

# FEMINIST VISIONS

## FEMINIST ARTISTS AND ART (STILL) WORKS: FOUR FILMS

by Helen R. Klebesadel

**DECISIONS OF THE HEART: THE STORIES AND ART OF FUTURE AKINS.** 90 mins. 2006. Produced by Doug Nelson & Armando Rodriguez, KTXT-TV, Texas Tech University, Box 42161, Lubbock, TX 79409-2161; website: <http://www.ktxt.org/productionFutureAkins.htm>. Sale (DVD or VHS): \$25.00, including shipping & handling.

**GIRL HOUSE ART PROJECT: FEMINIST ART BY MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS.** 16 mins. 2006. Film directed by Brooke Randolph. Project led by Kesa Kivel as part of the YWCA Santa Monica/Westside's community service programming; website: [www.kesakivel.com](http://www.kesakivel.com). The complete video is viewable at <http://www.smywca.org/girl-house-art-project.html> (uses Windows Media Player). While supplies last, the DVD, as well as copies of *Girl House and Beyond: A Facilitator's Guide for Empowering Young Women*, is available from Kesa Kivel, 149 S. Barrington Ave., #132, Los Angeles, CA 90049; email: [kesakivel@mac.com](mailto:kesakivel@mac.com).

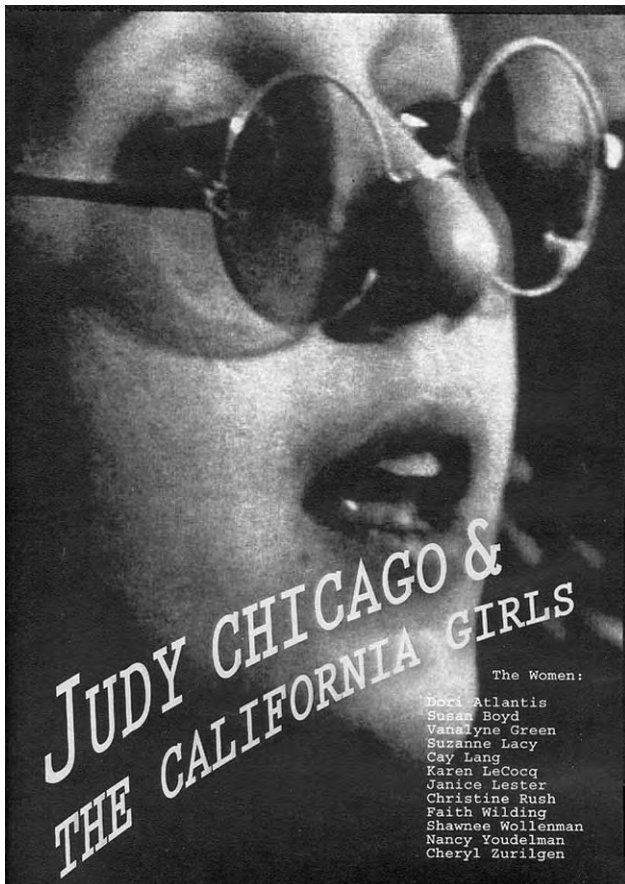
**I CAN FLY, PART V: KIDS AND WOMEN ARTISTS IN THEIR STUDIOS.** 28 mins. 2006. Created and produced by Linda Freeman; written and directed by David Irving. Distributed by L&S Video, Inc., 45 Stornoway, Chappaqua, NY 10514; phone: (914) 238-9366; fax: (914) 238-6324; email: [videopaint2@msn.com](mailto:videopaint2@msn.com); website: <http://www.landsvideo.com/vcat.shtml>. Sale (DVD or VHS): \$39.95.

