



Entering the Picture

JUDY CHICAGO, THE FRESNO FEMINIST ART PROGRAM,
AND THE COLLECTIVE VISIONS OF WOMEN ARTISTS

Edited by JILL FIELDS



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NOTES OF A DUBIOUS DAUGHTER

My Unfinished Journey Toward Feminism

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I always wanted to be an artist, but I never expected to be a feminist. Growing up in Buffalo, New York, in a somnolent suburb bearing the name of a brand of kitchen appliance, I could hardly as a youngster have explained what either really meant. Yet in the process of becoming one, I also became the other.

Kenmore was the suburb, a village just outside Buffalo, now inside the city's expanded perimeter. Still a tidy community of single-family houses and trimmed lawns, Kenmore has the good fortune to be a short ride from the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, a jewel-box-like contemporary museum that became my playground the first time I was taken to see its wonders.

And its wonders were many. On every visit, I was surrounded by the works of Louise Nevelson, Marisol, Frieda Kahlo, Joan Mitchell, Louise Bourgeois, and others too numerous to list. I saw the first Eva Hesse retrospective when I was in high school. Hesse, and also Nevelson, showed me that nearly everything could be material to make art. Marisol's quirky humor, her playful sense of scale, showed me one's vision did not need to mimic the real world. Her *Mother and Child* transposes the expected: a super-size baby as tall as I am, with the mother a fraction of the baby's size, standing on her child's knee. Old friends by now, I still visit them when I'm in Buffalo. Because of the inclusive nature of the Albright-Knox collection, it never occurred to me the art world was largely closed to women.

That is, until I tried to attend art school. During my admission interview at Buffalo State College, I was advised to consider art education or art therapy, and handed brochures about those programs on my way out. The school's message: middle-class Jewish girls don't have whatever it takes to be artists. It was the mid-1970s. I was aware of feminism, and a little overwhelmed by the choices feminism was making available. I remember being both excited and terrified. But I was not yet aware of "feminist art."

I did manage admittance into art school, and it proved to be an awakening, though a gradual one. I won one award, for example, for showing the most progress during the three years I studied at the Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts). But when I asked my department head for a recommendation for graduate school, he refused. It was devastating. I never did go to graduate school, and it took some time to realize his refusal had more to do with his issues than with me. But I kept working. I sought out communities and venues in which to continue learning, piecing together my own postgraduate art education. And blessed with a gift for disregarding adversity (and authority), I kept sending work into the world.

Strong Tea, Stronger Women

I come from a line of strong women, all storytellers. When I go home to visit, we still sit around the kitchen table: me, my mother Ida, my sister Susie, even sometimes one or both of my brothers, drinking endless cups of tea, trading stories from our lives, the people in them, stories seen on television or in the news. We would hear Ida's stories about grandparents, especially Yetta, her tyrannical grandmother; about known and reputed aunts, uncles, cousins, a parade of the mostly departed. Our family legacy: salesmen, gardeners, cantors, china painters, scoundrels, and thieves.

Ida recounted her childhood in the 1930s during the Great Depression, growing up on Buffalo's East Side, in a neighborhood whose harshness its buildings still project. I learned how the family lived for years without a place to bathe. How Ida was hospitalized for nephritis when she was eight. How recovering afterward in a gleaming convalescent home showed her she could escape the world she knew. She decided to become a nurse, and live in a cleaner, more orderly world, far from her childhood's reality. And she did become a nurse, and married a surgeon.

When I was a teenager, Ida and I battled over everything about me, especially my clothing, weight, and appearance. Having grown up in poverty, she worried about my ability to earn a living. Though she didn't understand my desire to be an artist, she didn't stop me. But she persisted in making wicked, biting comments about my clothing, art, jewelry, and more. In art school I studied fiber, which included weaving, textiles, and using textiles as a basic material for artworks. I worked a lot with felt: "I hate to say this," Ida would say about one piece or another, "but that looks like something somebody threw up." I hate to admit this but, in retrospect, sometimes it did. Lately, Ida's come to understand my work. Now she only makes fun of my shoes.

Room with No View

I moved to New York in the fall of 1978, landing in a claustrophobic, closet-sized apartment in Chelsea, and started making books. Books, which could be

compactly folded up, were a perfect solution for laboring in a small space. As I became more involved with books, I studied their history. I learned about the girdle book, a medieval type of prayerbook monks lashed to their belts, or girdles, so prayers would always be at hand.

