

Students Question Students

Judy Chicago, *The Birth Project* & the Female Voice

Critical thinking questions authored by students to challenge fellow students to thoughtfully engage with the artwork presented in the exhibition.

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Judy Chicago, *Guided by the Goddess*, 1985, Silkscreen, 34 x 44 in.

What can I see?

- What people, places, or things does the artwork show?

Feminist artist Judy Chicago used *The Birth Project* to establish a creation mythos using the feminine form and childbirth. In the textile and silkscreen versions of the piece *Guided by the Goddess*, Chicago wanted to show the continued nourishment and support that mothers give to their children after birth. The design, in part, is based on comments that Chicago heard mothers express -- they felt like goddesses as their newborns stared into their faces. What do you see in the artwork that portrays those sentiments? What do you see in this image that relates to the larger story of the creation of the universe?

What does it mean?

- Why did the artist want the artwork to look the way it does?
- How is the artwork understood within the culture where it was made?
- How do individuals' personal experiences affect the way they understand the artwork?

Judy Chicago's *Birth Project* challenged the prevalent Judeo-Christian creation story to pursue a portrayal of Genesis, in which women embodied Creation. The *Birth Project* presents the story of Genesis from a female point of view. How does this portrayal of a goddess figure providing nourishment contrast with the Judeo-Christian creation story? What kinds of personal experiences could potentially affect the way a viewer understands the artwork? How might being a mother affect an understanding of the work? How might being a father affect an understanding of the work?



Judy Chicago, *Birth Tear / Tear*, 1985, lithograph 24 x 35 in.

What does it mean?

- Why did the artist want the artwork to look the way it does?
- How is the artwork understood within the culture where it was made?
- How do individuals' personal experiences affect the way they understand the artwork?

For the *Birth Project*, Judy Chicago utilized her understanding of women's personal experiences and attitudes towards childbirth in an effort to create raw and genuine depictions of birth and creation. *Birth Tear/Tear* serves as an excellent example of the way Chicago conveyed the complexity of these attitudes and experiences through a series of deliberate creative choices. Even the title is meant to facilitate deeper understanding of the work, as it references both the perineal lacerations experienced by many women in childbirth and the tear falling from the eye of the figure, meant to symbolize the internal conflict and emotions experienced by some mothers. What other choices did Chicago make in regards to her imagery to help convey conflicted or emotional attitudes and experiences of birth? What conclusions and interpretations can we make about those experiences and attitudes? Describe the conflict or emotions felt by the mother in this image? In contemporary western culture, what might create such conflict? To what extent, if at all, might an individual's own unique experiences affect their interpretation of the work?

What else can I learn?

- What is the background and life of the artist?
- What does the artwork do?
- What do people think, believe, or do in the culture in which the artwork was made?

According to Chicago, the *Birth Project* expresses "the glory and horror of the birth experience itself, the joy and pain of pregnancy, the sense of entrapment that goes along with the satisfactions of giving life." *Birth Tear/Tear* is an example of the positive and negative emotions that occur during and after childbirth. Chicago, herself, has no children. In what manner might Chicago's background and experience as a woman artist in a male-dominated domain influence her relationship with the subject matter in *Birth Tear/Tear*?

How does Chicago approach the topic of women and childbirth in *Birth Tear/Tear*? Does this approach align with typical representations of women in art? In what way is her approach different? Think of other images of "mother and child." In what ways is this image different?



Judy Chicago, *Birth Trinity Needlepoint 1*, 1983, 51 x 130.5 in.
Needlepoint by the "Teaneck Seven."

What does it mean?

- Why did the artist want the artwork to look the way it does?
- How is the artwork understood within the culture where it was made?
- How do individuals' personal experiences affect how they understand the artwork?

The *Birth Trinity* portrays three human figures: a mother, a midwife, and a partner. The ripples in the artwork suggest the mother's strength radiates into all three to morph them into a unified whole but one in which the birthing woman is central. Judy Chicago based this image on past traditions where it was common for women in labor to be supported by another woman or husband while the midwife delivered the baby. Why does Judy Chicago choose this image to be part of *The Birth Project*? How does this subject matter serve Chicago's purpose? Does this practice of birthing posture and relationship among the birthing woman, midwife, and supporting person differ from accepted practice in hospitals today? Does this work challenge social standards of medical practice and does it favor past traditions of childbirth? Does this artwork relate to your life or do you think it will relate to your life in the future?

How does it compare and contrast?

- How does this artwork look like other artworks, either by the same or different artists?
- What other artworks address the same general topics?

The *Birth Trinity* by Judy Chicago is a needlework that emphasises the birth-giving capability and creativity that women possess. It signifies the female mythos of creation. What other artworks serve to represent this same theme? How does it compare and contrast to other Feminist Art pieces, including *Hannover Nana (Sophie, Charlotte, Caroline)* by Niki de St. Phalle? What do both pieces reveal about the female figure? How do they praise the female form?



Judy Chicago, *The Crowning Needlepoint 3*, 1983, 35.5 x 51.5 in. Hand painting assistance by Linda Healy, needlepoint by Kathryn Haas Alexander.



Judy Chicago, *The Crowning Q5*, 1982, 56.5 x 89 in. Reverse applique and quilting by Jacquelyn Alexander.

How does it compare?

- How does this artwork look like other artworks, either by the same or different artists?
- What other artworks address the same general topic?

The Crowning Q5 and *The Crowning Needlepoint 3* are very similar in many ways, but they also have their differences. *The Crowning Needlepoint 3* depicts a woman looking down, observing her own anatomy going through the process of birth. The act of watching her own body perform this act is a form of self-empowerment. An image of a self-empowered woman is a reversal of the historical representation of women. *The Crowning Needlepoint 3* contains a wealth of visual symbolism, including the butterfly-like appearance of the woman's shape, a common image in Chicago's work. Butterflies are a symbol of the natural and metamorphosis. Other symbols include the vaginal and penile forms that make up the woman's body. Radiating forms in yellows and golds surround the figure, elevating her status even further. *The Crowning Q5* is the same image, but repeated four times in quilted form. The same female, gazing at the birth taking place from her own body, is reflected on itself twice, making up a rectangular quilted pattern. Repeating the image as such creates a pulsing design in the radiating lines from each figure. Compare and contrast the two works. What aspects of these works differ? Which aspects are similar? How are their messages or meanings similar and different?

What does it mean?

- Why did the artist want the artwork to look the way it does?
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For most of western history images of birth were scarce, despite the fact that birth was and is a common experience shared by everyone. To remedy this Judy Chicago created multiple depictions of the process through textile works, portraying the acts of birthing and motherhood as spiritual and intellectual, while at the same time removing the idealized notions surrounding motherhood by exploring the physicality and realness involved in the process and experience. In *The Crowning Needlepoint 3*, the almost holy energy radiates in colored ripples. How does this work fit with the other pieces in the show? Does it stand out? Explain.

Unfortunately, needlework, quilting and other forms of sewing were traditionally thought of as women's craft, not as an acceptable medium for art-making. Judy Chicago sought to break this stigma and redefine the terms "art" and "craft." She believed a focus on skill designated a work as craft, and a focus on the message or meaning made the work art. To achieve her goal, Chicago recruited over 150 needleworkers to participate in the creation of *The Birth Project*. Do you think Judy Chicago's use of textiles makes *The Crowning Needlepoint 3*, and the other works in the show, less acceptable as fine art? Does this medium make the image Chicago portrays of the crowning more acceptable than it would be if it were a photo of a woman giving birth? Do you think the message or meaning of *The Birth Project* indicates that Judy Chicago succeeded in breaking the stigma surrounding fiber arts?