

“Womanhouse is not a home.”

# WOMANHOUSE



The Iconic Feminist  
Installation & Exhibition

1972

Author: Scout Duncan

**“In essence you walk into  
female reality and are forced  
to identify with women.”**

**-Judy Chicago, 1972**

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# Introduction to Womanhouse

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Womanhouse was an art installation and exhibition that took place in 1972 in Los Angeles, California. It was a feminist exhibition organized by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, professors in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts.

A 17-room Los Angeles mansion was renovated and transformed by Miriam, Judy, and 23 female students into a provocative display discussing the domestic experience of, and expectation for the 1970s housewife. As described in a 1974 documentary by Johanna Demetrakas, the project was a display of the “longings, fears, and dreams women have as they cook, sew, wash, and iron their lives away.”

After two months of renovation, preparation, and creation, Womanhouse opened to the public on January 30, 1972. During the month-long exhibition, roughly ten-thousand men and women entered the house, confronted with a deconstruction of the myth of the satisfied and fulfilled white, middle-class housewife.

Womanhouse became the first feminist work to receive national attention when it was reviewed by Time magazine, and became a sensation in the art world.



# The Professors



## Judy Chicago's Vision

Judy Chicago's careers as an artist, feminist, and teacher were intertwined from the beginning. In the spring of 1970, she became a faculty member at Fresno State College to teach a women's-only art program, but found that the Art Department was reluctant to embrace her vision, and the art scene in the small city was too narrow for her grand plans.

In light of this realization, Judy moved the Feminist Art Program and her Fresno State students to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), thanks to the added efforts of fellow artist Miriam Schapiro, whose husband, Paul Brach, was the newly hired dean of the art department. Together, the two future feminist icons began teaching in the Feminist Art Program and made it their own.

## Miriam Schapiro's Wisdom

Miriam Schapiro was a Canadian-born American painter, printmaker, and sculptor. In 1969, she and her husband moved to Los Angeles to join the faculty of a new art school, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where her husband was hired as the first dean. In 1971, Miriam found her purpose in creating the Feminist Art Program at CalArts with Judy Chicago.

What Miriam brought to the program was her experiences and standing as a successful New York artist, yet also something more; second wave feminism had been primarily led by women in their forties who had been conditioned by a previously invisible sexism and were able to recognize the historical importance of the changes they were demanding. "Since I was the oldest person working on the installation of Womanhouse," she later observed, "I knew to what degree we were making history."

# Lea's Room

Installation & Performance by Karen LeCoq & Nancy Youdelman

Lea's Room is a room of lush beauty and suffocating oppression. The strong, pungent smell of magnolia, the pinkness of the wallpaper roses, the hats with veils to soften an aging face all create this feeling of oppression and decadence. Enmeshed in this suffocating environment was courtesan Lea, a woman desperately trying to save her fading beauty. Her beauty was her life. Beauty made her pleasing to the gentlemen, obtained her favors, gave her wealth and friendship.



The performance piece done in this room, in which a woman incessantly applies layer after layer of makeup, portrays the pain: the pain of aging, of losing beauty, pain of competition with other women. We wanted to deal with the way women are intimidated by the culture to constantly maintain their beauty and the feeling of desperation and helplessness once this beauty is lost.

# Shoe Closet

Installation by Beth Bachenheimer



Stacks of shoes have been one of women's most popular obsessions. There are all kinds of shoes for all kinds of special occasions -- and there are so many special occasions!

"The process of creating this shoe-filled environment was itself obsessive. I collected hundreds of shoes and painted or treated each shoe individually. For example, a pair of spike heels is decorated with real spikes, driven all around the bottom of the shoe."

# Dollhouse Room

Installation by Sherry Brody & Miriam Schapiro

The Dollhouse was a collaborative piece created by Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody, a Los Angeles artist who later became Schapiro's assistant in the Feminist Art Program. This miniature house, a dollhouse, had six rooms. The room in the upper right of the house was an artist's studio. Seen in this studio was a man, standing nude and erect on a pedestal, with a tray of bananas at his feet; he was one of the only two human figures in the house. The bananas and the man's erect genitalia were meant to parody the association between women's breasts and apples, while the male figure's existence in the room in general was representing a reversal of the gender norms in art history, as women were historically the artist's model, not the artist themselves. To the left of the studio was the nursery, housing a crib in which the baby was represented with a monster, implying an over-demanding child. On the second floor of the house was a dressing room and a bedroom, which both contained

