“Before *Womanhouse*:Ms. Chicago and the California Boys”

Revolutions start from the inside. Despite our romantic visions of the sans culottes storming the Bastille, the French Revolution was initiated by the aristocracy, while the landed gentry spearheaded the American. This statement in no way diminishes the ruptures that revolutions instantiate or the radical social and political changes they engender, rather it signals where we might look to construct a history of the most profound revolution in postwar art: the one brought about by Feminism.

A second declarative statement: Judy Chicago was the most well-known woman artist in Los Angeles in the 1960s. This does not mean that she was not frequently subject to misogyny, or that male curators or other artists did not ignore her work or even refuse to look at it. What it does mean is that Chicago was one of the artists who helped set the terms of Southern California art, and it is my contention that Feminism’s rupture was as much about giving new valences to already existing artistic issues as it was about introducing new ones.

Exploring how the terms of Southern California art were set does not mean tracing the genealogy of a style. On one level, no stylistic rubric could possibly encompass the work of artists such as Chicago, Peter Voulkos, Robert Irwin, Craig Kauffman, and Billy Al Bengston. The contention that these artists share certain affinities, despite the manifest incompatibilities of their works in any obvious morphological sense, is meant to counter the facile tendency to group artists in catch-all and largely untheorized categories such as the LA Look. Rather, these artists engaged with a set of issues that, while particular to Los Angeles during this era, allowed them to intervene in artistic and theoretical debates that were far from regional. In very general terms, the artists came together around several shared concerns, the most important for this essay being craft and perception.

For Robert Irwin, the question of craft was of paramount importance, in fact, absolutely constitutive of the difference between a material practice and a purely ideational one—in other words between a perceptual and a conceptual art. Irwin states: “There’s a consistency to physical objects that somehow reads all the way through…” and he continues, “If you place a very severe observation on something—which means first allowing your senses to really read this thing uninterrupted...if there are mistakes in there which your senses pick up which contradict or lie in some way, then the area of craft has failed.”[[1]](#endnote-1) What bears further exploration—starting with the ceramics of Peter Voulkos—is the nature of the craft which inflected the practices of artists in Southern California.

For one, this craft precludes a simplistic identification with the well-made object, especially if this is defined in terms of medium—that is a work of Voulkos’s like *Little Big Horn* (1959), with its cracked, jutting masses, was not considered a well-made ceramic work within the established terms of the discipline at the time. What Voulkos demonstrated in works like *Little Big Horn* is that a viable ceramics practice could, instead, be based on a thoroughgoing retraining of artistic skills and such principles as a destabilization of medium, a liberation of color, and an engagement with technology, all qualities that became fundamental terms in the practice of Chicago and other Los Angeles artists of the 1960s. To focus on the last of these principles, the turn to industrial technology already existed in ceramics, but its position was greatly intensified by Voulkos and his colleagues. First, Voulkos modified the Denver-Fire Clay Company electric wheel then widely in use by increasing its horsepower from one-quarter to one-half, allowing them to work on much larger masses of clay. Next, Voulkos crucially adopted two pieces of factory equipment from disparate industries for use in the ceramics studio. He brought in enormous humidifiers designed for fruit-packing plants, repurposing them so that large clay forms would not dry out while being worked on. Giant dough mixers, capable of mixing hundreds of pounds of flour—or powdered clay—and water at once, were bought, making it feasible to produce works that by the late 1950s weighed up to half a ton. These innovations were central to transforming clay from a material in an *objet d’art* context to a sculptural material able to be used on an industrial scale.

Like ceramic sculpture, the development of Finish Fetishentailed a fundamental and considered reskilling for the artists involved: nearly all the major Finish Fetish artists began as abstract painters, and their artistic retraining also consisted of an intensive engagement with industrial techniques and technology. John Coplans claimed in the exhibition catalogue for “American Sculpture of the 1960s” that such LA works as Larry Bell's optically coated glass cubes and Irwin's plastic discs were dependent on the space technology available in the LA basin.[[2]](#endnote-2) This claim, while dramatic, is not entirely true; a much more prosaic engagement of art and technology instead characterized most Fetish Finish work.

