Behind the dinner table

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Abstract. Judy Chicago is defined by the art world as the founder of the concept of "feminist art." Her creations revolve around patterns with metaphorical and symbolic colors, such as "reproductive organs," "flowers," and "butterflies." In the 1970s, feminist artists began to contemplate using the female body as a subject of creation, using artistic language to advocate for the political metaphor of female reproductive organs as an independent center of discourse apart from male-centered phallic symbolism. This body art unleashes the freedom and nature that feminist artists have long been suppressed by patriarchal society. Against this backdrop, Judy Chicago created "The Dinner Party."

Keywords: Judy Chicago; Feminism; Contemporary Art.

1. Introduction

The Dinner Party is a vast triangular banquet table with three wings consisting of thirty-nine greatest women in history categorized into prehistory to classic Rome, Christianity to the reformation, and American Revolution to the women's revolution. Created by Judy Chicago, America's greatest modern feminist artist, The Dinner Party breaks the traditional high art standards, directly conveying the message of the power of women and the necessity of rebuilding the social hierarchy with females. Chicago ingeniously celebrated women's individuality using the traditional stereotypes of women's "work" such as porcelain and embroidery. Yet, to fully understand this stunning piece of artwork, we need to trace back more than 50 years to Judy's Chicago's early era of art creation, or even to her childhood.

"The Dinner Party": A Feminist Heroic Epic

2. Social Context and Artist's Gaze

2.1. Artist Reference

Chicago was born in 1939, her childhood was an era of turbulence but also a great turning point in America. That time period was marked by the ending of the Great Depression, the beginning of WWII, the Holocaust, atomic bombs, and The Cold War, which caused men to be on the battlefields for years. As a result, it was the first time ever in the United States that women took over a man's job at home, proving the capability of women in breaking social constraints. Women worked in heavy construction such as machinery, taking roles in lumber and steel mills as well as physical labor including unloading freight, and building ships. This stimulated "Rosie the Riveter" being put forth as a symbol of early American feminism and women's economic advantage, and later on the character "Wonder Woman" served as an influential role in encouraging girls to believe in their power as a woman. The continuous attempts in emphasizing female independence caused artists like Judy Chicago to begin making influence through art and education, in order to liberate both men and women who were still stuck in the traditional ways of thinking. When Chicago was in her early adulthood, America changed radically through the civil rights movement.

2.2. 1970s: Freedom and Nature

The question of sex and its use in society was being raised through large social movements like gay liberation and women's revolution, both focused on the severe oppression of groups with alleged "feminist" traits and social oddity. Mentioned by *The Communist* in September 1970, "These movements range from reformist lobby-type groups to highly disciplined and tightly-knit

organizations and collectives with a revolutionary perspective" Soon this voice of gender equality was enlarged through the making of TV shows and the actions of celebrities. "Deep Throat", and "Charlie's Angels" are both examples of movies and TV shows amplifying women's sexual desire and ability to dominate. Barbara Walters was the first woman to co-anchor a major network evening newscast; 29-year-old Billie Jean King won three sets in a tennis doubles match with 55-year-old Bobby Riggs. All of them brought awareness to the stereotyping of women and exposed the public to what would become the structural and ideological foundation of the seventies feminist movement.

Judy Chicago made herself a part of the revolution by beginning the first-ever women-only art program at Fresno State University in 1964. Where women gained the precious opportunity to look at history and art through their own lenses instead of men's, this overturned the normalized male gaze on information sources we could get for hundreds of years. Her students were deeply influenced by not only the exposed material but also the massive amount of work and strict rules. From not allowing students to be absent due to sickness, to grueling schedules in the studio, Chicago freed the female students from their inner feminine nature which instinctively made the students avoid conflicts and heavy work. She also puts herself in the uprising for freedom by making controversial artworks for the public to immerse in--Chicago explored and exposed women's physical and psychological demands and satirized domesticity through her early installation art, *Women House* along with her students. Chicago wondered if the same activities women had used in life could be transformed into the means of making art, a question that would animate *The Dinner Party* 6 years later.