beds. Balducci writes that the purpose of these adjacent rooms was to expose the role of the housewife as a sex object; the dressing room concerned the housewife's beauty and sexuality in relation to satisfying her husband in the adjacent bedroom. The bedroom was named "The Seraglio," which is a name for a harem, specifically in the Ottoman Palace. The bedroom resembled an exotic place similar to a harem, with

carpeted walls, brightly patterned bedding, pillows on the floor, and rare birds. This design of the bedroom was to make an observation about the correlation of the housewife and the imprisoned inhabitants of a harem. The dollhouse was meant to expose and reject the idea of the housewife being like a beautiful doll: expected to perform without complaining and be pliable and compliant.

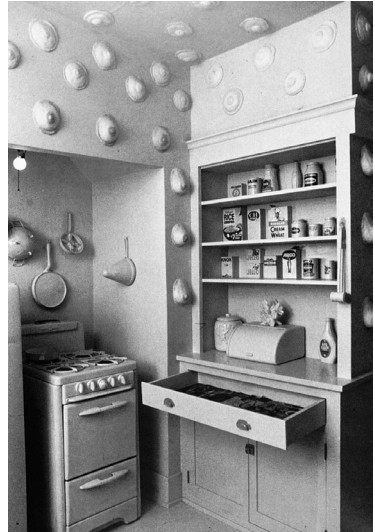


# The Nurturant Kitchen

Installation by Susan Frazier, Vicky Hodgett, & Robin Weltsch

The kitchen was painted entirely pink, including the walls, ceiling, floor, appliances, and even canned goods. The most striking part of this room was the three-dimensional egg motif covering the ceiling, which, as they travel down the walls, turn into breasts. The kitchen itself symbolized how a mother nurtures her family with food, and the breasts were also a symbol of a woman's innate ability to nurture a child with breastmilk. The Nurturant Kitchen illustrated the many ways in which a woman or housewife was expected to nurture others.

“The kitchen was a battleground where women fought with their mothers for their appropriate share of comfort and love. It was an arena where ostensibly the horn of plenty overflowed, but where in actuality the mother was acting out her bitterness over being imprisoned in a situation from which she could not bring herself to escape, and from which society would not encourage such an escape.”



*The Kitchen* - Robin Weltsch

The soft skin of a kitchen pink  
Is openers, strainers, blenders  
Is cups, pots and hot ovens  
Is boxes, cans and glass packages  
Is faucets and nipples knobs  
A toaster, juicer and waffler  
All pink skinned  
How would you like your eggs done  
this morning?



# The Dining Room

Installation by Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Karen LeCoq,  
Robin Mitchell, Miriam Schapiro, & Faith Wilding

The Dining Room was one of the most ornate rooms in the house. A giant oval dining room table sat in the middle of the room covered in a lemon-yellow tablecloth which echoed the curtains that admitted light and sunshine to the mauve- and plum-colored walls. Sculptures of bread, turkey, ham, pecan pie, and salad made the real thing feel lackluster, these creations represented the fantasy of the perfect labor of a good wife. The students painted the crown moulding ornately with fruits and flowers, the walls with a full mural of food from the likes of imagination and fantasy, and even the floor with a rich stencilled rug that was more beautiful than any real one.

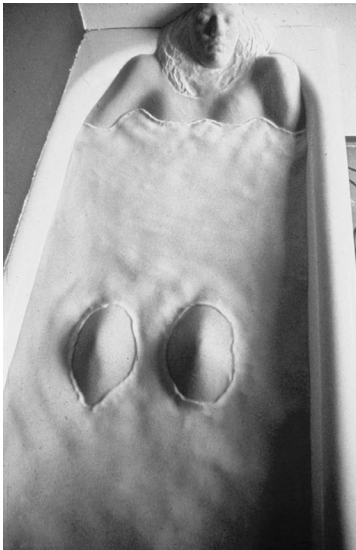
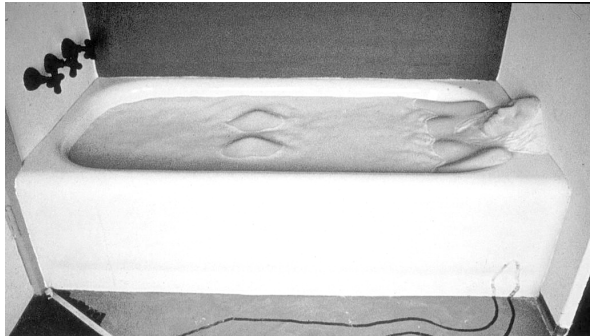
The dining room is a classic room of traditional proportions where life is presented as a picture-perfect product of a wife's purpose, responsibility, and daily, thankless labor.



