

**This is the postprint version of the accepted article post peer review. The published version might differ slightly. Images have been removed due to copyright. The text will be published in the *Oxford Art Journal*.**

## **Blood Works:**

### **Judy Chicago and Menstrual Art since 1970**

#### **Introduction**

In the span of two years, Judy Chicago created three artworks about menstruation. First, the unpublished play *My Menstrual Life* in December 1971, in collaboration with University of California Berkeley political scientist Isabel Welsh. Second, she made the photolithograph *Red Flag* in 1971. Third, in 1972 Chicago created the installation *Menstruation Bathroom* as part of feminist exhibition *Womanhouse*. In the almost fifty years that have passed menstrual discourse has ballooned as activists, academics and artists reach larger audiences than ever before, exemplified in popular discourse when the magazine *Newsweek* defined 2015 as the Year of the Period.<sup>1</sup> In many of such recent articles about menstruation and activism, Chicago's 1970s menstrual artwork illustrate this story, but are seldom discussed in detail as works of art. This article aims to answer the questions that mainstream media and art historical literature have largely overlooked. How did Chicago come to make three works about menstruation in the early 1970s, and what can this tell us about the decade? How did the works make the journey from being taboo to being iconic, and how were they received (or not) depending on medium and timing? Do we appreciate the radical gesture of the artwork today, as a new generation of artists explore menstruation while receiving praise as well as censorship? This article presents the history of these three works, exploring how they were created in a state of taboo, and have ended up as icons of a movement calling for menstrual equity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Abigail Jones, "The Fight to End Period Shaming Is Going Mainstream," *Newsweek*, 20 April 2016.

## Art history or menstrual history?

Art historians have explored Judy Chicago's work and impact, resulting in analysis of and publication about the *Womanhouse* installation, the Fresno feminist art programme, and *The Dinner Party*.<sup>2</sup> However, the menstrual works are usually footnotes in the history of Chicago and feminist art, and do not often appear in art historical literature in the context of menstrual or reproductive history.<sup>3</sup> Complicating this, Chicago herself has played a large role in writing her own history of these works in her autobiography *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, and in interviews from the 1970s to 1990s, as discussed in this article.<sup>4</sup> Her

---

<sup>2</sup> Temma Balducci, 'Revisiting "Womanhouse": Welcome to the (Deconstructed) "Dollhouse"' *Woman's Art Journal* 27, no. 2 (2006); Kathy Battista, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), p 34-5. Jill Fields, *Entering the Picture : Judy Chicago, the Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Amelia Jones et al., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1996). Faith Wilding, 'The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and Calarts, 1970-75' in Norma Broude, Mary D. Gerard (eds.) *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions include Ruth Green-Cole, 'Widening the Cycle: A Menstrual Cycle & Reproductive Justice Art Show,' *Menstrual Health & Reproductive Justice Conference Proceedings* (San Francisco: Blurb, 2015); Breanne Fahs (2016) 'Smear it on Your Face: Menstrual Art, Performance, and Zines as Menstrual Activism', in Fahs, *Out for Blood: Essays on Menstruation and Resistance* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016); Bee Hughes, 'Challenging Menstrual Norms in Online Medical Advice: Deconstructing Stigma around Entangled Art Practice', *Feminist Encounters* 2, no 2 (2018); Daniela Tonelli Manica and Clarice Rios (2017) '(In)visible Blood: Menstrual Performances and Body Art', *Vibrant: Virtual Brazilian Anthropology* 14, no. 1; Camilla Mørk Røstvik, 'Blood in the Shower, A Visual History of Menstruation and Clean Bodies', *Visual Culture & Gender* 13 (2018); Louise Lander, *Images of Bleeding: Menstruation as Ideology* (New York: Orlando Press, 1988); Battista, *Renegotiating the Body*.

<sup>4</sup> Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (London: The Women's Press, 1982).

identification with the lone artist genius figure compared to the collaborative legacy of Second Wave feminism has interested art historians, and continues to make the task of incorporating Chicago's self-presentation a challenge.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the artist's own writings on the menstrual creations are important sources, because little critical writing about them exists elsewhere.