The introduction of industrial technology into Irwin’s work, for example, at first took a rather old-fashioned form. The Los Angeles basin had been dotted with specialty shops that produced parts of cars by hand, fenders for instance, before innovations made it cheaper to mass produce them. Irwin found a shop that had survived by making very high-end products, parts for Indy cars, and they shaped subtly convex discs for him out of lightweight aluminum. In 1964, Craig Kauffman began experimenting with the industrial process of vacuum-forming plastic. Normally, vacuum-formed plastic was employed in quite simple configurations, plastic electric signs in restaurants and other types of commercial establishments, but by 1967 Kauffman had produced a truly innovative process, creating molds and shapes much more complex than anything previously produced in vacuum-formed plastic. DeWain Valentine also began with a relatively straightforward industrial process—cast polyester resin—which is a simple exothermic reaction between a catalyst and resin that turns the liquid resin into a hard plastic. The problem was that before Valentine no one had been able to make an object more than twelve inches in diameter using this process, but in 1968 Valentine broke the materials barrier and developed a solid casting process enabling him to accomplish large-scale resin sculpture, such as his Concave Circles of 1970, which measured ninety-six inches in diameter.

Chicago was unquestionably one of the artists who carried industrial craftsmanship furthest by training herself in several industrial fields—auto body mechanics to create her early sprayed pieces, boat building for her plastic paintings, and pyrotechnics for her *Atmospheres*s. As Chicago said of her practice: “You have to remember the history of my work…When I wanted to learn how to use a spray gun, I went to autobody school, when I wanted to learn how to lay-up fiberglass, I went to the boat-works, when I wanted to learn how to do fireworks, I went to the fireworks company—I have a long history of apprenticing myself to whomever knows the technique I am interested in.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

What does this excursus into art and industry demonstrate? First, it shows a very different relationship to technology on the West Coast than on the East Coast, where it is hard to imagine Dan Flavin introducing new production methods for fluorescent tubes or Carl Andre reformulating firebricks. Yet because these techniques were not really high-tech, artists could be the hands-on innovators, and not just the repurposers of off-the-shelf technology or the supervisors of fabricators. However innovative, this craftsmanship would not be consequential unless it produced significant art. One of Chicago’s earliest sprayed pieces, *Car Hood* (1964), demonstrates how incredibly nuanced this new technique could be in the relation between color, surface, and shape. Chicago’s valediction from autobody school, *Car Hood*, was painted on the actual hood of an early 1960s Chevrolet Corvair. It is in many ways a three-dimensional hard-edge painting, with a composition that contrasts complementary blues and oranges to striking optical effect. The central design of concentric blue/orange circles bisected by an orange cross shows the enormous precision of Chicago’s spray technique, while also avoiding the sometimes visually distracting raised ridges of more traditional brushed hard-edge technique. Chicago makes extraordinary use of the undulations of the hood to enhance her flared design, most remarkably in the employment of the elevated centerline, painted in the deepest blue, to pierce the central concentric design. This work is an early example of the painting/sculpture hybrids that became so identified with Southern California art of the 1960s, and in a nice twist, Chicago reverses Voulkos’s transformation of utilitarian objects into sculpture by employing an actual utilitarian object as the substructure.

For Chicago and a number of other Los Angeles artists the issue of craft led directly to the question of perception, which became another defining difference between West and East Coast artists. These differences are neatly summarized in two anecdotes Irwin tells of encounters with the work of New York artists. First, he outlines a discussion he had with Frank Stella when both artists were showing at LA’s Ferus Gallery in the mid 1960s: “We were having lunch one afternoon, and he said to me, ‘Why do you go to so much trouble finishing your paintings, for example, in making the edges on your frames so perfectly straight?’ I asked him, ‘Why don’t you? How can you not?’ At that time, Stella was making those hexagonal paintings with the hexagonal doughnut holes in the middle. In his sketches he would use a ruler for the edges, but the canvases themselves had edges which were often wobbly and uneven, completely unattended to. ‘Why don’t you make your paintings like your sketches?’ I asked him. ‘Or, if not, why don’t you have wobbly edges in your sketches?’ Well, his answer was simple: ‘It’s not important.’”[[4]](#endnote-4) Irwin presents this conversation as something of a revelation of the differences between New York and Los Angeles artists: “That was the difference between the artists on the East Coast and those on the West. We saw it and they didn’t. They relied on *con*ception while we worked in the domain of *per*ception.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Second, Irwin remembers one of his first experiences of seeing Barnett Newman’s paintings in person. The large Zip paintings were hung in a manner that was common in the era, suspended from picture rails with wire. For Irwin, the wires had more perceptual weight than the zips in the paintings themselves, and he was unable to follow the interdiction just to ignore them.

