

## IF MEN HAD BABIES, THERE WOULD BE THOUSANDS OF IMAGES OF THE CROWNING

—Judy Chicago, 1982



The *Birth Project*<sup>1</sup>—Judy Chicago’s analysis of the interrelationships among gender, femaleness, maternity, and motherhood—was twenty to thirty years ahead of its time. Chicago was the first to comprehensively address the issues found within the series. Completed between 1980 and 1985, these images afford a vision seldom seen in western culture since the Neolithic, when woman embodied Creation itself as well as the many manifestations of individual creation—human, plant, animal, or mineral. Chicago wanted to reveal birth as spiritual and intellectual, a source of potent myth and symbol, but also wanted to show birth as physical and real. Historically, nearly all images of mother and child were idealized or sentimentalized. In the early years of this century, several exhibitions raised more complex themes about motherhood – for example, the ambivalence women may feel about taking on the responsibility of another human life. Chicago’s own complex visual exploration of maternal cognitive dissonance within the *Birth Project* precedes these exhibitions by nearly twenty years.

Renewed interest in the maternal body makes this exhibition timely. A number of recent political and scientific developments re-emphasize women’s bodies as commodities. In contrast all Chicago’s bodies are empowered and Chicago’s images encourage viewers to perceive women in unaccustomed ways. Illustrative is the woman of *The Crowning* who is intersexed as well as inter-specific. Chicago offers women a changed self-norm.

The *Birth Project* was stitched by 150 women needleworkers who joined artist Judy Chicago over the five year period of its production to complete approximately 84 textiles for a series of “exhibition units.” Chicago worked with needleworkers, providing underpaintings, cartoons, drawings, mock-ups, color specifications, and written directions for the transformation of her images. One needleworker summarized the process, “We are creating within Judy’s creation.”<sup>2</sup> Every needleworker receives public credit for her work.

The medium, associated since the Renaissance with craft, was here returned by Chicago to its medieval standing as an art medium. Chicago’s ability to transform the “discriminated-against” status of textile and needle media encouraged the use of such media by other artists. With this series, as she had done in *The Dinner Party*, Chicago helped redefine the terms “art” and “craft.” For Chicago, focus on skill determined the work as craft and focus on meaning determined the work as art. The meaning of the *Birth Project* was, and is, revolutionary.

This exhibition re-gathers a number of exceptional *Birth Project* works together. Originally the *Birth Project* works were shown as single exhibition units or in groups in galleries, museums, libraries, hospitals, and other conventional and unconventional locations. The accompanying documentary book, which is now out of print, provides the only overview of the *Birth Project*. Among past schools of feminist thought were those that saw an emphasis on sexual difference as a basis for criticism of imagery like the *Birth Project*. Feminist historian Jane Gerhard, however, hails sexual difference as “possibly the only starting point for understanding” the outlines of a next phase of the women’s “revolution.”<sup>3</sup> The *Birth Project* was designed by Chicago, and is now “born again” in this exhibition, as a continuing force for cultural change and aesthetic transformation.

### Judy Chicago: Internationally-known Artist, Author, Feminist, and Educator

Judy Chicago’s career spans five decades. Her art is exhibited in the US and abroad. She holds five honorary doctorates and she is the author of fifteen books, many published in foreign editions. In the early 1970s Chicago pioneered Feminist Art through a unique program for women at California State University, Fresno. From 1974 to ’79, Chicago turned to women’s history to create, with hundreds of volunteers, *The Dinner Party*. It found permanent housing in 2007 at the Brooklyn Museum as the centerpiece of the Elizabeth S. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. From 1980 to ’85, Chicago worked on the *Birth Project* and while completing that series created *PowerPlay*, a series which brought a critical feminist gaze to the construct of masculinity. After eight years of work, the *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light* premiered in 1993 at the Spertus Museum in Chicago. The *Holocaust Project* features the merging of Chicago’s painting with the photography of Donald Woodman. *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* was Chicago’s last collaborative project. Begun in 1994 with skilled needleworkers, *Resolutions* combines painting and needlework in a series which reinterprets adages and proverbs. More recently Chicago has focused on glass as a medium in series like *Heads Up*, done between 2007 and 2013. In 2011 and 2012, in multiple venues and events, including *A Butterfly for Pomona*, Chicago’s first fireworks piece since 1974, Chicago’s important contributions to southern California art were highlighted in “Pacific Standard Time,” a Getty-funded celebration of the region’s history. In 2014, Chicago’s pyrotechnic *A Butterfly for Brooklyn* marked her 75th birthday with the applause of 12,000 people.



