

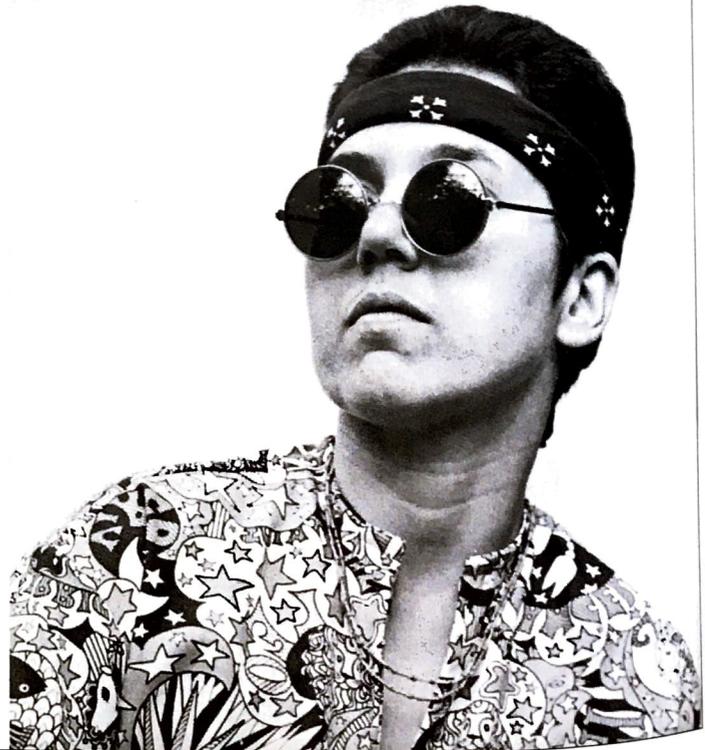
Judy Gerowitz hereby
devests herself of all
names imposed
upon her through
male social dominance
and freely chooses
her own name:

Judy Chicago

Chicago
JUDY ~~GEROWITZ~~
woman
ONE ~~MAN~~ SHOW
CAL STATE FULLERTON
OCTOBER 23 THRU
NOVEMBER 25

JACK GLENN GALLERY

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Through Minimal to Feminist

CHAD ALLIGOOD

Judy Chicago: minimalist? It seems an unlikely moniker for the artist, who is widely admired for her trailblazing and outspoken embrace of evocative feminine imagery. But before she became famous as Judy Chicago, creator of the feminist masterwork *The Dinner Party*, the young artist was known by her married name, Judy Gerowitz. And in the 1960s, Gerowitz was indeed a minimalist: her large-scale sculptures and paintings adopted geometry and repetition to confront the viewer with their blunt objecthood. Her *Rainbow Pickett* (1965; p. 38), for example, featured alongside Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre in the first museum exhibition of minimalism, *Primary Structures*, which appeared at the Jewish Museum in 1966. Though the minimalist approach may seem discontinuous with her signature later work, Gerowitz worked through the dominant, masculinist vocabulary of art-making in the 1960s to reach her signature idiom. In my view, she unmade the prescriptive, gender-based norms endemic to American avant-garde art production in this moment. Gerowitz adopted their formal characteristics, performing them in her life and work as though in drag, and then ultimately cast off their male-dominated structures, finding a new narrative through minimal form by looking to a collective history of powerful female figures.

To understand how Gerowitz evolved, we must approach her work in the context of the mid-1960s—before the advent of the women's movement and predating the dramatic cultural events of 1968. The art world reflected larger American mores of the day: cultural bias against women reigned. In the case of *Primary Structures*, for instance, curator Kynaston McShine chose Gerowitz as one of only three female sculptors out of fifty-one artists in the exhibition. In this cultural climate, an increasingly dogmatic and masculinist critical discourse emerged surrounding the minimal sculptural object. For all of its seeming negation and apparent renunciation of expressive content, minimalism had incited a veritable avalanche of critical responses—both laudatory and reproachful—from the moment of its inception in the early 1960s. It is almost as if the desolate absence of human touch, the repression of overt content, and the strained reduction of expressivity begged for an unusually robust critical apparatus to justify it. And 1966—the year Gerowitz attracted notice for her deployment of a

minimal vocabulary—might be considered the apex of this critical clamor. Judd's famous essay on minimalism, "Specific Objects," was published in 1965, while Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood" and Clement Greenberg's "Recentness of Sculpture," among other significant texts, both appeared in 1967, shortly after *Primary Structures*. As Anna Chave has argued, the production and proliferation of minimal form in art often coincided with a barely repressed misogyny, expressed through the words of the artists and in the artworks themselves.¹