Such refusal to consent to the established norms of their field led Los Angeles artists to a kind of radical empiricism. Chicago’s own perceptual empiricism is most clearly elaborated beginning with her Colorbook of 1967 to 1970. The Colorbook is a bound book of 77 pages on which Chicago drew closed and open circular forms using Prismacolor pencils. In speaking with art historian Jenni Sorkin, Chicago described the Colorbook drawings as studies in “spectral color,” by which I take her to mean that the colors do not inhere in the pencils themselves or even in their interactions on the pages but are produced in the perception of the viewer.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This shift in the focus of perceptual attention from object to human perceptual apparatus is fundamental, and Chicago expanded her inquiry into the conditions of perception first in a series of multi-part sculptures of the mid 1960s and then in several major environmental installations. *Rainbow Pickett* (1965) comprises six wooden planks wrapped in canvas and sprayed in a mixture of warm and cool tones ranging from yellow to green. The planks are installed at 45-degree angles between wall and floor and are graduated in length as they recede toward the corner of the room. The work is entirely dependent on a mobile viewer who determines both the spatial and visual qualities of the piece. From certain vantages, the work appears as six discreet and individually colored units; from others, the negative space disappears and a singular “rainbow” of interacting colors meets the viewer. Chicago is rarely mentioned in accounts of Light and Space art, yet she developed her work in a similar trajectory from environmental objects to full-blown environments, and did so before most of her male counterparts. The first of these was a collaboration with Lloyd Hamrol in which the artists constructed a room in the Rolf Nelson Gallery made of white plastic walls, bowing out at the sides, and a floor covered a foot deep in chicken feathers and talcum powder. The greatly reduced visual stimulus of the all-white environment made viewers much more conscious of their own perceptual system and had profound psychological effects. In the words of the *Los Angeles Times* art critic William Wilson: “The environment inclines one to total unselfconsciousness. It induces a sense of dreamy floating. It has been suggested that this work, like so many contemporary efforts, has a way of creating a subjective reaction in the viewer since it approximates a state of mind which some find pleasurable and others threatening. The artistic achievement is, however, in the artists’ ability to find a sculptural parallel that creates an effective and consistent sense of endless air.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Chicago continued her environmental investigations in a systematic manner in the more than a dozen *Atmospheres* she staged between 1969 and 1974. These outdoor pyrotechnic works utilized fireworks and road flares to blanket open spaces with a slowly dissipating perceptual haze. Chicago needed precision in both the placement and the timing of the pyrotechnics to create the density and the overlapping color mixtures her investigations demanded. In one of the best documented *Atmospheres*, Chicago covered the fountain court of the new Pasadena Art Museum site with layers of violet, blue, and magenta smoke. For her one-artist exhibition at Cal State Fullerton, she used entirely white smoke emanating from the high-rise buildings around a central court. Thomas Garver described the experience in *Artforum*: “the central area gradually became obscured, the fog increasing to the point where one could see only a few feet. Sunlight filtered through the smoke, however, lighting the entire area with an incredible underwater glow. After a few minutes the smoke lifted and fragments of architecture returned…and finally ‘reality’ was restored.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Providing a means by which someone can perceive, however briefly, the world and their place in it differently is one of the signal achievements of Light and Space art, for most of the time our expectations color our perceptions— we only see what we expect to see—and, as Chicago demonstrated, to force the viewer out of these ingrained habits requires a remarkable degree of meticulousness and craft.