3. Feminist Epic

3.1. Symbolism From Antiquity

When we analyze an artwork, both art, and history are inextricably linked. Art during the 70s also underwent a vast reformation due to the spread of pop culture where artists detected people's obsession with media and famous icons and utilized their art to reflect society and popular culture instead of making aesthetic "high art". Artists used anything they could find, including technology, recycled material, new media, fabrics….etc. Ideas were being put forth, then aesthetics. Judy Chicago was not the only one participating in this new kind of art form. The *Women House* we previously touched upon was done together with artist Miriam Schapiro, who was a leading figure in pattern and decoration art. Schapiro used traditional women's crafting techniques like quilts and fabric decoration and combined with her own ideas and perception, successfully blurred the line between fine art and crafts. Video and installation artist Dara Birnbaum made art by hanging TVs up on the ceiling with transparent human shapes as targets in front of them, reflecting that mass media targets everybody easily. Usage of materials is certainly not limited, thus some artists chose to convey messages using what they originally have, bodies. Famous performance artist Marina Abramovic created the most fascinating and dangerous performance in 1979 where she stood in a gallery for six hours and put her life and body completely in the hands of strangers, turning herself into an object to be used as one wished. She used her own body as a medium to reflect human nature when it faces absolutely powerless beings. Countless examples presented to us the unique forms of art in that era, which can be helpful when we look at *The Dinner Party* created at that same time.

3.2. Symbolism From Antiquity

Looking back on Judy's Chicago's revolutionary art, *The Dinner Party*, it was also a large piece of conceptual art using several different materials to celebrate women's culture. The piece was largely influenced by *The Last Supper* done by Leonardo Da Vinci. Chicago once gave a slide presentation and lecture at the Smithsonian Institution and answered the question, "why a dinner party?". She said that "while men have their last supper, women have their dinner parties." While the shape of the table, a triangle, usually represented the power and hierarchy of man, she chose to use the shape itself to break this toxic social system by making women be a part of it. Thus, by using it in the dinner party, the triangle represents fairness, wholeness, and enlightenment of the female body, embracing the

power of both the individuality and the unity of women. Chicago also used porcelain and embroidery to create representational art for all 39 women, the plates are full of varied colors and shapes inspired by each woman's personality and contributions. In wing one, Chicago used an abstract floral form with petals glazed in purples, blues, and greens to represent Sappho, who was a prolific poet of Ancient Greece. Her place setting reflected her important cultural influence on Greek. Looking from the front, Sappho's name was embroidered in a burst of color that identifies her female creativity, with the "S" being illustrated with an instrument often accompanying the recitation of her poetry. In wing two, Chicago depicted a birthing image with snakes on the plate and created the tree of life image in the runner while making the place setting for Trotula, an eleventh-century Italian doctor. As the world's first gynecologist, Trotula held progressive ideas about women's health care and giving birth in a male-dominated profession. Chicago thus used the serpentine form, a symbol for medicine and doctors, to present women's wisdom and power of healing. In wing three, Chicago began to use 3D ceramics to represent the idea of "breaking free" from the confines of pre-existing masculine art and literature, and how women should create in a style that reflects themselves. This is shown especially in how she created the place setting for Virginia Woolf—-Chicago created a blooming flower in reference to Woolf's creative genius, a stitched and painted light beam under the plate to symbolize the impact of her literary legacy, illuminating the path toward women's freedom of expression through literature.

4. Respond to Artwork

The shapes and paintings on the plates are much more than just patterns and flowers. If we look closely, it presents genitalia, which can also be related to the usage of the body as part of the conceptual art movement. Instead of using the body as a way to reflect the cruelty of society as Marina Abramovic did, Chicago celebrated women's bodies by placing them at the center of each set. By presenting what has traditionally been thought as shameful as the sole focus of high art, Chicago elevated the genitalia's significance, recognizing that all power in the world is ultimately derived from it, as it is the source of creation itself. Under the table, there are 2300 hand-cast porcelain tiles, and inscribed in gold are the names of 999 women of achievements. This heritage floor cast a strong idea on both the unity of women, and to convey how many women had struggled into prominence, and how impressive were the 39 women who climbed on top of the society and told the world about feminism. It is worth noting that over 400 individuals, the majority of whom were women, collaborated with Judy Chicago on The Dinner Party. This underscores the notion that female power has been transmitted across generations and that women have persistently overcome obstacles in each era through their unwavering efforts.

5. Conclusion

It is evident that Judy Chicago's groundbreaking artwork, *The Dinner Party*, has had a lasting impact on the world of art and on the feminist movement. Despite initial controversy and criticism from the public, the piece has inspired countless female artists to stand up for themselves and their artistic visions. Chicago's legacy will continue to inspire and empower women for years to come, proving that the power of art can be truly transformative.

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