

## JUDY CHICAGO: REVIEWING POWERPLAY

DAVID RICHARD GALLERY  
544 SOUTH GUADALUPE STREET, SANTA FE

### The exhibition

title invites us to ReView Judy Chicago's *PowerPlay*, but for many of us it's our first time. Originally exhibited in New York City, in 1986, and greeted with silence, the works—with only a few exceptions—have been stored in Belen, New Mexico, ever since. Created between 1982 and 1986 in a gallery on Santa Fe's Canyon Road, *PowerPlay* is at once protest art and message art. "I use the male body to critique masculinity," Chicago explains. It was the beginning of her visual dialogue about how men act and an exploration of their negative use of power. This at a time when there were few gender studies and no queer theory. But it is not unusual for Chicago's work to take decades to be understood.

The works in the *PowerPlay* series include paintings, drawings, weavings, bronze reliefs, and cast paper. The show at David Richard Gallery presents twenty-six of these works. Many of the paintings are massive to convey the massive aggression, massive anger, massive destruction exhibited by Chicago's male subjects. The largest painting is nine feet by twenty-two feet, and the main gallery's huge white walls and excellent blend of natural and artificial lighting are perfect to emphasize Chicago's luminous over-the-rainbow colors.

Six of the works on paper are displayed in the gallery's intimate viewing room by the front entrance. The lithograph *Rather Rage than Tears* (2009) frightens both in its likeness to George W. Bush and in the way Chicago

portrays rage as the easier, more natural emotion for the depicted figure.

*In the Shadow of the Handgun* (1983) frightens in a different way. A large painting displayed in its own giant alcove, the work presents a muscular, prismatic man and his blue shadow. His right index finger is a gun that has just fired blood and smoke, which blends into the smoke from the shadow gun. What is frightening is that the man is not looking at his target; he is looking at his perpetrating hand. With determination? With disbelief? No, with pride. *Woe Man I* (1986) is a lost wax-cast bronze bas-relief. The figure's upturned face exposes a vulnerable throat lined with what could be muscles, wrinkles, even labial folds, as one scholar suggests. There is despair in the blue eyes. Stand to the left and this individual has given up. From the right, the figure appears even more tortured. And since wrinkly old women often look like old men, perhaps she is.

*Woe Man with Blue Eye #9* (1986) introduces a different element of power. Here Chicago used sprayed acrylic and oil on hand-cast paper. The blue eye in this case refers to the figure's right eye. The eye itself is not blue, but Chicago has traced around it with the same vibrant blue that she uses in nearly every work in *PowerPlay*. The resulting outline creates the head of a hawk or an eagle overlaid onto the figure's face. In *Disfigured by Power I* (1984) it is hard to find the disfigurement. This man looks like every boss I've ever had, male or female. Chicago frightens me with how completely normal her subjects' emotional extremes seem.



Have we become so used to violence and abuse that it now appears normal, almost natural?

Chicago's triptych *Rainbow Man* (1984) anchors the exhibition. This man presents us his gift of a rainbow, and its colors whirl around the gallery in nearly all of the other works. Gallery owner David Eichholtz, with Chicago's blessing, arranged the art so that we are enveloped in this rainbow effect. After generously presenting the rainbow—an offer of love—in the left-hand panel, the center panel shows the man defending himself against the emotion that flows back to him. By the time we reach panel three on the right, he is overwhelmed and repulsed by the reciprocity.

Chicago's critical images of men in *PowerPlay* grew out of her own frustration with

how men act and what male power does to the world. Her use of the heroic male nude evolved from her first trip to Italy in 1982. "I think through making art," she says. "I did think my way out of anger and into empathy." For many of the paintings she used Belgian linen and a special gesso that would show the linen. They are under-painted with sprayed acrylic and over-painted with oil paint, not a medium she normally uses.

At the 1986 exhibition, *PowerPlay* may have been misunderstood or perhaps arrived ahead of its time. Today Chicago's imposing male figures and opalescent colors tempt us to say that this disturbing subject matter is beautiful. But how can we?

—SUSAN WIDER



Bottom: Judy Chicago, *Rainbow Man*, sprayed acrylic and oil on Belgian linen, 108" x 252" 1984 | Top: Judy Chicago, *In the Shadow of the Handgun*, sprayed acrylic and oil on canvas 108" x 144", 1983. Photos: Donald Woodman