# Nightmare Bathroom

Installation by Robin Schiff

The most memorable part of the Nightmare Bathroom was a woman made of sand who was lying naked in a bathtub filled with sand, but also in the bathroom were cosmetic bottles all filled with sand. Her bath entrapped her, and she was vulnerable not just to those who entered the bathroom/exhibit, but also to the snake crawling towards her on the floor and a black bird menacing above. Since the female sculpture was made of sand, she was gradually effaced during the exhibit at Womanhouse.



“Even though the bathroom can be a refuge and a private place, I have always been afraid there. It is not a rational fear. It may stem from the fear I had in childhood of being sucked down the drain with the water, the ritual of confronting my nakedness, staring at my face in the mirror, the fear of being intruded upon. I wanted to convey the idea of vulnerability. The woman in the tub is made completely of loose sand. Sand is able to take a shape and retain its vulnerability at the same time. By the end of the show she was eroded by fingerprints.”

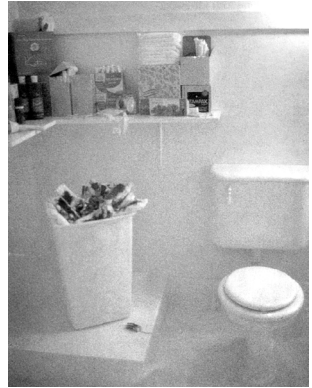
–Robin Schiff

# Menstruation Bathroom

Installation by Judy Chicago

Judy Chicago's Menstruation Bathroom was created as a response to the lack of menstrual themes in the nearly finished Womanhouse exhibition.

“Menstruation is something women either hide, are a very matter-of-fact about, or are ashamed of. Until I was 32 years old, I never had a serious discussion with my female friends about menstruation. The bathroom is an image of women's hidden secret, covered over with a veil of gauze, very, very white and clean and deodorized, except for the blood, the only thing that cannot be covered up. However we feel about our own menstruation is how we feel about seeing its image in front of us.”



-Judy Chicago

# Linen Closet

Installation by Sandy Orgel



“As one woman visitor to my room commented, ‘This is exactly where women have always been—in between the sheets and on the shelf.’ It is time now to come out of the closet.”

-Sandy Orgel

# Lipstick Bathroom

Installation by Camille Gray

Lipstick Bathroom was one of the most visually striking places in the house and was the third bathroom in the exhibition. The entire room was painted a fiery lipstick-red, not an inch of white was visible. There was a red fur-covered toilet and bathtub, and a single red bulb on the ceiling, and a wall display of 100 lipsticks. Scattered around the room and sink counter were red hair curlers, combs, and brushes. The Lipstick Bathroom was meant to bring attention to and exaggerate society's obsession with cosmetics and women's sometimes frantic attempts to meet societal expectations to be beautiful and fashionable.



*Lipstick Bathroom — Camille Gray*

She cannot take a bath  
The tub is lined with fur  
200 plastic lipsticks  
painted repeated colors  
that will not  
stain her lips.

Her panties have been sprayed  
Bras have been colored  
The room and all that entered  
have been painted  
lipstick red.

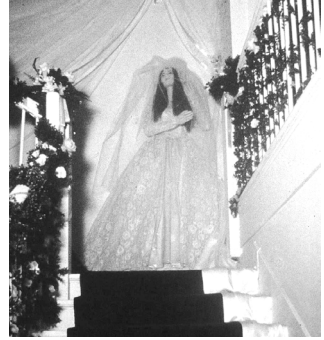
Stage lights go on  
setting the room ablaze  
her hair is red  
her lips are red  
her gown is red  
She is hot  
The cameras roll.

She has a name  
She is a woman  
and for a moment  
she is evrything  
and yet so absurd  
this stage.

