

Midwife to the Revolution

THE BIRTH PROJECT

By Judy Chicago.

Illustrated. 231 pp. New York:

Doubleday & Company. Cloth, \$35. Paper, \$17.95.

By Judith Stein

EVER since 1969, when the artist Judy Chicago donned boxing gloves and trunks to pose for an advertisement in *Artforum* proclaiming her new, nonpatriarchal surname, she has often stepped back into the ring to take on our tacit assumptions about the nature of art and of women.

In the early 70's, propelled by her observation that the visual arts rarely reflect the reality of women's lives, Judy Chicago developed a radical iconography to address this omission. In her best-known work, she has often employed controversial imagery, encouraging her audience to transcend their preconceived notions of thematic appropriateness. In "The Dinner Party" (1979), a monumentally scaled homage to women's history, a radiant labial blossom was her favored image.

An author as well as an artist, at 46 Judy Chicago has already published her autobiography, "Through the Flower," as well as two volumes explicating the content and construction of "The Dinner Party." Her new book, "The Birth Project," chronicles the creation of her art project of the same name. Devoted to the subject of childbirth, the art consists of 100 works designed by the artist and fabricated by a worldwide team of volunteer needleworkers. Selected groups of these embroideries are now on a long-term tour, on view in museums and

union halls alike. But for the time being, more people will experience "The Birth Project" as a publication than as a work of art.

Reading "The Birth Project" is like leafing through an annotated scrapbook. We are offered a mélange of the artist's journal entries and expository prose, letters, poems and testimonial statements by the needleworkers, whole and detailed photographs of the embroideries, views of preparatory stages and numerous snapshots of the participants.

A majority of the images cast the viewer as midwife, unflinchingly facing the emerging baby. Many people have encountered a spiritual wellspring in this bold visual conceit, but others (and not only men) have been discomfited by the blatant vantage point. Using human figures for the first time in her work, Judy Chicago nevertheless presents a more stylized description of the birth process than did such diverse predecessors as Marc Chagall and Frida Kahlo, who graphically depicted its raw realities. Judy Chicago's designs range from the moving "Birth Figures" series, exploring women's reactions to the changes brought by pregnancy, to the more heavy-handed "Birth Certificate," in the Pennsylvania Dutch style, which depicts tulips, phallic crosses and potato-shaped babies.

What comes across so clearly in "The Birth Project" through the words of the participating needleworkers is Judy Chicago's notable ability to empower other women. Her volunteers speak eloquently of change, of taking themselves more seriously, expanding the role of art in their lives and stretching their definitions of the possible. She provided "the image, the framework and the guidance," at times enabling them to function as collaborators: "We are creating within Judy's creation," an embroiderer, Frannie Yablonsky, says of the working process. By enlisting techniques such as embroidery, needlepoint, smocking and crochet for the final translation of her drawings, Judy Chicago

continues the feminist reappraisal of women's work, which alters the conventional consideration of the needle arts as an unworthy vehicle for serious expression.

A self-righteous edge occasionally shows through the prose, though. The pitiable stitcher called "the belly dancer" (whose later unwillingness to return her unfinished work would require a call to the police to retrieve it) once inappropriately wore a gaudy costume for a documentary photo session at her home. Judy Chicago writes that she was mortified to see her "all covered with sequins which she'd carefully sewn on when she was supposed to be needlepointing 'Creation of the World' and contributing to the liberation of women on the planet." While her brief, impassioned discussion of some traditional Hindu birth customs provides an illuminating introduction to deleterious practices, her cursory historical section, "Childbirth in America," reveals the flat, didactic tone of a label on a gallery display. In the section on the history of maternity clothes, Ann Hollander, an art historian, is the object of unwarranted skepticism for her contention that Arnolfini's bride in the famous painting by Jan van Eyck is not depicted as pregnant.

JUDY CHICAGO is arguably America's most visible female artist. Her feminist themes, ambitious projects and published writings have touched the lives of many women not normally attuned to contemporary art. But so much does Judy Chicago equate her own struggle for acceptance with the goals of the women's movement that in criticizing her polemical stance or evincing selective enthusiasm for her work, one runs the risk of being thought an antifeminist, or worse, a misogynist.

And yet, although the pugnacious artist may lose a few rounds when up against the bastions of tradition, she is actually winning her fight to democratize art, expanding its audience by reshaping its content. □

The New York Times

Book Review

September 15, 1985 60¢

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