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Judy Chicago: The Birth Project

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Gettysburg College

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Judy Chicago: The Birth Project

Description

When I was a first year student sitting in the art history classroom of Professor Carol Small's introductory survey course in the fall of 2008, *Creation of the World #7* was on display in a large Plexiglas case along with the work's documentation panels. At first, *Creation of the World #7* seemed unimpressive and bland. The dim room, the text-heavy panels and the dusty case did not inspire close examination of the work. When I eventually approached it, I realized that it was a birthing scene and the result of a national art-making endeavor advanced by feminist art pioneer Judy Chicago.

As I continued to have more art history courses in that room, I was always tickled by the fact that my peers were unknowingly faced with a two breasts and a birthing vagina on a daily basis. Although the anatomy is delicately embroidered as painterly strokes of warm blended colors with whimsical creatures, the scene does graphically express the physical and emotional strife of labor. The work is accompanied by documentation panels used by Chicago to offer viewers a more in-depth understanding of the art-making process, the participants' creative processes and their personal lives, as well as ethereal and temporal interpretations of birthing and mothering.

For my senior capstone project, I comprehensively researched the legacy of Judy Chicago and sought to bring awareness to the two Birth Project works in Gettysburg College's collection. The thesis paper, entitled "Judy Chicago: Visions for Feminist Art," was an opportunity to document and honor the presence of these works on campus and place them in a larger context of feminist art history. From the onset, it was my hope to curate an exhibition of the works. When I met with Chicago in the spring of 2012, her great dislike of the detached and cold "specimen-like" display of the works also prompted me to consider alternative options for the display and care of the *Creation of the World #7* and *Birth #4*. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Judy Chicago, feminist art, The Birth Project, Birth Certificate, The Dinner Party, *Creation of the World #7*, *Birth #4*

Disciplines

Art and Design | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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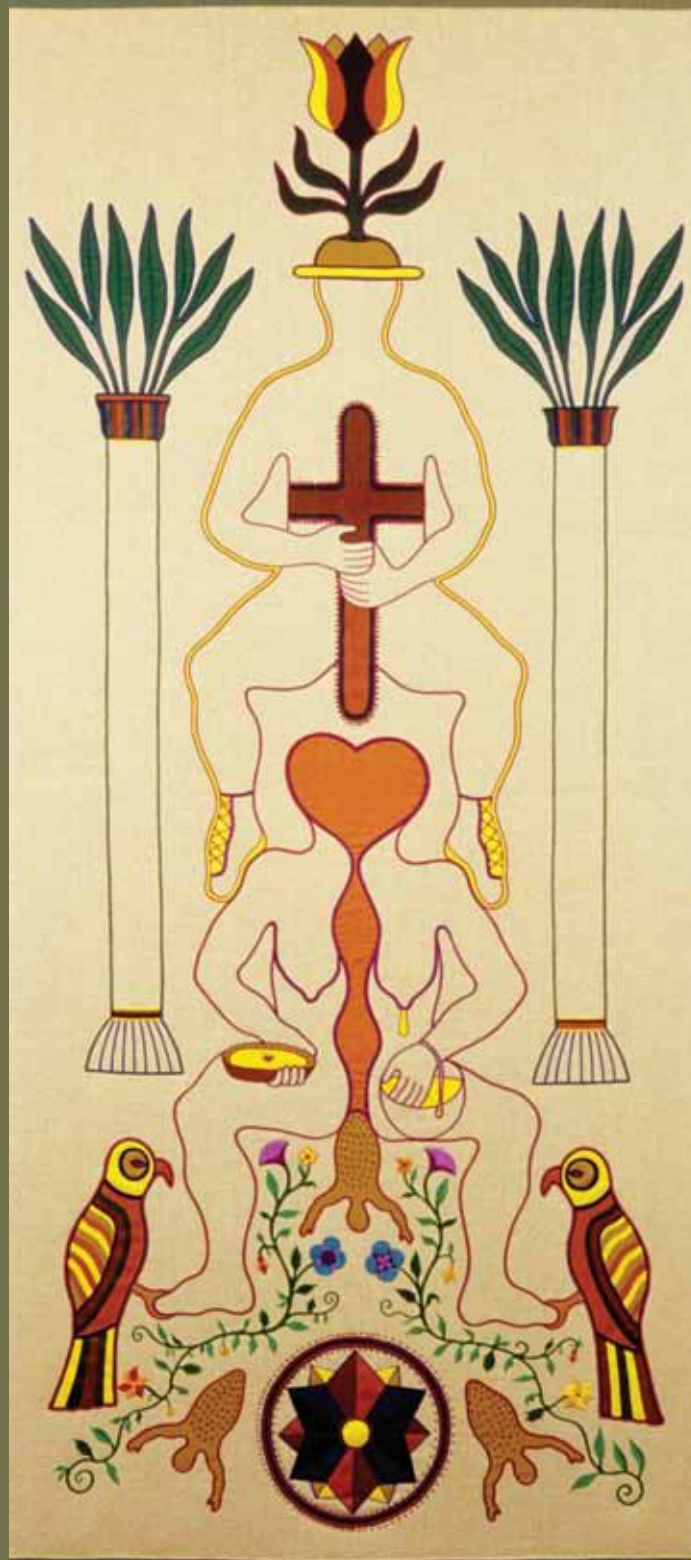
Comments

