Myth, archetype, and Judy Chicago

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MYTH, ARCHETYPE, AND JUDY CHICAGO

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MASTER'S THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

As a woman involved in the arts I found myself greatly moved by Judy Chicago's book, *Through The Flower*, but questioning the validity of the stereotypes. The problem with the women's movement in art, it seemed to me, was the involvement of the figureheads of the movement in stereotypes of woman. This was further complicated by overlapping of issues: woman? woman artist? woman artist politician? I strongly felt that although I might not agree with Chicago completely it was my responsibility as a woman artist to understand by what definition I viewed a work of art. This paper is my attempt to clarify the semantics and issues. It is not to be viewed as a definitive piece of scholarship, but rather as an individual search for feminine identity. Judy Chicago's name is not mentioned in the acknowledgements but I hasten now to add that she forced upon me the need to clarify how I critically approached a work of art before analyzing any individual artist, work, or sociological implication of either.

Having set up these statements I will begin with a definition of what I believe art and artistic activity to be. So that this paper does not become a purely subjective statement, I will rely on the judgement
of Herbert Read and Carl Jung, using their terminology to scaffold my own viewpoint. "'Artistic activity begins when man finds himself face to face with the visible world as with something immensely enigmatical . . . In the creation of a work of art, man engages in a struggle with nature not for his physical but for his mental existence.'"¹

This concept of artistic activity puts the question of art beyond the reach of stereotypes, thereby giving the female/male artist equal footing. If art is a "patient fixation of what is significant in human experience,"² and I contend that it is, then it cannot be dealt with in the realm of stereotypic oversimplification. I do not mean to imply that the tragic neglect of the female is not a significant human experience, but whether it has anything to do with a specific work of art by a particular artist is questionable. The results of an analysis based on the femaleness of a particular work might be interesting and may have critical value, yet to interject a Jungian for instance:

... a post-mortem examination of the brain of Nietzche, which might conceivably show us the particular atypical form of paralysis from which he died. But what would this have to do with Zarathusra? Whatever its subterranean background may have been, is it not a whole world in itself, beyond the human, all-too-human imperfections, beyond the world of migraine and cerebral atrophy?³

I feel that the question of stereotype in the view of artist, activity, and art object is too general an issue to deal with when considering individual artists and their work.

There are in the art world today women who work on redefining the qualifications of art and artist. There is, however, in their attitude an overlapping of two major and distinct questions: what is art? what
is politics? These are inherently different questions and in dealing with them one needs to make a distinction. In the Chicago book this dichotomy pervades almost all discussions and viewing of women's art, and culminates eventually in the making of Womanhouse in downtown Los Angeles, where the question was posed:

What would happen . . . if women took those very same homemaking activities and carried them to fantasy proportions? Instead of making a pink-and-white, filmy, feminine but functional bedroom for one's daughter, the space might become pinker and whiter and filmier and filled with more and more ruffles until it was a complete environment. Could the same activities women had used in life be transformed into the means of making art? 

In analysing the finished product of Womanhouse as art, an interesting problem occurs. Womanhouse lends itself nicely to a distinctly Freudian analytic technique. Frueidian psychology is hardly sympathetic to the analysis of the feminine psyche. The use of the Freudian reductive method turns the artist into a clinical case, and is a method Jung (who is much more sympathetic to the existence of feminine psyche) felt was inapplicable in its totality to the question of art:

The school of medical psychology inaugurated by Freud has undoubtedly encouraged the . . . historian to bring certain peculiarities of a work of art into relation with the intimate, personal life of the artist. For it has long been known that scientific treatment of art will reveal the personal thread that the artist, intentionally or unintentionally, has woven into his owrk. The Freudian approach may, however, make possible a more exhaustive demonstration of the influences that reach back into earliest childhood and play their part in artistic creation . . . The difference is at most a question of degrees . . . The temptation to draw daring conclusions easily leads to flagrant abuses . . .

The artist becomes a clinical case and the analysis has turned aside from its proper objective and strayed into
a province that is as broad as mankind, that is not in the least specific of the artist and has even less relevance to art.

This kind of analysis brings the work of art into the sphere of general human psychology, where many other things besides art have their origin. To explain art in these terms is just as great a platitude as the statement that 'every artist is a narcissist.'

To further the analogy with this paper, female artists, because they are female, must deal with a feminine stereotype.