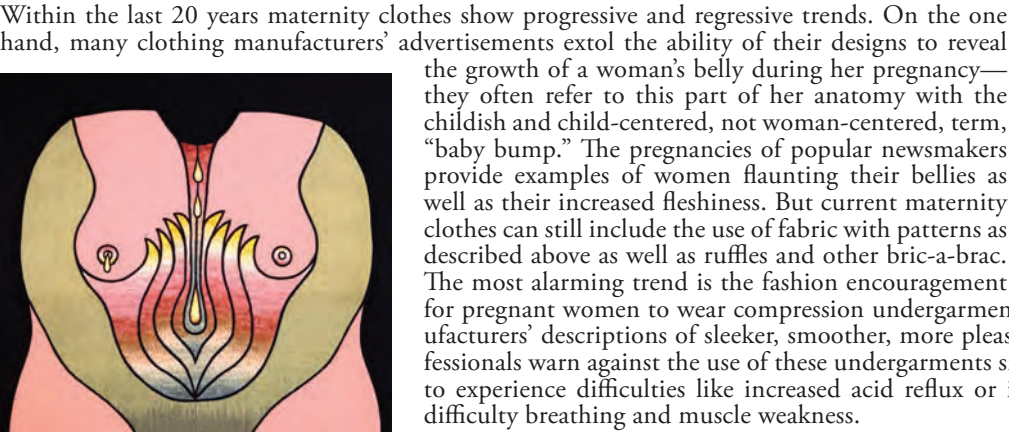
### Creation of the World PP2

Chicago identifies *Creation of the World* as the first *Birth Project* image she developed. Here she retells Genesis from a female point of view, one that merges a sense of myth and science. *Creation of the World* evokes the evolutionary development of the earth and its life forms. Despite the “vast” aspect of the subject matter, the work is small and jewel-like in its color, detail, and petit point technique which utilizes small fine stitches plied by the needleworker over single threads on the needlepoint canvas.

*Creation of the World PP2*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 10¾ x 15 inches. Exhibition Unit 45. Petit Point by Jean Berens. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

### Birth Garment 1: Pregnant Amazon & Birth Garment 2: Flowering Shrub

In 1984 when Chicago researched maternity wear, she realized most maternity clothes were designed to defuse the sense of sexuality, power, and basic connection to nature conveyed by a woman’s pregnant body. Though pregnant women routinely appeared in public, unlike many of their forbears who thought such appearance unseemly, they nonetheless wore clothing that covered the body in “innocent” plaids, checks, or patterns of small objects or flowers. Such clothing frequently bore infantilizing bows, little collars, or puffy sleeves.



*Birth Garment 1: Pregnant Amazon*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 44 x 43 inches. Exhibition Unit 34. Dyeing, weaving, needlepoint by Dr. Helen Courvoisie with garment fabrication by Sally Babson. Collection: Albuquerque Museum.

*Birth Garment 2: Flowering Shrub*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 44 x 43 inches. Exhibition Unit 34. Spinning, weaving, dyeing, and needlepoint by Penny Davidson with embroidery outline and garment fabrication by Sally Babson. Collection: Albuquerque Museum.

Chicago’s *Birth Garments* frankly clothe and contour bodies that are mature, fertile, dripping full, and mountainous. The needleworkers who executed Chicago’s designs both dyed the thread used, wove the fabric, and needlepointed the belly inserts. Penny Davidson, who worked on the *Flowering Shrub Birth Garment*, also spun and dyed her yarn from wool she sheared. Both needleworkers became pregnant during their time working on the *Birth Project*.

### Hatching the Universal Egg E5: Birth Power

“[F]rom this egg . . . all things came.”<sup>4</sup> The myth of the universal / cosmic egg is common to a wide variety of cultures, symbolic of female primordial mass and energy from which is hatched deity as well as the order of life. Chicago uses the universal egg as one means to restore genesis to its female mythic roots. Here the egg and vaginal form merge. Fire and light flow from the breasts of a muscular female figure to nurture the life birthed. Chicago bows the head of this woman since Chicago sees her as the “provider of life,” yet being “trapped by the needs of those she gives life to.”<sup>5</sup> In bowing her head she also views herself to declare authority over her own body.