Judy Chicago: The Birth Project was on exhibition at the Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, January 25 - March 8, 2013.



JUDY CHICAGO
THE BIRTH PROJECT

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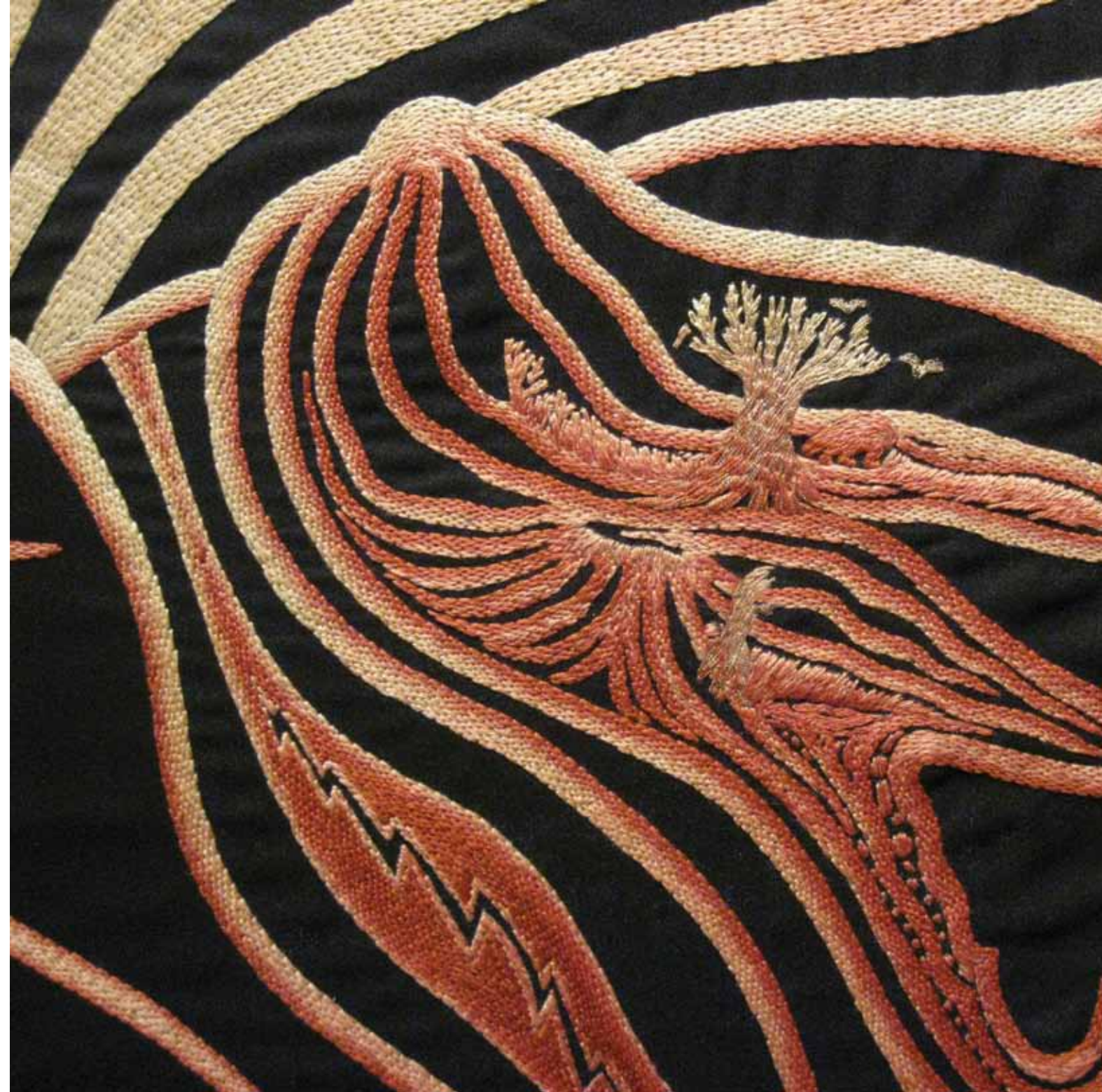
Judy Chicago, *Birth Certificate for the Birth Project*, 1985. Applique, embroidery and paint on linen, 99 x 49 x 2 3/4 in. Martin Art Gallery, Muhlenberg College, NN 1985.1. © Judy Chicago.