At this point, I hope it is clear that any analysis of the psychology of artists and art will be Jungian in nature. Having taken a psychological stance, I feel it imperative to set up certain critical criteria. The following definition of "criticism" will again show why I find it impossible to deal with the question of women artists on the level of stereotypes of women. The objective theory of art, a critical system applied by M.H. Abrams, holds the work to be most significant as an object in itself, independent of the facts of its composition, the actuality it imitates, and its author's stated intention. In accord with the objective theory of art, Keats' term "negative capability" further exemplifies my usage of the word "criticism." "Negative capability" was first applied by Keats to deal with the impersonal and universal aspects of Shakespeare. Since then the term has been applied to the qualities in an artist's work that enable him to avoid expressing in it the expression of his own personality.

These modes of criticism, and denial of stereotypes when applied to art are compatible with Jungian psychology:
The normal man can follow the general trend without injury to himself; but the man who takes to the back streets and alleys because he cannot endure the broad highway will be the first to discover the psychic elements that are waiting to play their part in the life of the collective. Here the artist's relative lack of adaptation turns out to his advantage; it enables him to follow his own yearnings far from the beaten path, and to discover what it is that would meet the unconscious needs of his age.

This individual who discovers the collective and asserts it then gives birth to an autonomous object coming out of, in the language of analytical psychology, an autonomous complex. The individual artist therefore defines the collective whereas if the process is reversed the artist would be nothing more than what Jung refers to as the "normal man."

The plant is not a mere product of the soil; it is a living, self-contained process which in essence has nothing to do with the character of the soil. In the same way, the meaningful and individual quality of a work of art inhere within it and not in its extrinsic determinants. One might also describe it as a living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium, employing his capacities according to its own laws and shaping itself to the fulfillment of its own creative purpose.

Having set up the artist as an authentic, and the work of art as autonomous, then the link between the object created and the act of creation is an autonomous complex.

Taking all these factors into consideration, it is easy to comprehend why the question of woman artist as separate from male artist would seem absurd to me. Viewing the art object as an autonomous structure, however, has nothing to do with the politics of the women's movement. It still concerns me that historically women artists have not been accepted as artists because of their womanness. I do
question the validity of Womanhouse as art, but I do not question its significance as an illuminating and informative political historical statement about art.
All thoughts in the first part of this paper are applicable to part two. The myth is used in its actual literary sense, particularly the myth of Amor and Psyche, with reference to a commentary by Eric Neumann when applicable.

If the artist is not "normal man" following the "general trend", and yet discovers in the back streets the "psychic elements waiting to play their part in the life of the collective."8 If the "artistic activity begins when man finds himself face to face with the visible world as with something immensely enigmatical ..." and "In creation of a work of art man engages in a struggle with nature not for his physical but his mental existence."9

If both these statements are to be taken as valid when trying to understand art and thereby the artist, and I believe they are, then there is a parallel between the artistic development and the development of Psyche. By suggesting a parallel, I do not mean that each artist female or male must in order to create show a development of the feminine psyche (this thought may have great potential, because of its psychological implication). The parallel I draw is a much broader one, Psyche's
development is a very individual attempt to cope with her visible world. Her internal growth which elevates her by her own effort into a goddess is a struggle with nature for her physical and mental existence. Her development is fraught with personal danger, as is any development in the back streets, yet through this individual struggle she comes (in Neumann's interpretation) to stand for the collective development of the feminine psyche.

Psyche is an extraordinarily beautiful woman, the earthly Venus; because of her goddess-like qualities she is revered but unloved. It is a universal contention that the "grass is always greener on the other side of the fence" therefore Psyche being universal in nature is unhappy with her beautifully revered but unloved situation. Psyche's father undone by her unhappiness, asks the oracle of Apollo to send her a husband. The oracle has already been rigged by the goddess, Venus, who not caring for the competition attempts to keep the grass greener on her side of the fence and condemns Psyche to a marriage of death.

The ancient primordial motif of the bride dedicated to death, of 'death and the maiden,' is sounded. And we discern a central phenomenon of Feminine Matriarchal psychology . . . every marriage is an exposure on the mountain's summit in mortal loneliness, and a waiting for the male monster, to whom the bride is surrendered. When we concern ourselves with this profound mythological stratum, we must forget cultural forms and go back to the primordial phenomenon of the sexual encounter between them.  

Judy Chicago's book Through The Flower, deals with men on very much the same level as Neumann's interpretation of the myth. The "Cock and Cunt" play excludes cultural forms and development and returns to the primordial phenomenon. The play in essence says there has been no
development beyond the primordial sexual encounter. "What for the masculine is aggression, victory, rape and the satisfaction of desire... is for the feminine destiny, transformation, and profoundest mystery of life."¹¹ "Cock and Cunt" indicates by the rape and domination of the woman that Judy Chicago identifies with this analysis of the myth. The difference comes in the use of the word transformation; for Chicago, the transformation is negative and something to be transcended. The monster comes through the flower and there is mentally contended with.