Rather, *Red Flag* and *Menstruation Bathroom* appear mostly in Critical Menstrual Studies, a relatively new and very interdisciplinary field that has involved few art historians.<sup>6</sup> Critical Menstrual Studies is concerned with critiquing feelings, industries and taboos connected to menstruation, notably shame, gendered scripts in advertising, and the dominance of corporations and pharmaceutical companies. In such explorations, Chicago is described as an artist who has been involved in challenging the visual silencing of menstruation by presenting it clearly in her art practice. In this literature, *Red Flag* is often described as the *first* menstrual art work, a statement to which we will return as it reveals the myth-building around this work in particular.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party...* stresses the importance of looking beyond Chicago's authorship.

<sup>6</sup> 'Critical Menstrual Studies' is a very new concept, and has been introduced related to the forthcoming publication of Chris Bobel, Fahs, Katie Ann Hasson, Elizabeth Kissling, Tomi-Ann Roberts, Inga Winkler (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstrual Studies*, 2019. Notable earlier literatures that can be considered part of such an approach include Mary Jane Lupton Janice Delaney, Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Karen Houppert, *The Curse : Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000); Gillian Howie, Andrew Shail, *Menstruation: A Cultural History* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Peter Redgrove, Penelope Shuttle, *The Wise Wound: Myths, Realities, and Meanings of Menstruation* (New York: Grove, 1988); Sharra Louise Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (New York: Lexington Books, 2008).

The lack of art historical analysis does, however, leave *My Menstrual Life*, *Red Flag* and *Menstruation Bathroom* somewhat outside the confines of the art world, often as tokens of activism or a cause, rather than works in their own right – a problem Chicago was acutely aware of at the time and tried to reverse. The relative absence of menstruation in art historical writing, as well as the prevalence of the works in non-art historical scholarship, accounts for some of this. Examining the time and context in which the works were created help us understand how both Chicago and menstrual scholars and activists were crucial components in *one* of the pieces' journey from taboo to iconic.

### **Menstruation as subject**

Chicago describes a shift in her thinking about menstruation after she began actively involving herself in the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s. Consciousness-raising activities, 'Bleed In' rituals, Red Tent circles, and a feminist exploration of reproductive rights were important components in elevating the topic of menstruation from shameful to interesting.<sup>7</sup> In her autobiography, Chicago has written about her own squeamishness towards menstruation. Her consideration of the topic happened quite suddenly and three decades after her own menarche (first menstruation), in the midst of preparing for the opening of the installation and performance space *Womanhouse* in the early 1970s. Organised by Chicago and colleague Miriam Schapiro, both co-founders of the California Institute of the Arts Feminist Art Program, *Womanhouse* included their students' work alongside women artists from the local community. It consisted of a single house with rooms dedicated to installations, performance or collaborative projects, and has since been documented and analysed as a key moment in the history of feminist art. Although the

---

<sup>7</sup> Chris Bobel, *New Blood : Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Delaney et al, *The Curse*, 278-80.

physical house is no longer possible to visit, Joanne Demetrakas's documentary film about the project reveals the audience's curiosity and interest as they move through the space and explore the multi-faceted issues of womanhood as presented by the artists.<sup>8</sup>

Chicago has written about how planning *Womanhouse* itself made her think about the absence of menstruation in culture: 'One day, as I was walking down the steps of the house, it occurred to me that there was no reference to menstruation anywhere in the environment.'<sup>9</sup> The following analysis of the origin and characteristics of each work shows the different methods, ideas and feelings inherent in the separate creations. The various receptions (or lack thereof) and legacies of the works are also explored, in order to show the many ways in which Chicago's interest in menstruation spiralled out into the feminist art world and beyond.

### ***My Menstrual Life, December 1971***

Chicago's first attempt to examine menstruation involved working outside the art world. It is unclear how Chicago first met political scientist Isabel Welsh, but their friendship and respect for one another is documented in a long radio interview carried out by Chicago for Pacifica Radio.<sup>10</sup> Discussing the role of historical women in the feminist movement, both shared an interest in excavating hidden histories and subjects from the past. At the time, both were also actively involved in the women's movement. In 1972, Chicago recorded her conversation with Welsh about her recent involvement in critiquing gender discrimination at the University of California Berkeley, and how this connected to a larger history of women's absence in

---

<sup>8</sup> Directed by Johanna Demetrakas, *'Womanhouse'*, 1974: 47 minutes.