This led me to visualize modern girdles as potential book structures. And, how working with girdles would be an opportunity to explore classic notions of the female form. Girdles are essentially binders, structures to push, press, and mold female figures into idealized shapes. Like books, they could also be used to hold stories, embody ideas. I made several "girdle books" packed with contemplations, prayers, and cultural objects of devotion. Working with the girdle structure also helped me learn to love the femaleness of my body, and be more comfortable in my own skin.

Other garment-based books also took shape. I began to use articles of baby clothing because of their reduced scale, but a broader significance soon became apparent. They became vehicles for memories of childhood, both idealized and painful. The pieces I made using infant apparel explore issues of immaturity and motherhood. Feelings about my infertility live in works created using toddler dresses and baby rompers. Books based on gloves and industrial hand-shaped drying forms explore the hand as a basic signifier of communication, greetings, warnings, surrender, and embrace.

I have to admit I wasn't aware of the feminist art programs in California while they were happening. Yet there was something in the air I must have inhaled. The times vibrated with new ideas about women's rights and equal rights, with the belief by women they had something important to contribute. The choices such ideas presented were exhilarating and terrifying. The draft for the Vietnam War made issues of life and death palpable and immediate. Art was being redefined in ways that issued from feminist influences: performance art, film, even working with craft materials shunned by the traditional fine art world.

Neither at Boston University, where I first studied, nor at art school in Philadelphia, where I transferred after a year, did I find any awareness of women's issues, or that emerging new forms were feminist in origin. While the academic world was the birthplace for much feminist ideology, nearly all my instructors were white males.

When I moved to New York City, I struggled with issues of work, home, and family familiar to any young college grad. I was still finding my voice as an artist, and looking for ways to make art while making a living. But I was also operating pretty much in a vacuum, unaware of feminist and artistic support circles. When Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* came to the Brooklyn Museum in 1980, my boyfriend (now husband) suggested we go see it.

The Dinner Party was a revelation: a monumental work of art produced using non-traditional materials and processes, like china painting and embroidery, that were completely shunned in the traditional gallery world. The idea of working

collectively and finding support in community opened me to a new way of thinking. I was also amazed and captivated by the controversy *The Dinner Party* inspired, then and still. Any work that can arouse so large a response from so broad a range of perspectives is not to be lightly dismissed.

Artistic community came to me from the worlds of printmaking and artist books. I studied book structures at the Center for Book Arts and won a Special Editions grant from the Lower East Side Printshop, both in New York. Through these institutions, I met other artists, including some who had worked on *The Dinner Party*, and who were knowledgeable about New York's feminist collectives, including the A.I.R. Gallery, the Women's Action Coalition (WAC), and Ceres Gallery.

I was supported and given access to information about exhibit opportunities. I was included in residencies in the United States and abroad, and I was given the chance to grow in my work. In 1997, a large Special Editions print I made at the Lower East Side Printshop was included in *Crossing Over Changing Places*, a US Information Agency-funded show about collaborative printmaking. Curated by Jane Farmer, the show assembled works from the Printshop, the Rutgers Center for Innovative Paper and Print (now the Brodsky Center), the Print Center in Philadelphia, and Pyramid Atlantic, near Washington D.C.

I was invited to travel with the show to its exhibition in Madrid to work with the local curators installing the exhibition, and to give lectures and hold workshops. This was the first time I'd traveled alone internationally and in the service of art. Being entrusted with this dynamic print show was a milestone for me and my work.

Through my involvement with *Crossing Over Changing Places*, I also came to know Judith Brodsky, Gail Deerey, and Eileen Foti, from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers and the Rutgers Center for Innovative Paper & Print. I became aware of Rutgers as a place for nurturing feminist ideas in art. For example, Rutgers is home to the Feminist Art Project, an online resource that promotes feminist events, and works to ensure the inclusion of women in the art world.

As I learned more about feminism in art, I began to understand my place in it. Because my work often involves female forms, even if at times abstractly, I began to be included in exhibitions with feminist and women's themes. Often the forms serve as housings for books and objects that deal with relationship dynamics, and questions about politics, spirituality, and the role of women within structures like the family and society. For example, *Altars of the Invisible* (2007) is an actual bridal gown, the front panels of which open like giant beetle wings to reveal an inner landscape of embedded objects and text (see Plate 14).