This exhibition *Judy Chicago: The Birth Project* presents both of the works donated to Gettysburg College from Chicago as well as a loaned piece, *Birth Certificate* from Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. In tackling the subject of birth, Chicago drew attention to a topic which had not often been critically assessed or visually depicted in the Western canon of art. *The Birth Project* translates women's jubilant and harrowing stories of birth into an art of textile, a medium historically associated with women's craft. By combining the expressive and educational powers of art with a perspective centralized around a woman's experience, *The Birth Project* is a feminist endeavor in its aims to use art as a stimulus for social change. The works featured in the exhibition examine the profound connections between women and the birth of the earth, the birth of humanity and to the birth of creativity.

In 1979 Chicago unveiled the work for which she is best known, *The Dinner Party*, a monumental, mixed-media installation that serves as a celebratory memorial to the profound achievements of 1,038 historical and mythical women. *The Dinner Party's* landmark accomplishment and controversy derived from Chicago's use of "central-core imagery," or rather, forms and symbols which resembled vaginas and represented women. Each of the thirty-nine place settings in *The Dinner Party* is dedicated to specific accomplished women, including Egyptian Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Italian Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi and abolitionist and suffragist Sojourner Truth and consists of a personalized, "central-core imagery" dinner plate and a table runner illustrating that woman's historical and cultural contribution.

Chicago was first drawn to the subject of birth while she was designing the table runner for Mary Wollstonecraft's place setting in *The Dinner Party*. The scene depicts Wollstonecraft bleeding to death during the birth of her child Mary Shelley. She was astonished by the raw power of the image, but was satisfied with how the needlework rendered the scene readable, tender and aesthetically engaging. In 1980, when Chicago began researching the subject of birth, she was shocked to discover that there were very few images of birth in Western art and even fewer from a female's perspective. The onset of feminist art in the 1970s generated the opportunity for female artists to place women's experience at the forefront of artistic content and allowed Chicago to address the topic of birth, which had largely been ignored. Commenting on men's reign over high art, Chicago noted that "if men had babies, there would be thousands of images of the crowning." She observed that male artists focused on subject matter that only they deemed salient and had thus avoided depicting birth. In response, her feminist art practice used various dimensions of design, composition and content to express this fundamental experience of birth.

Judy Chicago, *Creation of the World #7 (detail)* 1984. Embroidery and needlework on linen, 37 x 20 in. Gettysburg College.
©Judy Chicago.