Chicago's first response to the artistic world is like Psyche's, "she does not respond with a struggle, protest, defiance, resistance as a masculine ego must have done in a similar situation, but quite the contrary with acceptance of her fate."¹² Chicago makes somewhat a success under the given condition in the art world, as does Psyche in the paradise of Amor. Judy Chicago comes through hardships and "tasks" that she sets up for herself to reach an individual and successful artistic development. Her psychic development is not very different from Psyche's. These similarities in the development of Chicago's feminine psyche, however, are not my primary concern. The most complex and interesting connection with the myth is the combination role that Judy Chicago plays. She is an individual seeker who is open to the cries of her sisters and in that she is Psyche, but as the leader of a movement, Chicago becomes the archetype of the sisterhood in opposition to Psyche.

The beautiful Psyche has two almost beautiful sisters, (these siblings are happily married in the beginning of the story) at least within the range of mortal praise. These siblings, as the story goes, "had
been betrothed to kings who came to woo, and they had become happy brides.\textsuperscript{13} Nothing much is heard of them again until after Psyche is well into her marriage of death. Eventually, Psyche's sisters hear of what has come to pass and together come to visit the scene of the primordial crime. Since it is the way of woman to cry and scream over losses, Psyche's husband prewarns her not to listen to their lamentations. If she does lend an ear Psyche will drive her husband to "bitter woe" and herself to "bitter destruction."\textsuperscript{14} Psyche in her attempts to concur with her husband on the universal nature of women's tears, cries, refuses to eat, finally showers him with beguiling kisses and endearments "husband sweet as honey, Psyche's life and love"\textsuperscript{15} and gets her way. The sisters when they arrive are quickly transported to Psyche (the west wind serves as mass-transit). Sisterly love quickly turns to envy and they leave with the same universal affliction that once plagued Psyche—("the grass is always greener . . ."). They plot to bring Psyche down a peg or two. The truth of the matter is that the two sisters are not happy brides, but unhappy women. They plan to return in their might to crush Psyche's pride.

Psyche is warned again by Amor as to the designs of her sisters; he tells her that they will try to persuade her to see his face. Amor describes the second coming of the sisters in terms of violence; "your kin and yet your foes; have put their armor on, having struck their camp, set the battle in array, and blown the trumpet blast . . . drawn the sword."\textsuperscript{16} The sisters have in actuality done no such thing, but they are described by Amor much like an army, a force, a movement.
Amor's fear is justifiable because this army in motion is to bring the lover of death and darkness into light. For Psyche this awareness is essential as it is for any woman if she is to come to an understanding of self. The sisters regardless of their dark designs are the first to awaken Psyche's curiosity, therefore they hold the key to her search and growth. Without them Psyche could never have questioned her given station.

Judy Chicago's awareness is brought to the front by the women's movement. In chapter eight of her autobiography Chicago deals with her search for archetypes; she finds one in Virginia Woolf whom she believes to be the first woman to articulate the feminine situation. Virginia Woolf in looking for an historical archetype "(argued that the Bronte's notion of a 'small independence' was indeed the first step to personal freedom.)" The search for the archetypal sisterhood appears to be Uroboric.

To return to the myth, Psyche is still playing the role of the woman in subjugation to the man, sexually charming her husband to her will and using tears as an effective weapon. Psyche manages to persuade Amor to let her sisters come to visit her again. She does not understand, (never having come in contact with the movement) Amor's point of view, promises not to divulge anything about him and he as usual gives in to her sexual charms.

When the sisters visit for a second time they question Psyche about Amor, and Psyche unwittingly gives them a conflicting story to her first
one. The sisters realize that either Psyche is lying or she does not know what her husband looks like. Being more worldly than Psyche they deduce from her situation and status that her husband is actually a god.

Psyche is pregnant when the sisters return for the third time. Amor again tries to dissuade Psyche from seeing them, to no avail. In this visit the sisters tell Psyche that her husband is a "huge serpent with a thousand tangled coils;" They try to convince her that he plans to devour her with the 'ripe fruit' of her womb. "If the musical solitude of this fair landscape, if the joys of your secret love still delight you and you are content to lie in the embraces of a foul and venomous snake, at least we your loving sisters, have done our duty."20

Psyche falls into her sisters' trap, confesses that she does not know who her husband is, and asks for their help. The sisters are willing to devise a plan, by which Psyche may see and kill her husband. "Then Psyche - summoned all her strength, drew forth the lantern, and seized the razor; a sudden courage displaced the weakness of her sex."21 For the first time Psyche overcomes the mythical weakness of her sex, sees the light and as she sees, falls in love with love himself.