<sup>9</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 113-114

<sup>10</sup> Isabel Welsh interviewed by Judy Chicago, 1972, Pacifica Radio Archives:

[https://archive.org/details/pacifica\\_radio\\_archives-BC0602](https://archive.org/details/pacifica_radio_archives-BC0602) (accessed 6 November 2018).

institutions.<sup>11</sup> At some point, the two decided to write a play about menstruation, but *My Menstrual Life* was never performed in its original state. The only mention of the play in any art historical context underlines this absence, as Jane F. Gerhard mentions the work as ‘unpublished’ and existing only within the archive.<sup>12</sup> The growing literature on feminist archival strategies has explored how such unrealised material nevertheless reveals a valuable historical insight into what women feel able to present or not.<sup>13</sup> The existence and placement of the play directions at Harvard nevertheless shows the writers’ interest in documenting their work, and reveal the multi-faceted ideas behind *My Menstrual Life*.

*My Menstrual Life* was loosely structured around three acts, divided by women speakers entering and leaving the scene as they explored various aspects of menstruation in culture and everyday life. Stage instructions detail a white room, and a pile of programs for audiences to take:

It is a long, slender, brown bag, stapled closed, with the words ‘My Menstrual Life’ stamped on it in rubber stamp letters. Inside the bag is a single sanitary napkin, a sanitary belt, and two safety pins.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> In 1973, UC Berkeley was worried about being sued for gender bias, as their graduate school admission figures showed clear bias against women applicants, but the lawsuit did not happen.

<sup>12</sup> Gerhard, *The Dinner Party*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Jenna Ashton, "Feminist Archiving: Skilling for Activism and Organising," *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91-92 (2017); Arlette Farage, *The Allure of the Archive* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Isabel Welsh and Judy Chicago, *My Menstrual Life, A Theatre Piece*, December 1971, Judy Chicago Papers MC502, cartoon 11, file number 36. Arthur and Judith Schlesinger Library Special Collections, University of Harvard.

The sanitary bag is a small everyday item still found in most women's bathrooms around the world. Chicago and Welsh offer the audience a chance to recognise what this bag communicates. What is it women are asked to hide? Who are they hiding it from? The inclusion of belts and pins also show how the early 1970s were a moment of transformation as disposable pads and tampons became more common amongst women with disposable income, whereas the cheap old-fashioned belt-and-safety-pin option was phased out by producers.<sup>15</sup> The audience would presumably have been welcome to leave with the memento, which they could use, share or save.

Instructed to sit on pillows, the audience would subsequently have been shown a 16 mm colour film. Here, the practical menstrual experience was centre stage, with the film featuring:

... the bottom half of a woman's body (or just the body from waist to knee). She is going through a series of activities: taking a napkin, attaching another one, wiping herself with toilet paper after urinating, having the toilet paper covered with menstrual blood, douching, washing the vaginal area, spraying it with feminine hygiene spray, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Foreshadowing *Red Flag's* similar focus on the pelvis, the image offered unprecedented views of a common menstrual experience. The references to douching and vaginal spray are remnants of the 1970s, as both products were intensely criticised by the women's movement

---

<sup>15</sup> Vostral, 'Chapter 4: The 'Kotex' Age: Consumerism, Technology and Menstruation' in Vostral, *Under Wraps*.

<sup>16</sup> Welsh and Chicago, *My Menstrual Life, A Theatre Piece*, December 1971.

alongside medical professionals in later years.<sup>17</sup> As the film played, sounds also were introduced: 'A tape is going with a woman's voice in a litany of all of the terms for menstruation: i.e. The curse, flying the red flag, the streak, on the rag, falling of the room, etc.'<sup>18</sup> The many euphemisms for menstruation are indeed a point of fascination for menstrual historians, activists, comedians and researchers alike, and Chicago's later use of 'red flag' in a title shows an on-going interest in coded language. The written signs for menstruation are plentiful, yet they all gesture to a culture of polite simulacra. The gap between what Chicago and Welsh showed on screen and the artistic and creative phrases read on the tape is vast.

Disrupting the film and tape, a woman would enter the stage with a book and pointer, and proceed to give 'a lecture about female anatomy'. This, Chicago and Welsh write, 'should be very much like the films in grammar school... very dry, very dispassionate.' Chicago and Welsh could have been referring to a handful of approved sexual education films and booklets that circulated in the US at the time of their primary education, including Walt Disney's 1946 animated *The Story of Menstruation*, where blood is white and a tiny girl without feet demonstrate the importance of cleanliness and positivity to onlookers.<sup>19</sup> Or they could be referring to product placement publications such as the Kotex booklets *Very Personally Yours* (many editions 1948-1961), *As One Girl to Another* (1950) or *Marjorie May's Twelfth Birthday* (from 1929), both mass-circulated and focused on the message that menstruation was a sensitive topic, while also serving the corporate interests of Kimberley-Clark by

---

<sup>17</sup> One of the first critiques of this in the US was by Karen Houppert, "Pulling the Plug on the Sanitary Protection Industry," *The Village Voice* (1995).