In 1999, I was offered a solo show at the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series of the Mabel Smith Douglas Library in Rutgers University. The Douglass Library show is the oldest continuously running series in the United States to showcase women artists. I was thrilled to be accepted into the series.

Sign of the Raven

To prepare, I felt it was essential I look at my work more critically. I began by attending the Writing for Artists Workshop, in New York, a three-week intensive with Arlene Raven, who sadly passed away in 2006. Raven had co-founded the Woman's Building in 1973 with Judy Chicago and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville.

The workshop met three times a week for three weeks, as well as several additional times as pairs in our individual studios. Arlene's system was both simple and complex. Each artist first gave a ten-minute presentation about her work. After this introductory round, we were all paired with other artists. This time, I spoke about my work for about fifteen minutes, with my partner taking detailed notes. Then we switched roles.

Eventually, we all partnered with each other. After about three or four rounds of this, we began to arrange our notes into new artist statements. We took turns reading the new statements, and getting feedback from the various partners. Midway through the workshop, each of us gave another ten-minute presentation, this time with images.

The feedback was honest and direct, and the process gave us the tools to find the words to describe our work. By the end of the workshop, I had received valuable feedback from everyone present, including Arlene. I also met several women, some of whom are still part of my artistic support circle, and found myself entering into a larger circle of workshop alumni who continue to meet using the format Arlene developed.

The course itself was an eye-opener. It helped me look at my work from new and different perspectives, question where my ideas came from, what its influences were, and where I wanted the work to go. For example, I realized more clearly that I was transforming objects of female clothing—girdles, dresses, aprons, gloves, and the like—into shrine-like constructions, and structuring places within them to house the odd little things I habitually collect: doll arms, toy irons, dressmaker pins, bottles, toddler dresses, beads, vials, as well various notes, leaflets, and fairy tale fragments. Folklorists Peter and Iona Opie's collections of nursery rhymes sits in my studio library alongside copies of *Art News*, books by Martin Buber, Ann Hollander's *Sex and Suits*, Keith Smith's *Non-Adhesive Bindings*, and catalogs of voodoo and fetish art as well as catalogs of work by Meret Oppenheim, Louise Bourgeois, Renee Stout, Claude Cahun, and Yayoi Kusama. These are some of my sources. Everything is my material.

In *Housekeeping* (2000), I transformed a corset into a rigid structure, painted it and enabled its two halves to open to reveal an altered copy of *The Consumer Reports Guide on How to Clean Anything*. The *Guide* appeared in my mail one day, unrequested. I cut and re-sewed it to form a small arc-shaped book that nestled inside the girdle. I filled its pages with line drawings of the tools (or weapons) of housework: buckets, brooms, mops, irons, and the like. Surrounding

the altered *Guide* are three-dimensional niches filled with votive-like offerings of plastic toys, kitchen utensils, the doodads of everyday life. *Housekeeping* is both a shrine to the never-ending battle to meet an absurd ideal, and a meditation on the endless nature of housework.

Altars of the Invisible is a sculptural work for which I tore apart, re-structured and compartmentalized an actual wedding dress. I transformed the front of the garment into doors capable of opening to reveal an interior filled with objects. *Altars* represents for me a new-millennium altarpiece for today's women, who are still being told they can have it all if only they try hard enough. It was partly inspired by the *Virgem do Paraiso*, a thirteenth-century Portuguese altarpiece from Evoria; by Sandra Orgel's *Linen Closet* installation piece, shown at the landmark *Womanhouse* in 1972; and by Maria, the robot provocateur in *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's great 1927 film.

In *Altars*, the female body is stylized to form a series of compartments bearing the items deemed necessary for a woman to thrive in today's world. The objects reflect every woman's interior trousseau, and the multiple roles thrust upon women by the culture, the media, and women themselves—symbols of love, sex, careers, marriage, households, families, and children.

In 2001, I began to create environments for my sculptures. Using varied modes of display, I found myself drawing on a narrative tradition in which the impossible is probable, in which magic and marvels coexist with things actual and proven.