In Southern California, where Gerowitz lived and worked in this period, the burgeoning art world may have afforded more freedom than New York in some ways, but she encountered a system just as steeped in chauvinism.² From its founding in Los Angeles in 1957 until the shuttering of its doors in 1966, Ferus Gallery and its male principals—Walter Hopps, Ed Kienholz, and, later, Irving Blum—exerted significant influence and attracted a bevy of emerging and established artists. The dominant image of the artists involved in the Ferus circle is perhaps nowhere more succinctly communicated than in the title of the 1964 Ferus group show of Ed Moses, Ken Price, Robert Irwin, and Billy Al Bengston: *The Studs*. Cocky, freewheeling, motorcycle-riding, and overtly (if not performatively) masculine: the Ferus studs set the tone for emerging artists in Los Angeles. Young Gerowitz entered this culture with guns blazing; several of her contemporaries recall her personality in this period as "pushy,"³ "charismatic," and "determined to be an outsider."⁴

Directly after receiving her MA from UCLA in 1964, the artist attended auto-body school for eight weeks, learning techniques that helped her to achieve the "finish fetish" style then prevalent among prominent L.A. artists like Bengston, Craig Kauffman, and Larry Bell. The only woman in a class of 250 students, Gerowitz applied these techniques in works like *Car Hood* (1964; p. 34), which was executed using a spray gun on the surface of the hood of a car mounted to the wall. The artist described the abstract composition painted in acrylic lacquer as a "vaginal form, penetrated by a phallic arrow"⁵; in its exploration of biomorphic abstraction in saturated hues, the work echoes a series of abstract paintings on paper the artist also completed during this time. Using traditionally male-dominated techniques to inscribe female imagery onto the hood of a car—that

Artforum magazine advertisement announcing Judy Chicago's name change and her solo show at California State University, Fullerton, October 1970; Photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archives

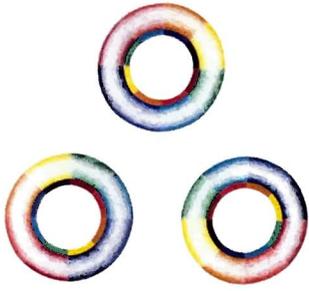


Fig. 1 *Whirling Donuts*, 1968–69; PrismaColor on paper, 18 × 24 in. (45.7 × 61 cm)

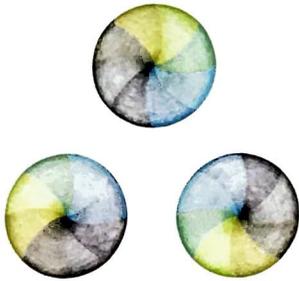


Fig. 2 *Dome Drawing #4*, 1968; PrismaColor on paper, 27³/₈ × 27³/₈ in. (69.6 × 69.6 cm)



Fig. 3 *Green-Blue Star Cunts*, 1969; Sprayed acrylic lacquer on acrylic, 27¹/₂ × 27¹/₂ in. (69.9 × 69.9 cm)

symbol of masculine freedom—*Car Hood* plainly interrogates the oppressive masculinity Gerowitz experienced as a young female artist in Los Angeles. The painting also anticipates her later embrace of feminine “core” imagery in the feminist work for which she is most renowned.

Following what Gerowitz recalls as the “great ridicule” she endured in reaction to *Car Hood*, she turned to discrete, unitary forms expressed in large-scale, colorful sculptures like *Rainbow Pickett* and *Trinity* (1965; pp. 38–39). Though they occupied space like sculptures, these works were made of classic painting materials: colored pigment on canvas wrapped around wooden supports. In these sculptures, Gerowitz sought “a way to make sculpture as direct as a Frank Stella painting,”⁶ presaging Robert Morris’s moralizing calls for “directness” in his didactic screed “Notes on Sculpture I–III” (1966–67). But critics took issue, too, with this work: of *Rainbow Pickett*, Peter Plagens lamented that “the sweet flatness of color has usurped the effectiveness of physical form.”⁷ Indeed, Gerowitz expressed keen interest in the evocative possibilities of color in this period,⁸ further exploring the interactions of dynamic color gradation in a series of PrismaColor drawings that continued through the late 1960s (figs. 1 and 2).