*Hatching the Universal Egg E5: Birth Power*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 20¼ x 20¼ inches. Exhibition Unit 56. Embroidery by Sandie Abel. Courtesy: Through the Flower.



### Birth Tear / Tear BT ST 1

The title, with the image, suggests layered meanings. The first “tear” in the title refers to the perineal lacerations approximately half of birthing women experience. Usually such tears involve just the skin, but less often muscle is torn which is more serious and can lead to complications.

The second “tear” in the title refers to the conflict women can sometimes feel about the decision to become a parent. A tear seeps from the right eye of this figure as she strains to birth and nurture her children who cling to and grab for her. Chicago here avoids the usual sentimentality of the mother and child image. The use of the macramé technique, a series of intricate knots, seems apt for the representation of deep internal conflict.

*Birth Tear / Tear BT ST 1*, Judy Chicago, 1985, 46 x 55½ inches. Exhibition Unit 81. Macramé by Pat Rudy-Baese. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

### The Crowning NP3

In *The Crowning* image Chicago celebrates the female process by centering the act of birthing in the compositional space. As Chicago noted, historically, images of birthing women nearly disappeared in the western world under a patriarchal pictorial taboo. Denigrated in their physical ability to birth another human, women found their bodily process co-opted by men in the form of baptism. Baptism was praised, painted, or sculpted as the important Christian beginning of life. In addition females as midwives disappeared. After the Renaissance, midwifery was replaced by the growing male profession of obstetrics and gynecology which viewed women as too feeble-minded to understand their own bodies.



*The Crowning from Retrospective in a Box*, Judy Chicago, 2010, lithograph, 30 x 30 inches. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

In the 1980s, with the *Birth Project*, Chicago visually reversed history. The woman in *The Crowning* looks downward to observe and understand, a means to self-power. Her body forms a yellow Pierid silhouette, a symbol of animalness and metamorphosis. This metamorphosis reverberates through expanding linear waves. Other symbols converge within the holistic body of the woman—male-ness in the guise of a penile form and plantness in the flowering vagina and the hint of the outline of pistils and stamens. She is animal and plant, male and female. In the *NP3* version in particular, the holiness of the woman’s body and energy is emphasized by the central and altarpiece-like composition as well as by the stitched patterns of light-giving yellows, golds, and sparkling threads. Today an image bank of birthing imagery is growing, especially on the internet.

### The Crowning Q5

In this quilt four symbolic female figures hold their legs open and cast their gazes to watch their own crowning events. Here the quilted pattern becomes the pattern of change pulsing from the lepidopteran outline of each of these women. The energized pattern is as important as the figures themselves. The concept of change refers to traditional and non-traditional emphases. A traditional meaning can be applied—that is, changes will certainly occur in a woman’s life after the birth of a child. Chicago however, was, and is, interested in the changes that occurred, or are occurring now, in women due to the blended ideas of the waves of the women’s movement—in the acquisition of knowledge and theory about gender, in the construction of self-identification, in the development of respect for the female body and intellect, and in the ability of the self to act. In the *Birth Project* book, Chicago quotes Gwen Glesmann, a needleworker who stitched a crowning image, “[M]y whole involvement in stitching this piece became a celebration of my own rebirth and the incredible joy of bringing myself out of the oppressive roles I have been taught and peeling away the layers of self-doubt which had surrounded me.”<sup>6</sup>



*The Crowning NP3*, Judy Chicago, 1983, 35½ x 51½ inches. Exhibition Unit 18. Hand painting assistance by Lynda Healy; needlepoint by Kathryn Haas Alexander. Collection: Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts.



*The Crowning Q5*, Judy Chicago, 1982, 56½ x 89 inches. Exhibition Unit 2. Reverse appliqué and quilting by Jacquelyn (Moore) Alexander. Collection: Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts.



*Guided by the Goddess*, Judy Chicago, 1985, silkscreen, 34 x 44 inches. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

ery further by revealing the responsibility that comes after creation—continued nourishment and support. This image, with others in the *Birth Project* series, meets Chicago’s goal “to make the feminine holy.”<sup>7</sup> The Hartford Seminary owns the textile version of *Guided by the Goddess* and keeps it on permanent display within an area where groups of both genders meet for “circles, prayer groups, ritual, and class.”<sup>8</sup>

### Mother India

Chicago organized Mother India around the figure of Shiva, the Hindu God of transcendence and purity. Here Chicago makes Shiva a crying pregnant female surrounded by children, thus trading his attributes for sadness, pain, and a sense of burdensome responsibility. Chicago devises this Shiva as a reflection of the historical lives of Indian women.

