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Book reviews

Feb. 23, 2007, 3:27PM

Setting the table

She inspires both worship and fear. No one seems neutral about the creator of *The Dinner Party*

By BARBARA LISS

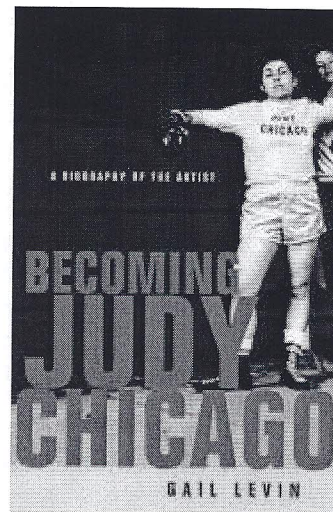
Struggling to find a place in the 1960s Los Angeles art world, an ambitious art school graduate received this harsh advice: "You have to decide whether you're going to be a woman or an artist." As art historian Gail Levin reveals in her accomplished biography of an iconic, yet polarizing figure, the decision to be both has driven the life and work of **Judy Chicago**.

Although she is best known for the controversial 1979 project *The Dinner Party*, **Chicago's** fight to win acceptance for feminist art goes beyond that groundbreaking work. The publication of Levin's book coincides with the March opening of the exhibit's permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum. Perhaps this sympathetic account will help bring **Chicago** and *The Dinner Party* the notice they deserve.

No easy feat, capturing the story of a living artist. Because it is difficult to achieve enough distance from the subject, biographies are often overly admiring or overly critical. Levin generally remains evenhanded, letting others draw a portrait of the artist. She had access to an impressive array of sources and quotes generously from **Chicago's** students and colleagues, her diaries, her mother's letters and endless art reviews.

We learn that no one is neutral about **Chicago**. She appears to inspire worship from those who regard her as a cultural heroine and fear from the rest. No one, awed or not, is at a loss to describe her: She is empowering or exploitative, nurturing or devouring, selfless or self-

RESOURCES



BECOMING JUDY CHICAGO

By Gail Levin.

Crown, 485 pp. \$29.95.

aggrandizing.

Chicago, who took her name from the city of her birth, was born **Judy** Cohen in 1939 to a secular Jewish working-class family. Her father, whom she adored, was her model for the political activism that informs her life. His death, when **Judy** was 13, caused a profound blow to her sense of worth, Levin maintains. In an attempt at psychologizing, Levin writes that **Chicago** has spent her life looking for her father and never forgave her mother for withholding emotional support after he died.

From a young age **Judy** wanted to be an artist. Her experience at the University of California, Los Angeles, art school proved frustrating, for she found the male-dominated faculty dismissive of women students. Although her sculpture focused on female sexual images, she tried to suppress them, knowing they would not be taken seriously by her instructors.

Chicago began her teaching career at California's Fresno State University in 1970 with a feminist agenda, explaining that she needed "an all-female environment where we could study our history separate from men's and see ourselves in terms of our own needs and desires, not in terms of male stereotypes of women." She called her course the "Feminist Art Program," which Levin believes is the first use of the term "feminist art."

When **Chicago** moved the program to CalArts, she collaborated with the artist Miriam Schapiro in a partnership that was sometimes productive but so competitive that it finally ended acrimoniously. In 1972, with their students, they created *Womanhouse* as both an educational center and an artistic statement about the devaluation of domesticity. Like *The Dinner Party*, which lay ahead, *Womanhouse* created controversy within the group making the art and shocked much of the public.

Halfway through the book comes *The Dinner Party*. While Levin follows up with a discussion of other works — among them *Birth Project* and *Holocaust Project* — it is the *Dinner Party* section that grabs our interest. **Chicago** worked with hundreds of volunteers to bring the project to life, and the drama of its creation — the collegiality alternating with fierce infighting — makes for fascinating reading.

Levin traces the evolution of the installation from **Chicago's** initial idea to honor women — long ignored in Western history — through its many exhibition venues. The exhibit, which many condemned for its explicit sexuality, featured a display of 39 brilliantly painted dinner plates arranged on embroidered cloths and situated on three arms of a great triangle.

Houston played a prominent role in the exhibit's journey. **Chicago** was determined that it be viewed in museum settings, but beyond the question of whether the world was ready for plates decorated with images of female genitalia was the issue of the scope and scale required for the installation. After the debut at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, other museums broke their commitment to present it, leaving *The Dinner Party* with a future in storage.

In 1980, through the dedication of local supporters, the exhibit came to the University of **Houston**-Clear Lake. Although **Chicago** was not enthusiastic about a locale that lacked museum prestige, the show proved successful. More than 60,000 people visited the exhibition, and a program of lectures and panel discussions contributed to its popularity. From **Houston** the show traveled to more than a dozen cities, reaching, perhaps, a million viewers.

Intertwined with the art is the tumultuous story of **Chicago's** three marriages, which Levin relates candidly. Of **Chicago's** extramarital affairs, Levin, in her one flash of humor, wryly observes, "Affirming other women and their art did not exclude pursuing their husbands." Levin gives too much attention to the question of whether **Chicago** is a lesbian. Apparently she isn't. Still, when writing about women artists, authors seem obligated to discuss the issue.

"The battle to become visible is ... what it's all about," **Chicago** wrote in her journal in 1971. For

Judy Chicago and feminist art the statement is still true. If we didn't know this before Levin's book, we do now.

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