<sup>18</sup> Welsh and Chicago, *My Menstrual Life, A Theatre Piece*, December 1971.

<sup>19</sup> Walt Disney Productions, 'The Story of Menstruation', 1946: 10 minutes. Commissioned and sponsored by the International Cello-Cotton Company (now Kimberly-Clark), makers of Kotex. Available to view via YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjIJZyoKRlg> (accessed 26 November 2018).

suggesting that tampons were sinful, and disposable pads were modern.<sup>20</sup> Chicago and Welsh were not interested in such superficial messages, and described the anatomical propaganda with irony: ‘the quality of the talk should be “Isn’t it nice to grow up and be a woman?”’ The speaker is interrupted by another woman presenting a new lecture, this time about menstruation in various cultures. No details are given, but the reference to folk culture may be in the context of the emergent study of the history of menstruation, as researched and chronicled by historians and feminist such as Delaney, Lupton and Toth. Although Chicago later expressed interest in this history, there is a sense of impatience towards this expert’s lecture as well.

In the final act, a new tape is played, this time featuring several voices detailing women’s personal accounts of menstruation, referencing the title’s focus on individual experiences:

They speak of cramps, first menstruation, people’s responses to their menstruation (men’s, women’s, father’s, mother’s), their own responses to it, doctor’s responses to their cramps and discomfort. This tape to be made from taped interviews with women about their periods.<sup>21</sup>

Although they never collected the interviews as planned, Welsh and Chicago’s interest in women’s views on their own menstrual cycle mirrored later feminist calls to listen to the experiences of women. Furthermore, their inclusion of the doctor shows an interest in

---

<sup>20</sup> Roseann M. Mandziuk, "'Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake": Modernity and the Mortification of Menstruation in Kotex Advertising, 1921-1926,' *Women's Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3/4 (2010).

<sup>21</sup> Welsh and Chicago, *My Menstrual Life, A Theatre Piece*, December 1971.

understanding why the medical establishment dismissed menstrual pain, as explored by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and other feminist groups at the time.

Departing from the themes of medical and academic knowledge of menstruation, the end of the play returns some mystery to the audience experience. Two women enter and read poems about menstruation, while a tape plays a song related to the same:

This dialogue goes on for a short while, with snatches becoming shorter, then longer. Film has stopped, there is total blackness, with just the sound of voices. They stop. Bright red lights on for an instant, then off. Play ends.<sup>22</sup>

It is unclear how long the play was meant to last, but the directions suggest a lengthy experience with several changes of medium and performers. After spending some time in this 'menstrual life', the audience would suddenly be immersed in darkness and bombarded with bright red lights. One could imagine such an experience being educational, uncomfortable and intriguing. The abrupt end featuring poetry and a light display suggests that the artists invite the audience to include the arts in the menstrual experience, and that art adds a dimension to menstrual culture beyond what social science, medicine or education can: a sense of mystery, individual representation, beauty, pleasure, and, crucially, visualisation of subjects that are taboo.

Apart from Gerard's brief mention, the play has gone largely unnoticed. Beyond the boxes of the Judy Chicago papers at the Schlesinger Library in Harvard, it is difficult for audiences to connect with the play. Rather than being received or reviewed in the traditional sense, *My*

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

*Menstrual Life* lives on in other menstruation-themed performances, such as Raegan Turax 2017 *Sloughing*, which captured several women's menstrual blood on wood boards in a gallery.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, we can only speculate as to the reasons why *My Menstrual Life* was never performed, but in the context of the time it is not unrealistic to assume that the taboos the play sought to dismantle caught up with the artists, at least in part. Other contemporary performances involving bodily fluids or reproductive themes, for example Catherine Elwes' *Menstruation I and II* (1979), the *Womanhouse* performance *Cock and Cunt Play* (also Chicago, 1972), and Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975/77) were often situated in the supportive atmosphere of an art school or feminist environment, but even then the artist faced some ridicule from the art world.<sup>24</sup> However, the play did have a legacy in Isabel Welsh's continued work on the subject, in her travelling educational piece *Menstrual Blood*, presented in an art context at Los Angeles feminist gallery *Womanspace* as part of a 'Menstruation Weekend'.<sup>25</sup> This show focused more on women's experiences of menstruation, with only short readings and video clips. While containing the 'very graphic' visuals, *Menstrual Blood* had clear activist aims. Welsh wrote that she wanted it to be a 'positive ritual' that would help women feel better about their periods.<sup>26</sup> While the new play was being performed and developed by Welsh, Chicago shifted her continued curiosity about menstruation over to what she considered to be a more established 'high art' medium.