Perceiving the world differently and forcing viewers out of ingrained habits begins to lead us toward the Feminist revolution. The steps along the way were also worked out empirically and one of the crucial stages was the color theory Chicago diagrammed in the catalogue for her one-artist exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1969 and made manifest in her dome sculptures of 1968 to 1970. The domes are quite intimately-scaled—the larger domes being only 4 x 10 inches--clear acrylic semi-spheres that are blown into shape. Chicago colored the domes by spraying and air-brushing them from behind in shades ranging from opalescent white to dark bronze and they are always displayed in groups of three on clear or mirrored acrylic tabletops. The coloring of the domes is systematized, and in the catalogue she explains that: “The three forms provide a framework for the color relationships. I’ve used different systems. In all of these pieces there is a 3–6 rhythm, which is a primary color/secondary color module. “[[9]](#endnote-9) To make this statement clearer, Chicago offers diagrams and accompanying descriptions of different series of domes, as in this example for a series that combines green, purple, and blue: “Color in dome diagrammed above is transparent from one view – opaque from other view. Numerous thin layers of pigment dissolved in clear lacquer produces an iridescent quality [.] Purple goes to rose, blue goes to aqua, green goes to chartreuse at edges.”[[10]](#endnote-10) She is extremely clear as to the formal qualities her color system achieves – “Color has become sculptural in domes – i.e. instead of being on the surface of the piece like a skin, it is integrated totally with the shape and inseparable from it. … It is not a sculpture that is painted, but a colored sculpture that is atmospheric and an entity in and of itself. The color glows, reflects light, and is indeterminate in position. These qualities align her with a number of practitioners who are usually described as Finish Fetish or Light and Space artists, but Chicago also insists that “color is directly emotive and sensate, demanding a non-intellectual, feeling response.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Unpacking the nature of those emotions, sensations, and feelings and their relation to Feminism requires looking at some qualities that were consistently mentioned but rarely embraced in Los Angeles art of the 1960s and at the work of two more of Chicago’s male colleagues: Craig Kauffman and Billy Al Bengston.

Taking one of the meanings of Finish Fetish literally, overt sexuality was seen by many critics to be an inherent quality of Southern California art: sometimes identified with a particular artist and sometimes merely intrinsic to the overall milieu. This is, perhaps, unsurprising in the writings of visiting critics like Barbara Rose, who carried with them stereotypes of Hollywood Babylon that colored their judgments of the local art scene. Rose asserts that “The most striking aspect of Los Angeles art is its pervasive eroticism. With the exception of straight-and-narrow geometric artists, hardly a painter or sculptor escapes it. One cannot call this element sensual, and one hesitates even to qualify it as sensuous….On the contrary, the eroticism of the art only appears to reflect the charged, generalized sexuality of the ambience, with its nearby beaches crowded by acres of tanning flesh and colonies of body builders.”[[12]](#endnote-12) However, even such knowledgeable insiders as John Coplans argued that what distinguished the work of Irwin, Bengston, and Ken Price was its overt pleasure-seeking: “There is little doubt that in the future it will be obvious that these artists (and many of the younger generation) are creating a level of empirical art that is unambiguous, high spirited and totally hedonistic.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Other than Ken Price, whose small rounded, perfectly formed shapes pierced by darker apertures have a sensuous, bodily quality, it was Craig Kauffman whose works are most consistently seen to combine craft, perceptual acuity, and sexuality. Kauffman was credited by the other Ferus Gallery artists with producing the first non-derivative Southern California painting, cleaning up and greatly simplifying the bombast of Abstract Expressionism. Yet, Kauffman’s reduced forms were still seen by the critic James Monte to be characterized by the passive sexuality that linked surrealism to Abstract Expressionism.[[14]](#endnote-14) Kauffman spent the early 1960s in Europe, and when he returned to Los Angeles he claims that he was blindsided by how much his friends work had changed and how old-fashioned his own paintings now seemed. His breakthrough came first in a series of drawings, in which he developed a signature image, and then in his discovery of a new material. These drawings were made over advertizing pages from the Frederick’s of Hollywood catalogue, especially the women’s shoe pages—no more classically Freudian connection could possibly be imagined—and in them, Kauffman distilled an image of two connected pear shapes with a long pendulous protrusion hanging down between them. The appearance of this image, first in flat paintings on acrylic sheet and later in vacuum-forced plastic in shallow, caused *Artforum* to use very uncommon language for an art journal of the era, describing the shape as “an erotic thermometer or a phallus designed in a windtunnel.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Kauffman’s erotic thermometers, however, were relatively short-lived, and by the mid 1960s overtly sexual imagery is sublimated into the extraordinary coloristic effects and perceptual experiments of the wall hangings, bubbles, and loops that made his international reputation.