Six scenes inspired by the style of Indian miniature paintings surround Shiva to tell the story of many women during much of India’s past. At the top is a scene of arranged marriage. Moving counter-clockwise are two smaller vignettes—the first of female infanticide and the second of child marriage. At the bottom is a scene of a woman just after giving birth, attended by untrained assistants in unsterile conditions. The birthing woman’s relatives hide their eyes because she is considered unclean. Moving to the right, Chicago presents women enduring purdah and an image of a woman who is forced to end her life through suttee.

Chicago based her images on a book by the same title, *Mother India*, written in 1927 by Katherine Mayo. Though many women in India today cannot afford a clinical setting, conventional western medicine is replacing traditional birthing practices. A number of women see this nevertheless as a dis-empowerment of the birthing woman, instead advocating for sensitive, trained, woman-centered midwifery. Despite the fact that from 1990 to 2010 maternal mortality rates dropped more than 50% in India, statistics in 2012 indicated that India’s maternal mortality rate was still one of the highest globally.

At the four corners of this expansive tapestry, Chicago placed images of the lotus flower, the peacock, and the Taj Mahal. Both the lotus and the peacock feature frequently as symbols in Hindu spirituality, art, and mythology. In 1963 the peacock became the national bird of India. The Taj Mahal, completed in the mid-1600s, was built by the emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his favorite wife, Arjumand Banu Begum, who died giving birth to her 14th child at the age of 37. In 1983, the Taj Mahal became a world heritage site as a lauded example of art in India.

The imagery of Mother India is gridded by scrolled, mirrored bands. Mirrored, or Shisha, embroidery began in the 1600s in India and spread to other parts of Asia. Originally this type of embroidery utilized the reflective surfaces of mineral and mineral-related materials such as mica, tin, or silver. Today, this form of needlework is most frequently found in India.



*Mother India*, Judy Chicago, 1985, 127 x 96 inches. Exhibition Unit 69. Border design assistance by Judith Meyers; applique and embroidery panels by Jacquelyn (Moore) Alexander (applique) and Judy Kendall (embroidery); mirrored and embroidered strips by Judith Meyers’ group, Norma Cordiner, Sharon Fuller, Susan Herold, Peggy Kennedy, Linda Lockyer, Lydia Ruyle. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

1 The book published in 1985 to accompany the original exhibitions of Birth Project work provides much information for this essay as well as the commentary for each work: *Judy Chicago, The Birth Project* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

2 Chicago, *Birth Project*, 164.

3 Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism*, 1970-2007 (Athens and London: the University of Georgia Press, 2013) 287.

4 Chicago, *Birth Project*, 93.

5 Ibid., 92.

7 Ibid., 177.

8 Interview with Dr. Miriam Therese Winter, Professor of Liturgy, Worship, Spirituality, and Feminist Studies, Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT, August 23, 2013 and July 16, 2014.





*Birth ST 1*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 94 x 252 inches. Exhibition Unit 70. Filet crochet by Dolly Kaminski. Collection: Albuquerque Museum.

crochet as a serious art medium that could incorporate notable and dramatic meaning or expand to a grand scale. Today, Olek, an internationally sought-after artist who is based in New York City, works primarily in crochet. Her largest work, a welter of fluorescent-like colors in crocheted yarn, covered a locomotive and three train cars in an installation in her native Poland in 2013.

### Creation of the World E 3/9

The *Creation of the World* imagery, as is the case for other *Birth Project* images, was translated through various techniques—embroidery, petit-point, quilting, needlepoint—and into different sizes. The image reflects Chicago's own Genesis story written in the 1970's. "The Universe reached the culmination of her great labor. And out of this mighty labor was born the Earth."<sup>9</sup> In the book which originally accompanied the *Birth Project* exhibitions, Chicago lists Hertha among her Goddess research, "the Germanic goddess from whose name is derived the word Earth."<sup>10</sup> In Chicago's version of Genesis, original chaos, matter, energy, formation, universe, and Earth are all female.



*Creation of the World E 3/9*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 23¼ x 40½ inches. Exhibition Unit 55. Embroidery by Merrily Rush Whitaker. Collection: Albuquerque Museum.