---

<sup>23</sup> Artist website: <https://www.raegantruax.com/sloughing> (accessed 28 November 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Battista showed how feminist-oriented body art has been underrepresented in institutional settings, and that alternative art spaces in the 1970s were essential. Battista, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London*, 2; 18.

<sup>25</sup> Janice Delaney, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, 277.

<sup>26</sup> Welsh quoted in *ibid.*

## ***Red Flag, 1971***

In comparison to *My Menstrual Life*, Chicago has described in detail the origin of *Red Flag*. In her autobiography and notes deposited in the Schlesinger library, she writes that the idea was first kindled while she worked in a print shop ‘owned by a well-established male artist’, probably Sam Francis, who offered her the chance to make a lithograph – an expensive technique Chicago did not have access to.<sup>27</sup> Excited by the opportunity, but unsure of the subject matter, Chicago recalls how the idea for the topic came from a conversation about menstruation amongst four female friends:

Suddenly we realised that none of us had ever openly discussed that subject in any depth before. As we were all involved in art, that realisation led us to a conversation about the absence of menstruation images in art and literature made by women. I decided to do a menstruation lithograph, called *Red Flag*.<sup>28</sup>

Chicago describes the image as ‘a woman’s hand pulling a bloody Tampax out of her vagina’, but offers no clue to how the image was constructed or who the woman is.<sup>29</sup> For what exactly is depicted in *Red Flag*? Although the image is realistic and shows an everyday practice in

---

<sup>27</sup> There is some confusion about the studio owner and photographer. According to the Museum of Menstruation, the aluminium plates were made available by Sam Francis in his personal workshop, although Chicago has not included Francis name on her own webpage. Harry Finley, ‘Red Flag’, 2002, Museum of Menstruation website: <http://www.mum.org/armenjc.htm> (accessed 21 November 2018). In Bobel, *New Blood*, the image caption includes a photo copyright to Donald Woodman. In Gail Lain, *Becoming Judy Chicago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), Sam Francis is mentioned as the owner of the studio whereas her then-husband Lloyd Hamrol is described as the photographer, p. 183. Usually, however, Judy Chicago is credited alone, and sometimes as the photographer.

<sup>28</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 135-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

many women's lives, Delaney, Lupton and Toth point out that women do not usually see it from this perspective.<sup>30</sup> The angle of the lens gives unusual insight, obscured only by the active hand attached to the string of the tampon, still attached to the vagina. The link of hand, tampon and vagina thus presented a new image for viewers, whether they experienced a menstrual cycle or not. The work is 50x 61 centimetres (20x 24 inches) and thus further invites close viewing, while making the content clear from some distance, suggesting that viewers can both examine it up close or at a 'safe' distance. Visually, the colour red dominates, whereas the composition renders the tampon the focus and centrepiece. Depicted at the moment of exiting the body, the image also brought to mind similar situations in the mind of viewers, who confused it with phallic imagery. Whether intended or not, *Red Flag* could be interpreted to both appropriate and reclaim phallic imagery of penetration, through its focus on the gendered and decidedly asexual object of the tampon. Overall, the visual choices made by Chicago would in turn become part of the work's success: its colours, framing, figuration, and symbols all played a part in making the image iconic.<sup>31</sup>

Referred to by Chicago numerous times as her 'Tampax piece', the Tambrands Inc. owned brand is a specific and important reference.<sup>32</sup> At the time, Tampax was the best-selling tampon in the world.<sup>33</sup> The Tampax applicator design was especially popular in North

---

<sup>30</sup> Delaney et al., *The Curse*, 275.

<sup>31</sup> On the icons of Pop Art see Sarat Maharaj, 'Pop Art's Pharmacies: Kitch, Consumerist Objects and Signs', in Marco Livingstone (ed.) *Pop Art* (London: The Royal Academy of Arts, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Lain writes that Chicago refers to the work as both 'Tampax print' and 'menstruation print', *Becoming Judy Chicago*, p. 183.