Judy Chicago’s early career took a similar trajectory to Kauffman’s. Her first published review announced that “Gerowitz’s concern, on the other hand, is a preoccupation with an organic sexuality rendered in painted plaster…”[[16]](#endnote-16) The reaction to her *Car Hood* was even more extreme, with the critic associating the work with a popular treatise that argued that blatant sexuality was the means by which Detroit manipulated buyers: “Judith Gerowitz’s painted car hood also eschews any connotations of motorized power in order to play with the decorative surface and erotic symbolism of the automobile. *Hood* might be a cover design for ‘The Insolent Chariots.’”[[17]](#endnote-17) Chicago, herself, admits that partially do to the negative reaction for these early pieces, she intentionally sublimated her art, producing works such as *Rainbow Picketts*, *Trinity*, and *Ten Part Cylinders* that would bring her to prominence in exhibitions such as “Primary Structures” and “American Sculpture of the 1960s.” Yet, even in their sublimation, there was often something that critics found discordant in Chicago’s work. Peter Plagens, for instance, called Chicago’s colors “fruity,” while another critic pronounced them pure “Disneyland,” and a third referred to their “excess of world’s fair zeal.”

What the critics are implying, none too subtlely, is that there is something in bad taste about Chicago’s art, although I think a more apt description might be found through a very specific meaning of the word “vulgar.” T.J. Clark argues in his justifiably famous essay “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism” that we could better describe Abstract Expressionist paintings if we took them to be vulgar. Clark’s definition of the term is that “it points two ways: to the object itself, to some abjectness or absurdity in its very make-up (some tell-tale blemish, some atrociously visual quality which the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries); and to the object’s existence in a particular social world, for a set of tastes and styles of individuality…”[[18]](#endnote-18) Both aesthetically and socially, vulgarity for Clark represents a betrayal by those who should be at the vanguard of good taste. Under the guise of vulgarity, artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Hans Hofmann rise to the forefront of Abstract Expressionism and the usual terms of avant-garde approbation like authenticity are jettisoned. This Abstract Expressionism is at its best for Clark when “it seems in search of the false underlying the vehement; where the point is that cheap vehemence, or easy delectation, are what painting now is—the only values, the only forms of individuality, that it can stage without faking.”[[19]](#endnote-19) The social world corresponding to this aesthetic world of “cheap vehemence” is one in which the petty bourgeoisie aspires to aristocracy because the bourgeoisie itself has abandoned all of its revolutionary ideals in order to maintain its grasp on power.