*Birth Trinity NP 1*, Judy Chicago, 1983, 51 x 130½ inches. Exhibition Unit 28. Needlepoint by the "Teaneck Seven," Susan Bloomenstein, Elizabeth Colten, Karen Fogel, Helene Hirmes, Bernice Levitt, Linda Rothenberg, and Miriam Vogelmann. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

In her accompanying *Birth Project* book, Chicago showed a sculpture of a birthing woman from 6th century Cyprus as well as a relief from ancient Greece. Both indicate this sitting/semi-sitting position with attendants as described. Other historical imagery illustrates this position—even relatively recent examples such as women from the United States included by George Julius Engelmann in his 1882 study of birthing postures and techniques. Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains in the Denver area owns another textile version of this image. The work hangs in the staff training room of the Planned Parenthood building.

In her *Birth Project* book Chicago revealed that the kneeling figure in her image represented the midwife but also the "child pulling itself out of the birth canal." Chicago further described the semi-sitting birthing woman mythologically as a "human female and the earth," thus meshing "the personal to the universal aspect of the birth process."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Judy Chicago, *The Birth Project (1980-85)*, Judy Chicago, <http://www.judychicago.com/gallery/birth-project/bp-artwork>.

<sup>10</sup> Chicago, *Birth Project*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 116.

### Birth ST 1

When people look at a crochet, most think of great-grandmothers sitting in their living rooms quietly fashioning diminutive, prim, lacy doilies for antique chair arms or endtables. In *Birth Special Technique 1* Chicago set out to change the associations of crochet—with solely private and intimate interiors, with a sense of the past, with a sense of the medium as the domain of only hobbyist crafters, and with the sense of a "small" and "frilly" femaleness often embodied in the description of such work. Crocheted in collaboration with a needleworker who interestingly did set up shop in her living room, the work, which is twenty-one feet wide and over seven feet high, triggered speculation by Chicago at the time that it was potentially the largest of its kind. Pieces like this helped to inspire or "re-birth" the description of such work. Crocheted in collaboration with a needleworker who interestingly did set up shop in her living room, the work, which is twenty-one feet wide and over seven feet high, triggered speculation by Chicago at the time that it was potentially the largest of its kind. Pieces like this helped to inspire or "re-birth" the description of such work. Crocheted in collaboration with a needleworker who interestingly did set up shop in her living room, the work, which is twenty-one feet wide and over seven feet high, triggered speculation by Chicago at the time that it was potentially the largest of its kind. Pieces like this helped to inspire or "re-birth" the description of such work.



*Creation of the World—Scroll 6*, Judy Chicago, 1981-83, hand-colored lithograph, 31½ x 92½ inches. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

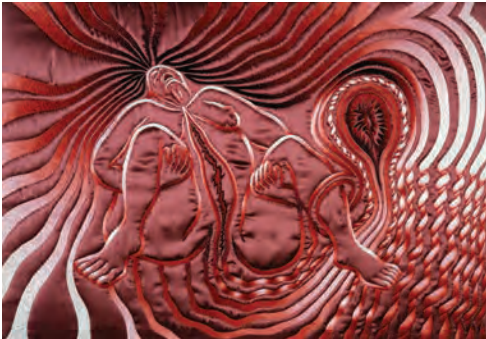
envisions a myth in which forms of the female body merge with those of the earth and the larger cosmos. In her myth the creation of the universe and its details commence from the visual and textual equivalent of the sounds and movements of a woman giving birth.

Most scholarship on creation myths categorizes such stories according to characteristics of the figures in the narrative and/or the plot such as order from chaos, creation from a cosmic egg, or creation in the primeval past from the bodily pieces of a being/deity. Creation myths may also be categorized according to similarities such as creation which emanates from one figure, or from two figures, or from a death, and so on. As Chicago researched creation myths she instead categorized them according to gender and saw they followed an evolution over time from female creator(s), to female and male creators, to female deity destroyed by male deity which then causes creation, and finally to a male creator. Today, this gendered analysis of creation myth is more prevalent than in the early 1980s when Chicago produced the *Birth Project*.

### Birth Tear E2

Chicago refers to a quote by Anais Nin to describe "the violence of birth."<sup>12</sup> Nin wrote, "somewhere my flesh is tearing and the blood is spilling out . . . [T]he pain makes me cry out. A long animal howl."<sup>13</sup> This *Birth Project* figure chooses to accept her capacity even as it takes the form of creative cataclysm.