<sup>33</sup> Neither Tambrands Inc. nor later owner Procter & Gamble have commented publically on *Red Flag* in the fifty years that have passed since its creation

America, where consumers told manufacturers that they did not want to touch their own blood.<sup>34</sup> Foreseeing this, Tampax was designed in 1931 by Dr Earle Haas so that the cotton tampon is inserted into the vagina by the help of a cardboard (later also plastic) tube. It is advertised as more hygienic, modern and feminine than the non-applicators that may involve blood contact. By the 1970s, advertising also included an updated reference to women's empowerment and freedom.

Therefore, *Red Flag* and its Tampax centrepiece depict a North American attitude to menstruation, based on consumers' feelings about menstruation as abject and taboo.<sup>35</sup> The irony of depicting a Tampax soaked in blood hinges on the product's explicit promise to the consumer of avoiding all bodily fluids. Sold to hide menstruation in disposable doses, Tampax is here flayed open and revealed to be full of the very matter it pledges to keep secret. Viewed in this way, Chicago's 'Tampax piece' is about the branding and promises of the product, as well as the experience of menstruating. Despite the inclusion of the woman, the real subject matter is the best-selling menstrual product brand in the world, which had, until *Red Flag*, not really been scrutinized publically at all. Chicago's focus on this topic and brand was therefore clearly an attempt to highlight a topic seen to be taboo at the time. Created in the years when she first embraced feminism in her own art practice, *Red Flag* was made against a tapestry of women's liberation and the associated critique of mass consumerism in the US. It is no coincidence that Chicago utilised the iconic and popular

---

<sup>34</sup> Robert Snowden et al, 'The Tampax Report: Summary of Survey Results on a Study of Attitudes Towards Menstruation,' (New York: Research & Forecasts Inc., June 1981).

<sup>35</sup> The consumer wish for less blood contact would lead to larger and more absorbent tampons in the 1970s, culminating with the large teabag-structured Procter & Gamble Rely brand, which ushered in the deadly Toxic Shock Syndrome crisis of the late 1970s. For more on TSS see Vostral, *Toxic Shock: A Social History* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

object of the tampon to render this invisible reality visible, as its popularity – including amongst feminists – made it a symbol of menstruation. Discussing or showing menstruation at the time was generally unheard of, making *Red Flag* a pioneering move in the discourse surrounding the harmful side-effects of avoiding the topic.

Chicago has also described her initial interest in men's reaction to the subject, due to the practical necessity of working alongside and with them in the print shop:

I didn't know how he would react, and I was still uncomfortable about exposing my point of view as a woman around men. Working on the print helped me considerably. The printer and I calmly talked about adjusting the blood colour and making sure that the Tampax looked like it was really emerging from the vagina.<sup>36</sup>

Men's reactions to menstruation have generally been recorded as one of curiosity or confusion. Historian of masculinity and menstruation David Linton has shown that a lack of education for boys a menstruation led to adult men lacking basic information on the menstrual cycle.<sup>37</sup> In 1970s North America, boys and girls were separated during sexual education (if they received any), and may in turn not have received information until much later. When Gloria Steinem penned the essay 'If Men Could Menstruate' in *Ms. Magazine* in 1978, she humorously argued that men would make menstruation a contest about having the biggest blood loss, and the coolest menstrual paraphernalia.<sup>38</sup> For Judy Chicago, who was discussing the colour and texture of menstrual blood with male colleagues during the creation of *Red*

---

<sup>36</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 135-6.

<sup>37</sup> David Linton, 'Men in Menstrual Product Advertising 1920-1949,' *Women & Health* 46, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>38</sup> Gloria Steinem, 'If Men Could Menstruate,' *Ms. Magazine*, October 1978.

*Flag*, the men's open-minded approach impressed her. She later wrote that *Red Flag* had in part been designed to 'test male reaction to overt female subject matter', and in a later interview she added that men were often especially interested in her menstrual work, which she tied to the lack of education about menstruation in school:

(Boys) are forced by social pressure, to make an identification with men... This is symbolized for many men by that moment in school when the girls are taken into the other room and shown a film on menstruation – the secret, so to speak, puberty ritual that separated the boys from the girls. Seeing the bathroom was a connection to the mother, to the female, to that which has been forbidden to them.<sup>39</sup>

In addition to inviting men to engage, Chicago wrote that she wanted to validate female subject matter as a 'high art process, which is what lithography is.'<sup>40</sup> Photolithography is a time-consuming technique consisting of several steps, including cleaning, preparation, and coating of the surface to be used, and exposure and development of the image. In hindsight, Chicago added that by using what was for her a new and complicated medium, she was testing her own limits and talents after 'having internalized so many taboos throughout the years'.<sup>41</sup> In order to overcome her own and others squeamishness about menstruation, Chicago guessed that the high art medium would lend some weight, prestige and seriousness to the topic.