Gerowitz kept pushing her ideas of color through sculpture. In 1967, influential curator Maurice Tuchman selected Gerowitz for the large survey exhibition *American Sculpture of the Sixties* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *10 Part Cylinders* (1966; fig. 4), which appeared in the exhibition, consisted of ten cylindrical units of fiberglass ranging in height from 36 to 108 inches. Gerowitz learned how to manipulate this new material at a boat-building school in Long Beach, representing her second attempt, after the auto-body class, to master nontraditional techniques not typically associated with women. Color remained of paramount importance: “In the fiberglass cylinders,” she commented, “the color was right in the surface” as opposed to being applied to it, as in *Rainbow Pickett* and *Trinity*.⁹

As she grew her arsenal of technical skills, so too did the artist expand beyond the blocky units of her earlier forays into minimalism. *10 Part Cylinders* reintroduces the curvilinear form into her vocabulary—a form she would further extrapolate in subsequent sculptures and paintings, such as her *Bronze Domes* (1968; p. 42) and

Pasadena Lifesavers (1969–70; pp. 44–47). In the latter series, Gerowitz used sprayed acrylic to create paintings that emphasized rounded forms redolent of portals, rings, and vaginas. Her exploration of these forms leads directly to the “core” imagery that marks her first feminist paintings to incorporate direct reference to great women of history, the *Great Ladies* series (1973).

Gerowitz’s return to the curved line, alongside her emphasis on color, marks an important formal development. The straight line and perpendicular corner evident in *Rainbow Pickett* and *Trinity* betray an allegiance to minimalist conceits of rationality and rigidity, but the curved line remains human, bodily, even feminine. Gerowitz’s interest in the curved line in this period coincides with her experiments in the built environment. In 1967, along with her collaborators Eric Orr and Lloyd Hamrol, the artist installed two *Dry Ice Environments* (also known as *Disappearing Environments Part I* and *II*; pp. 128–29). These works consisted of several tons of dry ice blocks stacked together to form walls, walkways, and structures. Though they evoked elements of minimal sculpture in their geometry, straight lines, and repetition, these works remained resolutely ephemeral and fleeting. As the dry ice degraded, so too did the minimalist form of the blocks, creating edges that were uneven and illegible in the atmospheric fog. In their dissolution of rigidity and emphasis on the ephemeral, these experiments serve as an antecedent for Gerowitz’s later colored-smoke and fireworks pieces, which she began in 1968 (see from p. 111).

In an *Artforum* ad from October 1970 for her solo exhibition at Cal State Fullerton, the artist announced her legal name change: “Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name: Judy Chicago.” Of the transition from making art “like the boys” to finding her own voice, Judy Chicago has said: “By the end of the 1960s, I was getting fed up with pretending I was a man, adopting male drag.”¹⁰ Though she used the term “drag” here somewhat in jest, an element of truth remains: by appropriating and performing the look of minimalism—becoming an expert in its techniques and manufacture, studying the mediums and acquiring a deep and abiding knowledge of the ways in which this kind of work functions—Gerowitz was able to effectively perform its formal nuances. In so

doing, she naturally found its limits: the things minimalism was unable to say, the gaps in the narrative it could not fill. With salacious, effusive color, and curvilinear form, by embracing painting and mastering craft, Judy Chicago found her way through the flower first by performing her own minimalist drag. Like the best performers, she showed us the truth and the vulnerability inherent to her role—elements she carried forward to her breakthrough creation of a new vocabulary we now call feminist art.

- 1 Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine*, 64, no. 5 (January 1990): 44–63.
- 2 Judy Chicago in conversation with the author, February 6, 2017.
- 3 Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 120.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 5 Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 37. Quoted in Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 114.
- 6 Judy Gerowitz to Janice Johnson and Louis Lunetta, May 24, 1965. Quoted in Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 121.
- 7 Peter Plagens, "Judy Gerowitz, Rolf Nelson Gallery," *Artforum* 4, no. 8 (April 1966): 14. Quoted in Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 121.
- 8 Jenni Sorkin, *Judy Chicago: Minimalism, 1965–1973* (Santa Fe, NM: LewAllen Contemporary, 2004).
- 9 Judy Chicago in conversation with the author, February 6, 2017.
- 10 *Ibid.*

Fig. 4 10 *Part Cylinders*, 1966; Mixed media, Dimensions variable; Photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archives