After the debut of the groundbreaking *The Dinner Party*, Chicago received an outpouring of support from women all over the country who wanted to be a part of what they saw as progressive, feminist art. She built upon this national community by establishing another participatory project wherein volunteers could work in their own homes. The 150 participating women were required to send in a needlework sample (pre-designed by Chicago) that demonstrated their technical skill and preferred style. Upon submitting their sample and qualifying for the project, Chicago took into consideration each individual's technique when designing the template and detailed color guide that were sent back to the women. The participants were asked not only to translate the artist's original design into needlework, but also to meet the multitude of demands that their careers, families and homemaking required of them. Chicago recognized that various needlework and textile techniques implemented in *The Birth Project* pieces like quilting, embroidery, crochet, macramé, petit-point, smocking, appliqué, batik and beading could create didactic images of the birth experience and the birthing process. She also chose needlework (as she did for *The Dinner Party*) because of its "low art" association with women's domesticity. By using this medium and taking on its gendered connotations, she embraced this opportunity to expand the conventional use of needlework away from domestic use. Chicago incorporated the traditional use of needlework into radical feminist art and drew attention to the intense technical skill of the undervalued workers and the impressive creative potential of this neglected medium. Upon completion of *The Birth Project* in 1985, the 85 works were donated to and exhibited at various public institutions including universities, libraries, birthing centers and hospitals. The purpose of placing the works in diverse and public settings and of providing detailed information in the documentation panels, was to demystify the practice of art and return it to a place where people felt that the form and content of the artworks were accessible, relevant and relatable.

Chicago visited Gettysburg College in the early 1990s for a symposium and gave *Birth #4*, *Birth (Embryo)* and *Creation of the World #7* to the institution. The works were meant to serve as a resource for understanding Chicago's feminist art and her mission to honor and represent women's culture. When the textiles were installed, however, some members of the campus community raised concerns about what they saw as indecent, pornographic imagery. In fact, one male art critic commenting on other *Birth Project* pieces compared its imagery to that of *Hustler* magazine. At Gettysburg College, the Board of Trustees was offended by the intense physicality of the female forms and demanded that closeable shutters be attached to the display cases to