# The Bridal Staircase

Installation by Kathy Huberland

The Bridal Staircase is a notable piece because it wasn't confined to a room; it extended the entire main staircase of the house. The work features a mannequin in a wedding gown at the top of the stairs, smiling and ornamented with bows and ribbons, flowers, and a veil. The train of her dress extended down the staircase and slowly became a discolored, muted, dirty gray. At the bottom of the staircase, there was a second mannequin that was face-first crashed into the wall, the front half of her body invisible inside the wall. This piece was a visual and symbolic representation of the contrast between the fantasy of marriage that society "sells" and the less perfect reality that often awaits.



# The Nursery

Installation by Shawnee Wollenman

The Nursery was a bedroom filled with oversized child furniture, including an adult-sized rocking horse, a tremendous crib, and two Raggedy-Ann dolls. The ceiling was painted with stars and the wall was covered in a rainbow mural. This room invited all who enter, man or woman, to feel like a child again. This was a different theme than other installations in the project because, on the surface, it didn't seem to be as heavily based in a feminist issue. On the contrary, women were expected to be poised, obedient, and submissive, so to revert to a childish state could be a very freeing and therapeutic experience.



# “Cock and Cunt” Play

Play Written by Judy Chicago, Performed by Faith Wilding and Jan Lester

The Cock and Cunt play is to be performed in a highly stylized manner. Words are to be spoken haltingly and in stilted form. Poses and movements should be awkward, slow, and jerky, resembling puppet motion. Arms and legs are held akimbo, palms upright and feet pointing out. Voices are highly exaggerated and in sing-song rhythm with the body movements. Male voice is low and authoritarian. Female voice is high and obsequious.



## Act I Excerpt

SHE: Will you help me do the dishes?

HE: (Shocked) Help you do the dishes?

SHE: Well, they're your dishes as much as mine!

HE: But you don't have a cock! (grasps cock and begins stroking it proudly)

SHE: What's that got to do with it?

HE: A cock means you don't wash dishes. You have a cunt. A cunt means you wash dishes.

SHE: (looking at cunt) I don't see where it says that on my cunt.

HE: (pointing at her cunt) Stu-upid, your cunt/pussy/gash/hole or whatever it is, is round like a dish. Therefore it's only right for you to wash dishes. My cock is long and hard and straight and meant to shoot like guns or missiles. Anyone can see that. (emphasis on cock, long, hard, straight shoot; strokes cock on each emphasis)

# Other Installations

## Painted Room

Installation by Robin Mitchell

“To make a painting that is a room,  
To make a room that is a painting,  
Color on the floor, on the walls,  
on the furniture, on the ceiling,  
To fill the room with color  
as the sun fills the room with light.”

–Robin Mitchell

## Red Moon Room

Painting by Mira Schor

“The Red Moon Room painting is about the night, the rising moon, the blood-red moon, about rolling hills and purple and pink and red and green and blue. When this painting was finished I realized that the room also is the dark side of myself, midnight moon blood red dark purple Mira, the pointing and pointy Mira of awry perspective who sometimes feels only she really owns the moon.”

–Mira Schor

## Necco Wafers

Installation by Christine Rush

“I wanted to create a fantasy sky and a fantasy ground in the garden. I used colors, pastels, that were totally in contrast to the real organic colors of the garden. I painted the ground with turquoise, pinks, blues, pale greens, yellows and lavender. I made some fanciful clouds that were exactly like drawings I had done of clouds when I was a young child. I wanted the ground to sort of float in the garden and seem unreal.”

–Christine Rush

## Leaf Room

Installation by Ann Mills

“I was initially attracted to this room by its oval ceiling and the leaves outside the windows. The leaves grew into large shields for me, behind which I could hide, while at the same time they revealed what I was. As the leaves developed they began to form a cycle. Externally they were the seasons, with the inevitable life and death, while internally they were a cycle of feelings which burst forth, gradually subside and then return to the past to begin again.”

–Ann Mills

## Aprons in Kitchen

Installation by Susan Frazier

“Come in, eat . . . please put on the apron strings and experience the heart of the home with me.

The outside is no longer with you, you are now embraced by my nurturing pink womb, giving life—sustaining milk from my breasts. The umbilical cord has been cut through, and you must hold on to the apron strings real tight or you might (gasp) . . . have to rely on yourself . . . tisk, tisk!