---

<sup>39</sup> Chicago quoted in Delaney, *The Curse*, 275-6.

<sup>40</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 135-6

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-6.

Apart from the menstrual experience, there are clues in *Red Flag* to 1970s culture, especially as regards its title. In addition to serving as a euphemism for menstruation (one of the many listed in *My Menstrual Life*), the red flag references American politics at the time of Chicago's adolescent years, which were dominated by the aggressive paranoia of US Senator Joseph McCarthy's hunt for Communists, as well as the Vietnam War. Chicago was interested in both conflicts, as her father was caught up in the McCarthy trials and she later joined the anti-war protests.<sup>42</sup> In modern history, a red flag itself had signalled left-wing revolution or action, and its depiction as such in the art historical canon is frequent, for example in Soviet propaganda posters. Chicago's referencing of red thus ties the work to the history of revolution.

Beyond the political implications, red flags are items made for signalling. Used by meteorologists to signal storms, red flags are raised to draw attention, and seek our explicit concern. It is the opposite of the pacifist alert of the white flag. It is, of course, also directly tied to the history of red and thus the history of blood. As historian Michel Pastoureau has shown, red pigment and blood are found in early cave paintings, as well as in the oldest surviving fragments of dyed cloth.<sup>43</sup> Discovered by Isaac Newton in 1666 to be at the end of the chromatic scale, the colour red lives on the edge of human vision and the colour spectrum, the last colour one can see before the human eye fails. *Red Flag*, however, is not entirely red, and consists mostly of black and white, urging us to focus, whether we like it or not, on what the eye naturally is drawn to. The stark contrasts made it a recognisable image, and the

---

<sup>42</sup> Deborah G. Felder, Diana Rosen, *Fifty Jewish Women Who Changed the World* (Yucca Valley: Citadel, 2005), 279.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

realistic depiction soon caught the attention of feminists seeking to dismantle menstrual taboos.

Three years after its creation, the publication of one of the first critical books on menstrual history and culture, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*, gave an enthusiastic introduction to Chicago and her work:

But it is Judy Chicago, also a Californian, who is most responsible for the breaking of the menstrual taboo in modern art. No folklore could be as striking as Chicago's handmade lithograph *Red Flag* (1971). Chicago's intent was frankly political.<sup>44</sup>

The authors corresponded with Chicago as they finished their manuscript, and included her thoughts on the piece in the years after its making:

'I wanted to validate overt female subject matter in the art community and chose to do so by making 'Red Flag' as a handmade litho, which is a high art process, usually confined to much more neutralized subject matter. By using such overt content in this form, I was attempting to introduce a new level of permission for women artists. It really worked'.<sup>45</sup>

This first feminist reception of the image would echo in later books on menstruation, to such an extent that it is difficult to find a book about periods that *does not* mention it. In the 2015 catalogue accompanying what is considered to be the first menstrual art exhibition, *Widening*

---

<sup>44</sup> Delaney et al., *The Curse*, 275.

<sup>45</sup> Chicago quoted in *ibid.*, 275.

*the Cycle: A Menstrual Cycle and Reproductive Justice Art Show*, art historian Ruth Green-Cole introduces the event by writing that ‘Judy Chicago’s depictions of menstruation (...) have become the most documented art works that visualise menstruation in popular culture.’<sup>46</sup> The first and subsequent writers of critical menstrual discourse described, depicted and celebrated *Red Flag*, and later historians of the movement such as Chris Bobel continue to depict the image and insist on its importance for 1970s menstrual activists.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, Chicago was concerned with the art world’s lukewarm reception of the subject of menstruation. She has written about her decision to keep the lithograph at home (for an unspecified amount of time), rather than exhibit it at once.<sup>48</sup> One of the first exhibitions of the work occurred at the Artemisia gallery in Chicago, between 6-29 September 1974.<sup>49</sup> Few responses to the first exhibitions survive, but Lain quotes Jeannie Orio’s reaction to seeing *Red Flag* at Artemisia as ‘a warrior’s act’, while Arlene Raven described it as ‘hidden information’ for women and men.<sup>50</sup> Ever since, confused audiences sometimes described the image ‘as a bloody penis’, missing the point entirely.<sup>51</sup> Echoing the reception of other menstrual artworks by Judy Clarke exhibited two years later in the UK, some members of the audience did not understand the image at all, interpreting it alongside both artists’ earlier work as abstract or Freudian. This conflation was not new in the 1970s, and could be seen as

---

<sup>46</sup> Green-Cole, ‘Widening the Cycle’, 14.