The proper inheritor of Abstract Expressionist vulgarity in Southern California was not those artists who continued to paint in an expressionist manner, even a superb artist like John Altoon, but Billy Al Bengston. Much has been made of Bengston’s participation in the surf and motorcycle subcultures of Los Angeles and his incorporation of some of their tools and techniques—the spray gun, industrial lacquers—into painting. Usually Bengston’s melding of his enthusiasms with his art have simply been taken as instances of machismo, which is, of course, not untrue, but far less attention has been paid to the idea that Southern California culture made manifest, that it was only outside of work in leisure-time pursuits that came to signal one’s identity that the highest bourgeois ideals like freedom were still possible to conceive, however pathetically. In a work such as *Sonny*, 1961, Bengston displays how he is able to achieve the qualities that Clark identifies with the best of Abstract Expressionism, paintings “consumed with their own empty intensity, with painting as posturing, with a ludicrous bigness and lushness and generality.” *Sonny* is a 36 x 36 masonite panel with a smaller square in the center that floats within concentric oval fields. The majority of the canvas is painted in candy and neon secondaries and tertiaries, moving out from a dirty mustard inner square to a yellowish oval that is increasingly dusted with a dark chartreuse until the green forms the outer oval of the design and then instantly transitions to a yellowy orange that darkens in accord with the shape of the support into a reddish, sunset orange along the edges. The surface is all heat and hardness, an unredeemably vulgar sunburst with a greenish corona and flames along the edges, reflective enough to be almost mirror-like. Two areas have been masked off to interrupt this lacquered perfection: an inner oval of brushed silver that comes between the mustard square and the yellow and green ovals, and Bengston’s trademark sergeant stripes in the same brushed silver, contained within the inner square. The concentric ovals focus attention on this central area of the painting, but they also distort the overall shape, so that both inner and outer squares read as rectangles elongated along their vertical axes. At the same time, the surface is destabilized by the juxtaposition of the normally reflective silver, which because it is loosely brushed reads as matte, and the overpowering intensity of the reflective sunburst, causing a flickering that makes it impossible to ascertain relations of depth or to focus on individual details of the composition, achieving a scale and “empty intensity” that blows away other pictures put in relation to it, even much bigger ones. If Clement Greenberg called Clyfford Still’s work “buckeye painting,” this is the first major art that is unironically imbued with the taste and style of the trailer-park.

Clark is troubled by his valorization of vulgarity for a number of reasons, not least that during the Abstract Expressionist era this attribute belonged mostly to heterosexual men, like Bengston. But as Chicago’s color system evolved from the Domes to her sprayed, plastic paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s, she claimed vulgarity for a previously excluded social group. Chicago produced her plastic paintings mostly in series, some of the most important being the Pasadena Lifesavers, the Fresno Fans, and the Flesh Gardens. These series comprise large paintings, ranging from 5’ x 5’ to 8’ x 8’ squares and 5’ x 10’ rectangles, made from sprayed acrylic lacquer on acrylic sheeting that is framed and supported by the same plastic material. To work on plastic paintings of this size, Chicago had to invent specialized studio equipment and build an outsized spray booth. Extending from the system of the domes, Chicago developed three systems of color for the plastic paintings, as she explained in an artist’s statement: “The first system is based on color opposites, primarily red/blue-green; the second system uses spectral color and changes from warm to cool; the third system relies upon consecutive color of close value, such as blue/green/chartreuse and is essentially cool.”[[20]](#endnote-20) The earliest series, the Pasadena Lifesavers, are the closest to the drawings in the Colorbook, substituting a central white square for the drawings grid around which float four shapes with octagonal centers and circular outer rims. The colors create mutable and varied spatial relations in which some of the shapes seem to spin, while others peak at the center or fluctuate in a manner that makes the shapes pulse in and out of space. The white centers do not maintain themselves as a consistent negative space, but at times grasp the edges of the partial grid, opening and closing and taking on a paler version of the palette of the surrounding rings. In the Fresno Fans that follow, Chicago makes the spatial/color relation even more complex by placing square shapes on a square grid in a way that destabilizes both elements. Through subtle changes in color, the squares, sometimes individually and sometimes as larger boxes, separate from the grid, literally fanning out. This movement draws attention to the bars or slits at the center of the paintings, which expand and contract amidst the changing location and position of the fans. The Flesh Gardens replace the whirring motion of the Fresno Fans with subtle, graduated color transformations that continuously return to whiteness, now diffused throughout the entire surface, before shading to pastels and more intense blues, pinks, greens, and oranges.