**JUDY CHICAGO AND THE CALIFORNIA GIRLS.** 27 mins. 1971. Updated on DVD with improved sound quality and the addition of historical subtitles. Produced, directed, & edited by Judith Dancoff. Distributed by California Girl Productions, P.O. Box 412496, Los Angeles, CA 90041; phone/fax: (323) 225-5633; website: [www.californiagirlproductions.com](http://www.californiagirlproductions.com). Sale (DVD): \$250.00; student price \$50.00; (VHS): \$225.00; student price \$45.00. DVD or 16mm. rentals are available. Three percent of purchase or rental price is donated to Through the Flower ([www.throughtheflower.org](http://www.throughtheflower.org)), a nonprofit feminist art organization founded by Judy Chicago.

The four films discussed in this review will be of interest to women's studies, girls' studies, and arts faculty who are looking at activist art; women in the visual arts; and anyone focusing on feminist art as an important part of the women's movement in the U.S. *Girl House Art Project* and *I Can Fly, Part V: Kids and Women Artists in Their Studios* are particularly relevant to the girls' studies series that was recently featured in *Feminist Collections*; they will also be useful resources in college-level courses that explore art as an activist process. *Decisions of the Heart: The Stories and Art of Future Akins* demonstrates how the phrase "the personal is political" is especially apt in regard to the visual arts, and reminds us that the feminist art movement has influenced American women artists everywhere and given them permission to make their lives and the lives of other women a force for understanding and for creating social change. The short film *Judy Chicago and the California Girls* reminds us of the radical work in arts education that started it all.

The women's movement in the United States is over forty years old, and the feminist art movement is the same age. The Feminist Art Project (TFAP), a collaborative national initiative based at Rutgers University (<http://feministart-project.rutgers.edu>), celebrates the aesthetic, intellectual, and political impact of women on the visual arts, art history, and art practice, past and present, and is a strategic intervention against the ongoing erasure of women — particularly women artists — from the cultural record. TFAP's website promotes current diverse feminist art events, education, and publications. Included is a useful timetable of historical events that identifies key occurrences in the U.S. women's movement since 1955 (starting with Rosa Parks's arrest in Montgomery, Alabama) and locates them on the timeline of important events in the feminist art movement. Documentation for the project is maintained in the Miriam Shapiro Archive at Rutgers.

As TFAP's timeline illustrates, contemporary feminist art originated in the late 1960s, inspired by the women's liberation movement and its demands for social, economic, and political change. In the art movement as in the larger movement, women joined together to demand greater representation and an end to their social, economic, and political marginalization. Women artists focused on the lack of representation of women artists in galleries and museums and their exclusion from the art history canon, and protested the dearth of women faculty in art schools while the majority of art students were (and still are) women. Women art faculty were (and still are) disproportionately found in temporary, non-tenure-track positions, despite making up more than half of the available teacher pool. Women visual artists, art educators, and art historians formed consciousness-raising groups, woman-centered art education programs, women's art organizations, and cooperative galleries to provide the visibility that they had been denied. Many feminist artists sought more than just equal representation for women artists, believing that feminist art could help bring about social and political change. The power of art to change the self and society is still central to many feminist artists' work.



Although its contributions are rarely acknowledged, the women's art movement has transformed contemporary art by introducing such significant concepts as nonhierarchical uses of materials and techniques and the multi-voiced, fluid subject. It has transformed the use of traditional fine art media, such as painting and sculpture, by introducing aesthetics, materials, and values from non-European traditions into our visual vocabulary. Feminist artists were among the earliest art practitioners to eschew object-making altogether in favor of performance art and video. The women's art movement championed the idea that gender is socially and not naturally constructed, questioned the cult of "genius" and "greatness," and emphasized creative perspectives that value pluralist variety rather than concepts of totalizing universalisms. Women artists sought to reclaim the female body by representing women's bodies and bodily experiences in ways that ran counter to the sexualized and idealized representations that dominated the media. Feminist artists explored — and still continue to expand on — aesthetics that emerged from female experience of female-coded labor, the female body, women's history, and individual autobiography. Many of the most significant shifts in thinking within the visual arts over the last forty years have their foundation in the work of feminist artists who have used the arts as a vehicle to think about and change the world.

