

Compare the work of a woman artist in the 1970's with one from the period 1990-2004.

It was not until 1970 when the cotemporary feminist art movement emerged. Women Artists believed that art could help change social and political views. This notion is still central in many feminist artists work today<sup>1</sup>. Judy Chicago a feminist artist from the 1970, is well known for her controversial *Dinner party* installation 1979, which started off public relations to women's issues in body imagery in art history<sup>2</sup>. Louise Walsh is a feminist artist during the period 1990 till present, her work plays with the power of art and it tries to change the society and women's status in society. Judy Chicago and Louise Walsh are both feminist artists, however their art work are from different periods. Throughout I will be comparing both artists work examining the similarities and differences of their work.

Since the 1970's, Judy Chicago has been known as an out spoken and visible activist for feminist change<sup>3</sup>. In 1971 Chicago had organised the first feminist art course at California State college at Fresno, and her autobiography *Through the flower* and the *Dinner party* are the indicators of the feminist art movement in a America<sup>4</sup>. All of Chicago's work is very controversial, for instance the *Dinner party 1979* and the menstruation Bathroom 1972. However the work of Chicago is quite similar to Louise Walsh work of the *Monument to the low paid women worker 1993* fig1. Walsh's sculpture of the two women figures sculptured from bronze, are represented as being within a patriarchal economic system<sup>5</sup>. The theme of the two figures is clear by the use of objects and utensils which are symbolic of women's work, which includes a type writer, a telephone and a shopping basket. The original brief of the women figures was to reflect Amelia Street as a former red light district with the female



fig 1.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wiwomensnetwork.org/womensartmovement.html>

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists*, 281

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists*, 281

<sup>4</sup> Randy Rosen et al., 1989, *Making their mark: Women artists move into the mainstream 1970-85*, 122

<sup>5</sup> Katy Deepwell, 1998, *Women artists and modernism*, 168

figures as colourful life-size cartoons. However Walsh believed the idea was offensive to portray women like that and proposed her own idea of addressing women's issues of low paid jobs<sup>6</sup>. Chicago and Walsh both focus on women in society and gender issues.

Judy Chicago was influenced by Hosmer and Lewis and her work of the *Dinner party* was her master piece of all her works and it became one of the most important pieces of American art<sup>7</sup>. The *Dinner party* fig2, was presented as a



triangle shape table for a rite of communion among famous women in history<sup>8</sup>. Chicago created 39 different plates, representing a different woman in history. Each plate has a vagina icon as the over riding image<sup>9</sup>. Chicago

fig2

wanted to emphasize women's identities, by defining female sexuality and the experiences women have of living in patriarchal culture; by working with the historical and theoretical aspects of women<sup>10</sup>.

In comparison to Louise Walsh work of the *Monument to the low paid worker*, both pieces of works by the artists are emphasizing women, women in history and the repressed women. Chicago is expressing the importance of the women who have contributed to history in some form, where as Walsh is accentuating how women in society are underpaid, because of their sexuality. However Walsh stated that the point of the representation of the two female figures is to give girls a valid representation of their genealogy an essential condition of their identity<sup>11</sup>. Artists, Walsh and Chicago's work are made from aesthetic materials. Walsh's *Monument to the low paid women worker* is sculptured from bronze and has a set of principles and meaning within the two female figures. Chicago's *Dinner party* is made from china, cloth and wood. The aesthetic materials show that there is an important message within the piece of work and it is not just an eye pleasing piece of work.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/publicart/tour/tour8.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~ulrich/femhist/art.shtml>

<sup>8</sup> Randy Rosen et al., 1989, Making their mark: Women artists move into the mainstream 1970-85,194

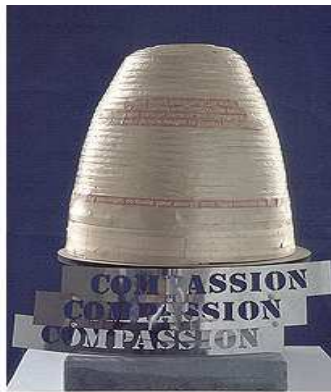
<sup>9</sup> Randy Rosen et al., 1989, Making their mark: Women artists move into the mainstream 1970-85,194

<sup>10</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's *Dinner party* in feminist art history, 23

<sup>11</sup> Katy Deepwell, 1998, Women artists and modernism,166

Chicago's work of the *Menstruation Bathroom* 1972 focuses on the vagina. The piece of work was set in a room, however one could not stand in the room, and they could only peer into the room; as if peering into a female sexual organ. Chicago had a metaphor within the *Menstruation Bathroom*, which was it figured the body as a house housing the body in the house<sup>12</sup>. The *Menstruation Bathroom* also uncovers the usually hidden subject of menstruation<sup>13</sup>. Chicago's dramatic *Menstruation Bathroom* is speaking out the repressed women's identity of being proud to be female. The *Menstruation Bathroom* may look unpleasant, however menstruation is what makes a woman a woman, without menstruation there is no form of reproduction, it is a form of women's identity.