It is now possible to locate some of the emotions, sensations, and feelings Chicago associated with her color systems. Two years after her Pasadena catalogue, Chicago herself established a more precise definition: “They allow me to deal with three different feeling states, to establish and then break down form, and to manifest a wide range of direct sensations based on a central or female core image”[[21]](#endnote-21) This and similar statements, and the fact that Chicago gave some works titles such as *Click Cunts*, have caused many critics to reduce the paintings to cunt art. However, Chicago has always taken a more expansive view that the paintings and her color system in general embody a wide range of lived female experience. Returning to the extraordinarily dynamic color relations of the paintings, at different times they seem to breathe, blush, flush, aggressively reach out, assertively take in, and yes, explode in pleasure, or bask in afterglow. They did so in a manner that was so radical that many of Chicago’s mostly male contemporaries could not or would not see them, such as this response to an exhibition that included fifteen of the paintings by the hapless critic of the *Los Angeles Times*: “Despite feminist statements in the catalog, Judy Chicago’s art bears no relationship to names or Women’s lib.”[[22]](#endnote-22) On the other hand, second generation Feminists have dismissed the work as betraying an essentializing and vulgar Feminism. With this I would agree, but only in Clark’s sense. Chicago’s may be the last art with aspirations to the bigness and generality that can embrace the revolutionary cry for totality in the name of more than half the people living on this planet.

What this essay has sought to argue is that early Feminism did not enact a complete break with the art that preceded it in Southern California. Rather, its radicality lies to a degree in the manner in which it recast terms that were already deeply rooted, usually by shifting them from the universal and aesthetic to the cultural and specific. This can be seen in Chicago’s own further evolution, for instance in her turn to china painting, which transformed craft into woman’s work. Across such Feminist projects as *The Dinner Party* is the perceptual goal of seeing beyond the frame, in this case the strictures of patriarchal society, by allowing viewers to see the world differently and forcing them out of ingrained habits. Communal undertakings like *Womanhouse* recast sexuality as gender, foregrounding societal roles instead of biology. Finally, Chicago and her fellow Feminist artists had the courage to embrace vulgarity, betraying the good taste that women were above all are meant to police, and insisting that major art could be rooted in their experiences.

1. Robert Irwin, quoted in Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting* *the Name of the Thing One Sees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Coplans, *American Sculpture of the 1960s*, Maurice Tuchman, ed. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Judy Chicago quoted in Jan Butterfield, *Judy Chicago: The Second Decade, 1973–1983* (New York: ACA Galleries, 1984), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Robert Irwin, quoted in Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting*, op. cit., 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jenni Sorkin, “Minimal/Liminal: Judy Chicago and Minimalism” in *Judy Chicago: Minimalism, 1965–1973* (Santa Fe: LewAllen Contemporary, 2004) 9. Sorkin was the first scholar to argue that Chicago’s move from Minimalism to Feminism was evolutionary and to offer sustained attention to the Minimalist works. My essay is deeply indebted to her work. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. William Wilson, “Geometric Forms Float as a Cloud,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 29, 1966): C14. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Thomas H. Garver, “Los Angeles Reviews: Judy Chicago, Art Gallery, California State College, Fullerton,” *Artforum* 9 n. 5 (January 1971): 93 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Judy Gerowitz* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1969), np. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Barbara Rose, “Los Angeles: The Second City,” *Art in America* 54 n. 1 (January–February 1966): 112-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. John Coplans, “Circle of Styles on the West Coast,” *Art in America* 52 n. 3 (June 1964): 41 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. James Monte, “Review: Craig Kauffman, Ferus Gallery,” *Artforum* 2 n. 8 (February 1964): 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. William Wilson, “Review: Craig Kauffman at Ferus Gallery,” *Artforum* 3 n. 9 (June 1965): 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Claire Wolf, “Los Angeles Reviews: Painted Sculpture, Mount St. Mary’s College,” *Artforum* 2 n. 11 (May 1964): 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Nancy Marmer. “Los Angeles Reviews: Group Show, Rolf Nelson Gallery.” *Artforum* 3 n. 2 (November 1964): 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. T.J. Clark, “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism,” in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 376. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Judy Chicago quoted in Marcia Tucker, *The Structure of Color* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971), 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. William Wilson, “Art Review: Judy Chicago Exhibition at Cal State Fullerton Gallery,” *Los Angeles Times* (November 2, 1970): F14. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)