The short film *Judy Chicago and the California Girls*, by then-student-filmmaker Judith Dancoff, shows how the arts and social critique merged in early feminist art. It is historical documentary by and about women in the arts at what some have called "the birth of the women's art movement" in Fresno, California. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro founded the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1971. It was the first U.S. art program to focus exclusively on the education of women artists from feminist perspectives. Dancoff's film documents performance work, discussions, and interviews with Judy Chicago and the women students who worked with her during this time.

The creator of numerous large-scale art installations over the last three decades, Judy Chicago is best known for her significant feminist art installation *The Dinner Party*. The piece took five years and the volunteer support of hundreds of other artists to create. The triangular dinner table includes thirty-three place settings for significant women in Western history. At each setting there are table linens covered with traditional needlework as a base for unique ceramic dinner plates shaped into vulva-like forms. First presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, *The Dinner Party* has now been seen by more than a million people

at fifteen venues in six countries on three continents. The art piece that Chicago created to “end the ongoing cycle of omission in which women’s achievements are repeatedly written out of the historic record and a cycle of repetition that results in generation after generation of women struggling for insights and freedoms that are too often quickly forgotten or erased again” was itself out of sight in storage for almost twenty years. Arguably one of the most important artifacts of the feminist art movement, *The Dinner Party* is now a part of the permanent collection of contemporary art at the new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art of the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The center maintains a database of contemporary feminist artists here: [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/index.php](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/index.php).

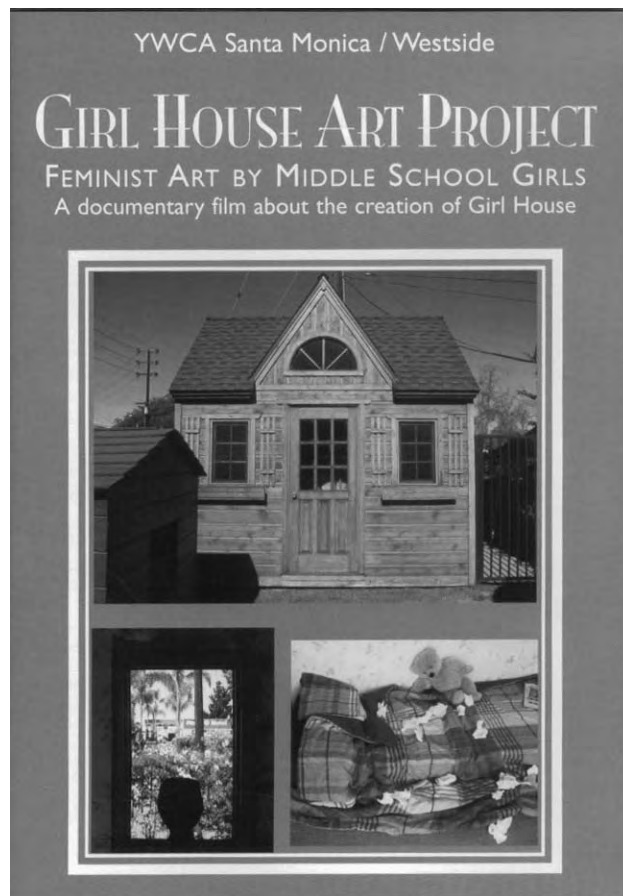
As an artist and an educator, I approached Dancoff’s film eager to see examples of Judy Chicago’s early feminist teaching context. Some of the footage in *Judy Chicago and the California Girls* has been included in other films featuring archival footage from the era, but in Dancoff’s updated DVD version, the sound has been improved, and there is subtitling to help viewers understand what they are seeing. The footage includes early exercises and performance work of women students focused on content generated from consciousness-raising techniques. Much of the performance work is raw and emotional for both participants and audiences. Energy and a sense of forging new paths are palpable in the film. It was in the early seventies that Chicago began to formulate the feminist philosophy that would shape such works as *The Dinner Party* and *Womanhouse* (which will be discussed later). In a significant film clip, Chicago discusses the intersection between female identity and the significance of the “cunt” image she is known for: “What we have to do is we have to seize our own cunt, grasp it firmly in our hands, and proceed to announce what it is.”