I must work harder to sustain life for you, to meet your biological needs, feed your habits with habits . . . I am a

habit to you! I am not a habit! Release me, let me go, you don’t know me, you don’t own me. I am a human being, not just a source of cheap labor for lazy people.

I want to undo these apron strings, to see what the rest of the world is doing, to see if I can help . . . to see myself once again, I want to travel, to see wonders I only dream of daily . . . to see wonders I only dream of daily, right here in the heart of the home facade.”

–Susan Frazier



## **Personal Environment**

Installation by Judy Huddleston

“A wish for otherness. A space in which you are surrounded by an entirely different world aura, transcending the established plane.”

–Judy Huddleston

## **Garden Jungle**

Installation by Paula Longendyke

“I chose animals as my subject matter because I identify with the quality of vulnerability in animals. In this world they are weak, unprotected; they can easily relate to this state of existence. I wanted to deal specifically with prehistoric animals . . . dead skeletal forms. The picture I wanted to create is of walking through a dimly lit, remote jungle about 50 million years ago, discovering large, pearly white bones of magnificent creatures. The skeletons lie there exposed, open, sad. Strange tropical plant life offsets the browns of old decaying plants. In the evening, the jungle is quiet with the exception of a trickling waterfall.”

–Paula Longendyke

## **Crocheted Environment**

Installation by Faith Wilding

“Our female ancestors first build themselves and their families round-shaped shelters. These protective environments, often woven out of grasses, branches or weeds. I think of my environment as linked in form and feeling with those primitive womb-shelters, but with added freedom of not being functional.”

–Faith Wilding

# Personal Space

Installation by Janice Lester

“The idea for my room began with a dream:

I dreamed I had a new bedroom. People came to visit me there, it seemed like a nice place. But when I was alone again, I discovered a secret room where only I could go—fantasy became reality there and everything was beautiful. Compared to this inner room, the outside room was dull and drab. Later I realized that the inner room represented the art that never gets made, the richness that most people, especially women, keep locked inside themselves. Then I saw that the secret room was a trap as well as a sanctuary, and that’s why, when I’m inside the room I built, it is both beautiful and frightening.”

-Janice Lester

# The Artists

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Top row (left to right): Ann Mills, Mira Schor, Kathy Huberland, Christine Rush, Judy Chicago, Robin Schiff, Miriam Schapiro, Sherry Brody

Bottom Row: Faith Wilding, Robin Mitchell, Sandra Orgel, Judy Huddleston

Not Pictured: Jan Ozenburg, Paula Longendyke, Karen LeCoq, Camille Gray, Nancy Youdelman, Shawnee Wollenman, Janice Lester, Beth Bachenheimer, Robin Weltsch, Vicki Hodgetts.

# The Legacy



Womanhouse was a powerful and experimental project that had a lasting effect on the feminist and art worlds. One of the students was recorded in Johanna Demetrakas's documentary discussing how difficult she found it separating her desires for her art and what she felt society wanted, which is, ironically, the overarching idea they were exploring in the project and trying to overcome as women. The women explored and parodied the relationship between essential and constructed identity; this supposed binary has defined the history of feminist art.

Womanhouse skillfully brought attention to the relationship between essential and constructed identities in a way that complicated this false binary, and, in doing so, provided a foundation for feminist art in its discussion of themes that continue to be relevant today. Judy Chicago was quoted by the New York Times saying, about the project, that "in essence you walk into female reality and are forced to identify with women."

Not only did the project have a lasting impact on the women artists involved and the people who visited the house, but it laid the groundwork for the future of feminist art and for the exploration of gender identity and construction. Womanhouse is a quintessential work that should continue to be re-examined and analyzed by anyone who seeks a fundamental understanding of feminist art theory and history.

# Resources

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Want to learn more about Womanhouse? AWESOME!! You totally should! You can start by checking out these two primary sources from the exhibition.



## *Womanhouse Catalog Display Panels*

Penn State University Libraries Digital Collections

<https://digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/judychicago/id/12719>



## *Womanhouse*

Documentary by Johanna Demetrakas

[https://youtu.be/xx0ZPflrsfk?si=M\\_IT-gefAPUqFRrc](https://youtu.be/xx0ZPflrsfk?si=M_IT-gefAPUqFRrc)

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