The Installation Imperative

Solitary Confinements: A Family Portrait (2002) was my first installation. It explores the interior life and its relationship to our public lives, since the family is where we learn who we are, and where we begin to figure out relationships and find our way in the world. Part of this involves the stories we tell ourselves to develop a sense of self, and the stories we keep hidden from ourselves because of what they reveal.

As a viewer enters the space of *Solitary Confinements*, he or she is greeted by four figures standing at a table set as if for a meal. Each figure is a large artist book that dramatizes the place of each individual in family life. Constructed from actual items of clothing, each book represents one member of a family consisting of a mother, a father, and two kids. A brightly colored table, chairs, dishes, and flatware suggest elements of a dollhouse blown up to life-size scale.

Six-foot tall black-and-white wall murals enfold the family with images of affluent, idealized interiors. On the left wall, glamorous partygoers, drawn from mass-market magazine ads, wait their turn at a festive buffet. They are the happy people, marketing entities experiencing the lives real people are expected to admire, the artificial baseline for our dreams and desires.

Each family member tells a different story, and the torso of each opens to reveal a removable book containing a brief narrative. Some of the narratives are

in accord with how the world perceives us, others are not. The books within the books of *Solitary Confinements* are available for visitors to read or examine. Visitors can also sit in the red chairs around the yellow kitchen table, guests and participants, as it were, in the larger family portrait.

Solitary Confinements was first shown in the Ceres Project Room at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York City. The space was a satellite of Ceres Gallery, a non-profit, artist-run organization dedicated to the promotion of women in the arts. Founded in 1983 as part of the New York Feminist Art Institute, Ceres is still going strong.

I had previously been in several group shows at Ceres, and discovered the Project Room was receptive to giving artists opportunities to create new work that pushed their boundaries. As a result, I was able to experience the best, most nurturing aspects of an artist collective. *Solitary Confinements* is my most requested installation, and has been shown in a variety of venues.

Chapel of Uncommon Prayers (2005) is an installation of books and book objects exhibited at the Whitewater Gallery in North Bay, Ontario. It features books shaped as hands, built with gloves and industrial glove dryers, employing traditional binding techniques in non-traditional ways. The installation explored personal relationships to prayer and devotion in a world awash with unanswerable questions.

The gallery walls were painted with rich, saturated colors to encourage visitors to think about their dreams and desires. The books deal with a broad range of personal and political subjects, including shelter, nourishment, love, war, and peace.

In 2005, Melissa Potter invited six artists and one curator and art historian to form a women's critique group. I hadn't been in a support group since the 1980s, when I was working as a graphic designer and illustrator. I knew Melissa from her work as program director at the Dieu Donne Paper Mill in New York, and from a 2003 residency we shared courtesy of a grant from the Trust for Mutual Understanding. The residency was to teach book arts and environmentally friendly printmaking techniques at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade, Serbia.

The group quickly evolved into an egalitarian arena for peers to discuss a problem rarely acknowledged by today's art press—the limited opportunities for female artists in the New York area. The group renews a nearly lost tradition of the female/feminist collective as a means of generating dialogue for women in the arts. The diversity of media, ideas, and backgrounds among its seven members lends the group its multifaceted character.

As I re-evaluate where my work is going, this feminist art collective has given me valuable source support at a pivotal time. It also serves as a constructive way for us to share feedback about each other's work, and defend against the isolation of individual studio practice.

We first met in the conference room of the New York Foundation for the Arts, where Melissa was then employed. Soon, meetings shifted to the studios and apartments of group members, and to hospitable cafés. We are committed

to quality dialogue, intellectual stimulation, and personal growth. At monthly meetings, each member is encouraged to discuss her current work or upcoming projects.

O Pioneer

As the group matured, it considered presenting itself to the public through exhibitions. This introduced a new dynamic, and the need for a name. Melissa suggested Art364B, in recognition of the first art history course about the representation of women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. Professor Linda Nochlin, a pioneer in feminist and women's art history, selected the subject for her undergraduate seminar, Art364B, at Vassar College in 1970. Our group held its first public exhibition in 2007. *Art364B: The Collective* was shown at the Kimmel Center Windows at New York University, a streetside venue in the middle of Greenwich Village. Art364B's Jennifer S. Musawwir and NYU's Jovana Stokic co-curated the exhibition.