Many works in this film illustrate the emergence in the late sixties and early seventies of performance art, which is often shaped by strong political and social messages. Such works as “Cunt Cheer” emerged collaboratively or through spontaneous improvisation, as did the impromptu performance piece by the filmmaker and Judy Chicago on “gun-play,” as well as the heated debate between Chicago and visiting critic and radical theorist Ti-Grace Atkinson. Atkinson, an advocate for political lesbianism as a positive alternative choice to heterosexuality, argues that there is no place for men in the feminist movement or in the lives of women who call themselves feminists, while Chicago argues in opposition to this proscriptive position.

As an artist viewer, it was impossible for me to ignore the film’s personal significance. I was a beginning art student

myself the year this footage was shot, but I was at a small private art school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In my first year of college I was taught neither by nor about a single woman artist. To judge by my personal educational experience, women artists did not exist. Left with a sense of unnamable hollowness, I would actually drop out after a year of college, despite a scholarship to continue, and not return for a decade. The then-young women featured in this film — who participated in these classes and in the Feminist Art Program at Cal Arts — had a very different experience. They were empowered to see themselves as women artists with something to say. Many, like Suzanne Lacy, Faith Wilding, Judith Dancoff, Vanalyn Green, Cay Lang, and others, have gone on to build significant art and academic careers.

A decade after the California Girls began their Feminist Art Program, I had the opportunity to return to college and complete my art education, and then to become an artist and an educator in art and women’s studies myself. In my profession I am always looking for good feminist materials to use in and recommend for the classroom. I first came across *Girl House Art Project* when it was shown at the 2006 National Women’s Studies Association Conference, in a



session sponsored by the NWSA Girls and Their Allies Caucus (<http://www.nwsa.org/communities/girls.php>). The caucus, which is for girls in pre-kindergarten through high school, the educators, activists, and community members who work with them; and the scholars who study them and issues relevant to their lives, highlighted the film as a model for best practices in engaged pedagogy, using feminist art strategies.

The short film traces the last month of a ten-month project inspired by the 1972 feminist art project *Womanhouse*, which was first conceived by Paula Harper and then created in 1972 by twenty-one students of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts under the direction of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. The purpose of *Womanhouse* was for students to examine the limitations of female gender roles and express their thoughts artistically. The project enabled participating women students to expand their individual skills and experience collaborative art-making. Consciousness-raising circles that encouraged dialogue, debate, and the sharing of experiences were an integral part of the learning process. Ultimately, each young woman was given a room or space of her own to alter in a soon-to-be-demolished seventeen-room mansion in Hollywood, California. From January 30 to February 28, 1972, thousands of people came to see *Womanhouse*. The project was preserved in a documentary film of the same name by Johanna Demetrakis.

*Girl House Art Project* documents how volunteer Kesa Kivel, in 2005–2006, offered an interactive, hands-on feminist curriculum to a small group of middle-school girls at the YWCA Santa Monica/Westside. Drawing on the idea of creating spaces that deal with feminist issues, and imagining how a contemporary “girl house” might be conceived, Kivel created a curriculum addressing adolescent girl issues. Over ten months, the Girl House Art Project gave a small group of middle-school girls the opportunity to explore gender issues, women’s history, the wage gap, and media literacy. As Kivel and an assistant facilitated, the four participating girls, ages twelve to fourteen, explored feminist issues and decided which were most significant in their lives at that time. Kivel’s broad-based feminist curriculum was presented in an interactive format with numerous art exercises. The girls chose to research the issue of sexual harassment and collaborated to create an art installation focused specifically on the sexual harassment of girls. Guest speakers and artists shared their expertise and supported the project in a variety of ways. The girls expressed their findings through art, empowering themselves in the process, by transforming an onsite house/shed into the bedroom of an imaginary young woman named Crystal who had been sexually harassed. The installation was

made up of visual imagery that artistically expressed Crystal’s worries and fears and the potential consequences of such harassment.

