Chicago's relationship with Judaism and a thoughtful examination of Chicago's feminist pedagogy. But the most arresting section is devoted to Chicago's masterpiece, *The Dinner Party*. Levin captures what an artistic challenge *The Dinner Party* posed for her subject, and spells out the personal and financial sacrifices she made in order to complete the massive work. Though this is not an authorized biography, Chicago was cooperative and generous with Levin, who seems to have unfettered access not only to Chicago's papers, but to dozens and dozens of people she knew and worked with, including ex-lovers, students, relatives and friends. The book is marred only by Levin's slightly stilted prose.

A gift for those interested in the history of American art and the history of feminism.