The name Art364B signals our connection to a historic moment, and a subject central to each member's practice. The group's collegiality and support have been a wonderful addition in my life. Its other members include Marietta Davis (www.mariettadavis.net), a photographer and video artist whose images disrupt society's obsession with perfection to reveal the grotesque reality embedded in our culture's glossy representations of beauty, and Kate Clark (www.kateclark.com), who combines human faces with the taxidermied bodies of wild animals to create strange beings evoking fears, desires, and instincts more often repressed than revealed.

Tiffany Ludwig also collaborates with Renee Piechocki as Two Girls Working (www.twogirlsworking.com). The pair documented the responses of women around the country to the provocative question: "What do you wear that makes you feel powerful?" They published the results in *Trappings* (Rutgers University Press, 2007), and transferred the archive of their work to the Schlesinger Library of Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute.

Melissa Potter explores gender codes, rituals, and discrimination. *Ammunition for the Virgin*, her current project, is a film about one of the last survivors of a Balkan tradition in which a girl in a household with no male heirs is raised and treated as a boy. Melissa is also an Assistant Professor in the Interdisciplinary MFA Program in Book and Paper at Columbia College, Chicago (www.melissapotter.com).

Maria Yoon (www.mariathekoreanbride.com) travels the country as "Maria the Korean Bride," exploring the institution of marriage, and seeking to reconcile an internal construction of self in conflict with cultural expectations. She is working on a feature-length documentary about her fifty weddings in all fifty states.

Finally, Jennifer S. Musawwir is an independent curator whose primary interest is feminist art from the early 1970s through the present. Her projects

probe contemporary issues as they relate to gender, race, and sexuality. *The Wedding Project* (2004), co-curated with Melissa Potter, explored the frenzy that surrounds many marriage rituals. She holds a Master's Degree in Art History from Hunter College, City University of New York.

Art364B continues practices Nochlin and other second wave feminists initiated through artist collectives, and their focus on female subjects. Inspired by recent exhibitions and symposia reviving discussions of feminist art, Art364B is pleased to present itself as a feminist collective expanding the discourse of feminist art. Recently, the group launched *(Pro) Create*, an online exhibition about motherhood and artistic practice from two points of view—women who have had children and those who have chosen not to.

Open Doors

My formal education, I now see, confined me in a cold vacuum of academic despair, nearly convincing me I had no future in the world of art. I well remember graduating with the fear I would not even be able to draw a straight line to some imaginary art director's satisfaction. My sentimental education, begun soon after arriving in New York, felt like a fresh breeze blowing through my brain.

Friends at Ceres and Rutgers introduced me to such classic texts of feminist art as *The Power of Feminist Art* by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Art and Feminism* by Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, and *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* by Amelia Jones. I bought these and other books for my personal library, and devoured every word, every image.

I found myself especially inspired by artists like Mary Kelly, Lynn Hershman, and the fearless Carolee Schneeman who turned the stuff of their lives into powerful art. As soon as I could assemble a small portfolio of original works, I approached the Kathryn Markel Gallery, then on West 57th Street. They declared my work uncommercial and dismissed the images I'd prepared as "expressionistic, greedy and crude, but good." The put-down made me laugh; at least they'd gotten it.

When the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* toured the country in 2007, I was elated by the excitement it was stirring about feminist ideas and influence in the art world. Seeing the show at PS1 in Queens let me experience in person artists whose work I'd only previously seen in print.

Feminism for me is about possibility. It's about allowing women to achieve whatever they might imagine for themselves. In art, feminism has opened the doors of acceptance for an array of materials, techniques, and content that women artists use to create artistic experiences the predominantly male art world had previously neglected or disparaged. Through feminism we have seen the emergence of performance art; a greater attention to pattern, fabric, embroidery, and collage; the use of materials from beads to bottle caps; an emphasis on work about the body, even a greater freedom among men to experiment with unfamiliar forms.

Exhibitions incorporating the above have become part of the art world's visual vocabulary, not the exception. While more remains to be done, much has been done.

And so, midway through life's journey, as I move into the next phase of my work, I'm grateful to have a supportive community in which to be working, and to the artists and feminists and feminist artists who have, knowingly and not, given me so much.