At this point in the story Psyche is more aware than she has ever been, at the same time she is more confused, and for the first time in a constructive mental darkness which she must overcome.

An interesting side event in the story is the lamp which Psyche uses to shed light on Amor. It is a tool of awareness, given an almost autonomous life, embodied with feelings. The lamp fits in nicely as a man made 'objet de art' that sheds light and awareness. A neat metaphor can
be drawn between the lamp, and Chicago's theory and use of the vaginal image.

After her treachery to and consequent loss of Amor, Psyche tries unsuccessfully to kill herself. A new character is introduced into the myth, the god Pan. He gives Psyche's burgeoning personality further definition and clarity. Unlike actual life the myth moves quickly from encounter, awareness, to the first step of resolution. The rustic god gives Psyche not actual help merely advice, on the basis of his "long old age and experience." In essence Pan tells her that she is to work for what she wants without physical or emotional support. Psyche does not reply and goes on her way. Her next act is individual and self assertive—she tricks her sisters into believing that Amor prefers them to herself. The sisters one at a time go to the site of the cliff, to be transported by the west wind into the arms of Amor. The west wind, however, is no longer functional and they kill themselves by plunging down the side of the cliff.

Neumann interprets the sisters in the tale of Psyche as negative shadow aspects of the feminine Psyche. "The method," Neumann says the sisters choose, "is again consonant with a universal motif, for the essential is not the murder of Psyche's husband, but that Psyche should be persuaded to break the taboo, to throw light on the hidden secret." Later in his commentary, in discussing the death of the sisters he says that "in the course of her development Psyche has freed herself both from the matriarchal powers which had given her the revolutionary impetus and from captivity in the sensual paradise . . ." I believe this to
be the significant aspect of the archetype of the sisterhood.

Judy Chicago in her book has given evidence in support of the rejection of the archetype. "At some point in the process, after the initial gratitude for help, many women turn against this figure who has helped them. It happened frequently in my years of working with women, and it always hurts."  Chicago here is referring to herself as the archetype, the women she is dealing with in becoming aware, like Psyche, try to break away and metaphorically destroy the archetypal figure. Judy Chicago equates this with a need to feel powerful:

> By saying 'I don't need you anymore,' the woman feels a sense of power. Unfortunately, this need to feel powerful often results in hurting the very woman who made the growth possible. Instead of giving her the love she provided, women sometimes feel the need to repudiate her and thus provide themselves with a false sense of independence ... Only by understanding its dimensions can we who are offering leadership protect ourselves against the terrible hurt of having women you've helped reward you with hate instead of love."  

Just as Chicago went through this experience of the rejection of her archetype of younger women, she herself experienced the same desire to reject. In Chicago's case the rejection was directed toward Miriam Shapiro, though she considers in her own case the rejection experience to have been "more complicated."  Miriam Shapiro "used to tell me things about myself with which I didn't agree. Her perception often didn't correspond to my own sense of myself, but I went along ... thinking that she knew more than I ... If only I had challenged her when my perceptions differed from hers but I needed her too much ... "  

In the end however, even though the situation was more complicated in her
case, Judy Chicago overcame her fear and rejected the archetype.

Unfortunately the situation as I see it will not be helped by the understanding of its dimensions. The women that Chicago is dealing with are striving to be artists, and the path she offers aspires to the collective. As an archetype of the women's movement, she perhaps discloses the secret and brings it into light. The "other women" being artists must overcome and destroy the archetype in order that they may find in the "back streets" their own insight into the collective, artistic and feminine development. Their understandings gather to feed the autonomous complex in the creation of the autonomous object.

Judy Chicago the artist has much universal and individualistic appeal. The vaginal image becomes an icon, beautiful in its depiction, universal in its concept. In this manner the vaginal images of Chicago the artist educate "the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking."²⁸
Figure 1. Untitled Drawing 36" x 23"
Figure 2. Untitled Drawing 40" x 26"
Figure 3. Untitled Drawing 36" x 23"
Figure 4. Thesis Drawing "Deborah" 26" x 31"
Figure 5. Untitled Drawing 36" x 23"
NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 18.


6. Ibid., p. 83.

7. Ibid., p. 72.

8. Ibid., p. 83.

9. Ibid., p. 17.


11. Ibid., p. 63

12. Ibid., p. 69.

13. Ibid., p. 6.


19. Ibid., p. 22.

20. Ibid., p. 23.

21. Ibid., p. 25.

22. Ibid., p. 28.

23. Ibid., p. 71.

24. Ibid., p. 134.


26. Ibid., pp. 110-111.

27. Ibid., p. 111.

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