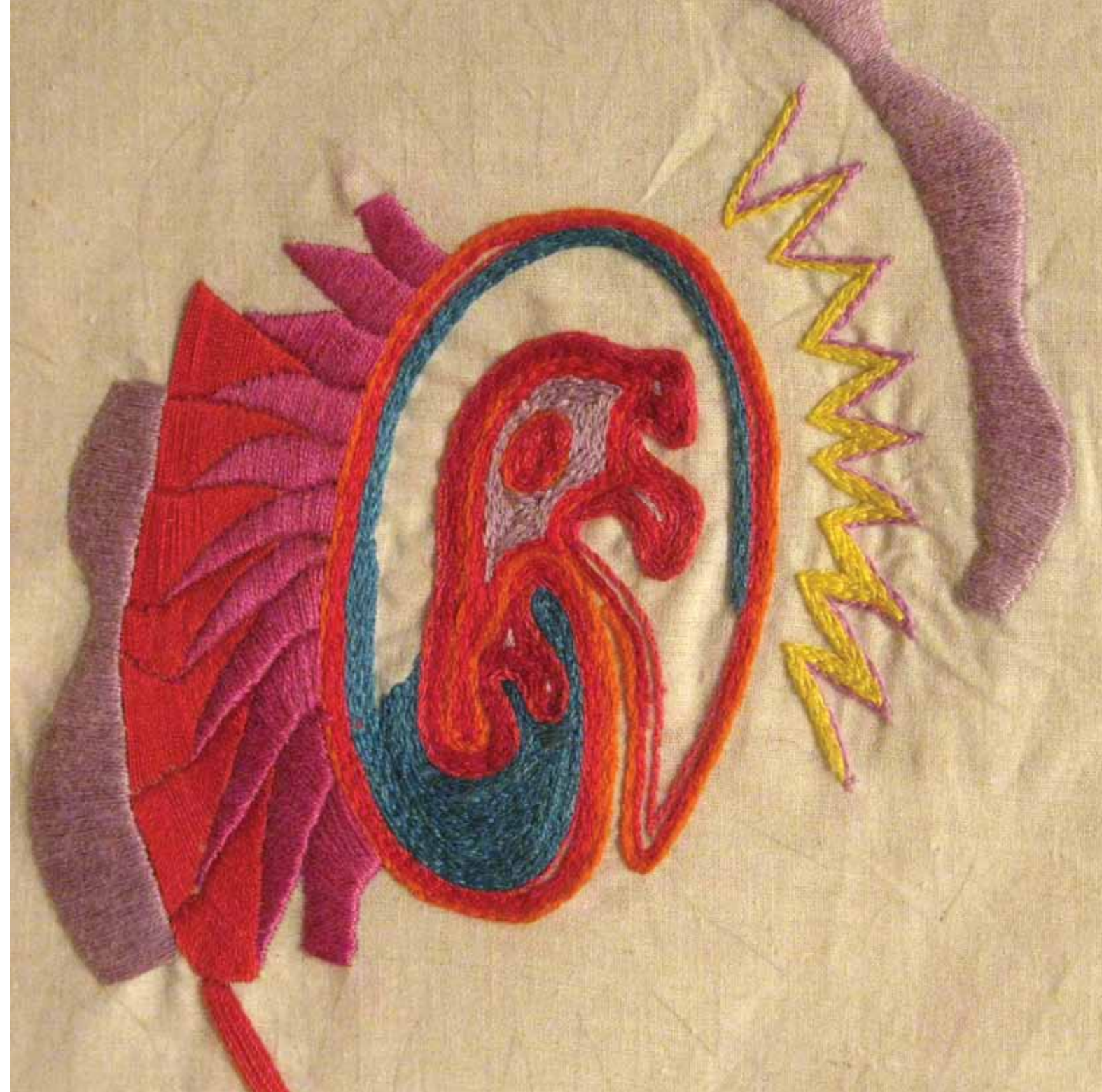
limit access to the works. Years later, when the covers eventually were removed, *Creation of the World #7* and *Birth #4* were almost forgotten and largely unseen by most faculty, staff and students.

Although relatively small in scale, this exhibition demonstrates the diverse content and form of the *Birth Project* textiles. *Judy Chicago: The Birth Project* grants viewers the unique opportunity to juxtapose very different *Birth Project* styles together for an enriched understanding of mythologies, folklore and iconography surrounding women and birth. Such graphic and often understated images remind us that in our current political and social spheres, the subject of women's bodies, and by extension their lives and role in society, is still a contentious topic. Feminist art, specifically the contribution of Judy Chicago and *The Birth Project* participants, demonstrates the desire to use art a means for universal and personal expression. These artists, therefore, had to create the visual and social lexicon to ensure the birth of that freedom.

For aesthetic purposes, the documentation panels have been omitted from the wall displays, but have been republished in guides found within the gallery space.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the great women who have helped me on this journey, especially Shannon Egan, Felicia Else, Carol Small, Karen Eskildsen, Barbara Amelia Nace (needleworker of Birth Certificate), Carolyn Sautter and Kathy Burke of Muhlenberg College.

— Francesca DeBiaso (Art History '12), Curator



JUDY CHICAGO

THE BIRTH PROJECT

JANUARY 25 – MARCH 8, 2013

CURATOR'S TALK: JANUARY 25, 4 – 5 PM

RECEPTION: JANUARY 25, 5-7 PM

CURATED BY FRANCESCA DEBIASO (ART HISTORY '12)

(cover) Judy Chicago and Jan Kinney discussing *Creation of the World*,
1982, photograph.

Gettysburg
COLLEGE

Schmucker Art Gallery

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Schmucker Hall
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
17325-1485

www.gettysburg.edu/gallery 717.337.6080 Tuesday - Saturday 10 - 4 Building is accessible.