Kesa Kivel is to be applauded for having the wherewithal to document this activist art project as a film that can be used by others who want to replicate the program. *Girl House Art Project* is a model for institutional collaboration (in this case, within the larger programming of the YWCA) that brings feminist art strategies for activism into the core of empowerment work for and by girls. The film documents the value of the project for the young women lucky enough to participate, but its real power is in the vision it offers for a concise and useful tool that can be replicated. Kivel offers the film and the accompanying facilitator’s guide free to interested activists while supplies last. The film is also viewable in its entirety on the website (<http://www.smywca.org/girl-house-art-project.html>).

The focus on girls continues in the film *I Can Fly, Part V: Kids and Women Artists in Their Studios*, created and produced by artist and curator Linda Freeman for kids of all ages. This is the fifth and most recently completed in a series of award-winning “I Can Fly” videos by Freeman. Short interviews with six prominent diverse American women artists are connected by brief introductory segues in which young girls quiz artist Faith Ringgold about art, women artists, and the activities that take place in an art studio. Along with Ringgold, artists Jackie Winsor, Flo Oy Wong, Grandma Moses, Jennifer Bartlett, and Elizabeth Catlett are interviewed and shown working in their studios, exploring, and speaking about what matters most to them, including their families, their medium, their art, and their identities as women artists. The interviews will be of interest to feminist educators who work with girls or with college-age students. Several of the interviews are also used in another new Freeman video more specifically geared toward adult populations — *Mixed Media Masters: Alison Saar, Al Loving, Flo Oy Wong* — which focuses on artists of color who employ paint, thread, and metal in artworks examining their cultural heritage. Both films allow the artists to speak for themselves through interview and action.

Feminist art and artists are everywhere, and that has been true throughout the last thirty years of the feminist art movement. Outside of major urban centers and the two coasts, however, art and artists have a greater challenge gaining visibility, documenting their work, and developing a national presence. The longest video under review here (90 minutes) takes an in-depth look at the creative work of one west-Texas woman artist, Future Akins. *Decisions of the*

*Heart: The Stories and Art of Future Akins* introduces us to a Lubbock, Texas feminist artist and educator and explores the major themes that have merged in her life and art. Akins, who grew up as a military brat in an alcoholic home, demonstrates how art saves lives. This candid portrait of the artist as a creative and complex woman shows how her commitment to art helped her survive young widowhood, two failed marriages, and numerous jobs, relationships, and new starts. As an arts educator, Akins demonstrates how to rethink how we learn art, how we teach art, and how we approach art and artists.

In this film, *Future Akins* and her art embody the phrase “the personal is political” as Akins explores the personal and creative effects of restrictive cultural norms on herself and on the women in her family. Named after a Lubbock-born aunt named Wanda May, who left town for New York at 18 and changed her name to “Future,” the artist shows how the core of her creativity is grounded in her experiences as a woman. With expertise in such arts media as fibers, ceramics, book arts, and printmaking, Akins demonstrates how she really has always made art out of the material of her life. Themes of gender role expectations,

memory, alcoholism, breast cancer, disappointed dreams, and the possibilities of hope combine in her work and life. As someone who celebrates the erotic, Akins is articulate in explaining how her art has become her research into woman, self-image, and aging in a visual culture that celebrates idealized and sexualized youth. In this film we are introduced to a smart, funny, and humane woman whose personal losses and public triumphs define her as an artist and a teacher.

This film and the others discussed above show us the beginnings of the feminist art movement and trace its expansion across geography and time to a present where feminist art can be an investigation into political, social, and cultural identity that leads to healing and empowerment. They remind us that feminist art is an activist tool that has changed the world and can continue to do so.

*[Helen R. Klebesadel, a visual artist, is also the director of the Women’s Studies Consortium of the University of Wisconsin System. A past national president of the Women’s Caucus for Art, she also served two terms on the governing council of the National Women’s Studies Association. Her watercolor paintings exploring woman-centered and environmental subjects can be seen at <http://Klebesadel.com>.]*



*Miriam Greenwald*