In comparison of Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* to Walsh's work of the *Memorial project*, the two pieces of work are very different in meaning and expression. The *Menstruation Bathroom* is very controversial where as the *Memorial project* is not. The *Memorial project* is about what happens as time moves on and how life takes you from childhood to death<sup>14</sup> fig3. Walsh's work focuses on life with male and female and by also looking at feminist aspects in her other work. The *Memorial project*



*project* is as sculpture, the shape is a beehive. It was designed for people to put messages into a ceremony each year<sup>15</sup>. Walsh worked with a poet while designing her project to evolve a story about the fight against drugs. Walsh stated that her piece of work was a listening piece as an attempt to make an articulation of what she was hearing<sup>16</sup>.

Fig3

Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* and Walsh's *Memorial project* both express different subject matters; however both pieces of work are emphasizing important subjects. In comparison to size the *Menstruation bathroom* is a life size

<sup>12</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, *Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner party* in feminist art history, 191

<sup>13</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, *Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner party* in feminist art history, 27

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.firestation.ie/pps/memorial/louise.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.firestation.ie/pps/memorial/louise.html>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.firestation.ie/pps/memorial/louise.html>

piece of a bathroom filled with menstruation objects, where as the *Memorial Project* is a small scale piece. The materials of the *Menstruation Bathroom* are unpleasant and could be seen as vulgar from a male and female perspective. However the *Memorial project* is made from aesthetic materials, it is made of a metal strip with text cut into it that wound around to make a solid shape<sup>17</sup>. The *Memorial project* is aesthetically pleasing to the on looker's eye and has a meaning to which both male and female can respond to. Where as the *Menstruation Bathroom*, a male can not really relate to the piece of work, for they do not menstruate and do not completely understand the whole process a women experiences during menstruation.

However Chicago's piece of work *what is this secret place inside me that held a tear so long?* 1974, is emphasizing the broken silence surrounding female sexuality<sup>18</sup>. The piece of work is quite graphic with a vagina image with the title of the piece of work written around the image. The artist Nabakowski stated that *what is this secret place inside me that held a tear so long?* Is a gift to the women's movement that parallel psychiatrist Mary Jane Sherfays re-evaluation of the orgasmic potential of the clitoris<sup>19</sup>. Chicago's piece of work is another controversial piece, she stresses the importance of female sexuality and why the female has been silent about objects surrounding her sexuality. However Louise Walsh and Pauline Cummins piece of work *surrounding the Depths: shell in hand*, challenges the conventional depictions of a female fig4. Walsh's piece of work is a photo made up of images



representing the female's hidden voice. The image of the shell is the females mouth, being trapped in the hand symbolises the women as not being heard or not being able to speak. Walsh's *surrounding the Depth: shell in hand*, is similar to Chicago's *what is this secret place inside me that has held a tear so long?* Both artists present the idea of women's silence in their work. The materials of Chicago's work are aesthetic, the use of

fig4

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.firestation.ie/pps/memorial/louise.html>

<sup>18</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, *Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner party* in feminist art history, 168

<sup>19</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, *Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner party* in feminist art history, 168

china paint on porcelain accentuates the beauty of the female. Where as Walsh's *surrounding the Depths: shell in hand* is a dark unusual photo of half images, perhaps symbolising women's voice is hidden and is sometimes heard by men.

Chicago's work of female *rejection* 1974 is a dramatic and evocative image fig5. The image had delicately coloured series of labial folds emerging from a painfully torn surface<sup>20</sup>. Below the image is a hand written text, describing her



feelings of fear, exposure, and anguish at being judged and rejected by the male<sup>21</sup>. Chicago's *female rejection* is known to be her most explicit autobiographic image<sup>22</sup>. Chicago's drawing is colourful and the materials used symbolises the life of a female. The majority of Chicago's work is centred on the female sexual organs, presenting the women's femininity. Chicago is a feminist artist, which is shown throughout her work.

Fig5

Throughout I have looked at and examined the work of Judy Chicago and Louise Walsh. Judy Chicago's work as had the most impact on the women's art movement since 1970; where as Louise Walsh is an artist from the 1990's, which is twenty years after Chicago's work. Both artists are concerned with women's rights, sexuality and femininity. However Judy Chicago's work is more controversial than Louise Walsh's work. Walsh is known for her life size energetic figures, which is challenging conventional depictions of women<sup>23</sup>, where as Chicago is well known for her controversial work of the *Dinner party*. Both artists use a wide variety of materials in their work; however the majority of Walsh's work is sculpture. Chicago experiments with and uses different kinds of materials to accentuate the meaning and messages of the work. Walsh's *Memorial Project* is remarkably different to Chicago's

<sup>20</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's *Dinner party* in feminist art history, 95

<sup>21</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's *Dinner party* in feminist art history, 95

<sup>22</sup> Amelia Jones, 1996, Sexual politics: Judy Chicago's *Dinner party* in feminist art history, 96

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.artsCouncil-ni.org/publicart/tour/tour8.htm>

work. I already mentioned that the *Memorial Project* is not emphasizing sexuality of a female or a male, however Walsh seems to be emphasizing time and how it moves humans from childhood to death. Chicago is older than Walsh and has experimented more with different forms than Walsh. However both artists do examine the women's role in society. Chicago and Walsh both use or try to use the power of art to change the self and society in their work. Chicago is an American artist and Walsh is an Irish artist, however the idea of femininity is present in both their work, for the women has always been mans shadow throughout different cultures. There is not much difference between Chicago's and Walsh's work except for the style and use of materials. The theme of femininity runs through Chicago's and Walsh's work and will probably continue to.

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