Jane Gaddie Thompson, the needleworker for this piece identified with the image. She recounted the difficult birth of her daughter, "I felt Judy's representation of birth was . . . realistic."<sup>14</sup> Yet, at the same time, she delightedly remarked that the umbilical cord in this image was "round and gently twisted, full of magic and life."<sup>15</sup>



*Birth Tear E2*, Judy Chicago, 1982, 20½ x 27½ inches. Exhibition Unit 4. Embroidery by Jane Gaddie Thompson. Courtesy: Through the Flower.



### Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure

This woman stands with her hands over her face in a gesture of sorrow. Mary Ewanoski, the needleworker of this piece, relates the image to the story of her own mother, a practicing Catholic, who cried when she realized she was pregnant with her fifth child. Ewanoski also connects the tenor of this work to one of the techniques she employed. Ironically, smocking historically permitted a garment to stretch when it was being worn to allow freedom of movement. But as Ewanoski covered the smocking pleats of the outline of the figure with cable stitching, she confided she felt as though she was symbolically "binding the figure."<sup>16</sup> In another contrary historic development, smocking ceased to be used in garments worn by laborers and became associated with clothes primarily for children, a subtle communication, via Chicago's design, of western culture's frequent messages to women that ultimate importance is placed on the child, rather than the mother.

*Birth Figure 6: Smocked Figure*, Judy Chicago, 1984, 61½ x 22 inches. Exhibition Unit 53. Smocking and embroidery by Mary Ewanoski. Courtesy: Through the Flower.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 85.  
<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 87.  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 85.  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 74.

### Creation of the World—Scroll 6

In symbolic terms creation myths form the foundational building blocks for cultural beliefs. Any metaphorical story of creation lays bare the character of a culture and its underlying principles. For example, the Judeo-Christian myth in which a sole male figure is the "creator" displays the male power and anti-female bias of western civilization. Symbols as multi-sensual and interdisciplinary motivators thus affect societal institutions and products—including art—which then reflect and maintain that cultural character. Contrary to the prevalent Judeo-Christian story, Judy Chicago

### Curator's Acknowledgments

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### Curator and Author

Viki D. Thompson Wylder, MFA PhD: Dr. Thompson Wylder is a Judy Chicago scholar who worked in the museum field for 26 years, primarily for the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts (FSU MoFA), where she curated and co-curated a number of exhibitions, including the Judy Chicago retrospective titled *Trials and Tributes*. *Trials and Tributes* traveled to seven additional venues from 1999 to 2002. The *Trials and Tributes* essay was edited for the catalogue of the 2002 survey of Chicago's career at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Thompson Wylder published articles for several other Chicago series and works. Thompson Wylder negotiated the acquisition of six *Birth Project* textiles as well as *Birth Project* studies and prints making the FSU MoFA the second largest museum collector of *Birth Project* art. In addition, Thompson Wylder teaches in the Women's Studies Program at FSU and serves as the Curator of Education at the FSU MoFA.

### Exhibition Sponsor and Organizer

Through the Flower: A non-profit feminist art organization founded by Judy Chicago, educating a broad public about the importance of art and its power in countering the erasure of women's achievements.

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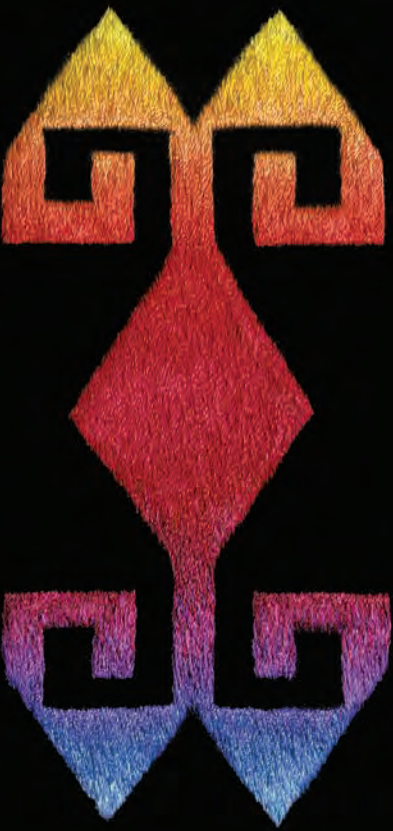
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Through the Flower

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# Judy Chicago's BIRTH PROJECT



# BORN AGAIN

An Exhibition Curated by Dr. Viki Thompson Wylder

Organized by Through the Flower