<sup>47</sup> Bobel, *New Blood*, 46-47.

<sup>48</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 136.

<sup>49</sup> Lucia Adams Beier, ‘Artemisia: A Women’s Cooperative Gallery in Chicago’, *Leonardo* Vol. 11, No. 2 (1978), 115-117.

<sup>50</sup> Orio and Raven quoted in Lain, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 257 and 183.

<sup>51</sup> The ‘penis’ story originated in *Through the Flower*, 135, and has since been emphasised in most writing about *Red Flag*, including in Bobel, *New Blood*; Delaney et al.; *The Curse*; Museum of Menstruation, and most journalism.

thematically linked to the symbolic phallic power of the tampon, which had concerned many different groups since the invention of the modern version in the early twentieth century.<sup>52</sup> While feminists writing about menstruation in the 1970s were delighted to find any visual representation of the subject, Chicago's worries about the work's status as an art work continued as she prepared her next menstrual project.

### ***Menstruation Bathroom, 1972***

After exploring menstruation through writing, theatre, photography, and print techniques, Chicago turned to installation for her final early 1970s work on the subject. In contrast to the other works, *Menstruation Bathroom* did not have a long gestation period, and was speedily envisaged and created by Chicago in the midst of a larger art project. She has described how *Menstruation Bathroom* was made in the absence of menstrual themes in the almost finished *Womanhouse* exhibition. At a very late stage in the creation of the house, only one small room was available, so *Menstruation Bathroom* was fitted around the constraints of the architectural space.<sup>53</sup> Chicago wanted to create a 'very, very sterile, all white environment' to house menstrual paraphernalia in order to counterbalance what she saw as society's effort to 'clean up' menstruation.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to many of the other rooms, however, one could not enter it. The bathroom was closed off from visitors by a veil of white gauze, creating an eerily voyeuristic effect and resulting in hazy photographs taken by artist Lloyd Hamrol and documentary footage by Johanna Demetrakas. Their images show the work consisting of bins,

---

<sup>52</sup> Notably, religious institutions and conservative education and health policy makers concerned about the effect on virginity and arousal. Women's groups have also criticised the tampon for its phallic shape and symbolism, arguing that the product was sold by men to women without benefitting consumers much.

<sup>53</sup> Chicago, Note on *Menstruation Bathroom, Womanhouse*, October 1977, Judy Chicago Papers MC502, cartoon 11, no 36, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>54</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 113-4

toilets, shelves, a sink and the floor, all overrun with used pads, tampons and products. Brands like Kotex and Tampax are clearly on display, showing Chicago's continued interest in the corporate and branded history of menstruation.

Chicago describes how colleagues got involved in helping her finish on time, painting pads with red and brown paint, and offering advice: 'As I worked on the sanitary napkins, trying to simulate blood, all the women artists gathered around me advising me as to the exact colour and density – for we are all experts on that aesthetic issue.'<sup>55</sup> By now, menstruation was no longer shameful to Chicago, and the installation was designed in part to help viewers realise this: 'The blood, the door, the reality of the monthly flow is a testament to our connection to the life process.'<sup>56</sup> In contrast to *Red Flag*, the installation was created in an environment dominated by women, making male involvement rare. Chicago, no longer dependent on male colleagues to create the work, felt differently too: 'As to how men reacted, I do not know – I did not ask, I do not care.'<sup>57</sup> Compared to her worries about male printers during the creation of *Red Flag*, Chicago had by 1972 largely stopped caring about other people's responses to menstruation and framed the experience as more positive. In this, she echoes the observation made by many feminists involved in the beginning of the menstrual activist movement, who reported feelings of joy and pride in their menstrual cycle, after a time of reckoning with the societal taboos associated with them.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Chicago, Note on *Menstruation Bathroom, Womanhouse*, October 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> This is explored in the history of the movement in Bobel, *New Blood*. The Society of Menstrual Cycle Research was also founded in the mid-1970s, and published reports and organised conferences about the positive consequences of challenging taboos.

As part of *Womanhouse*, *Menstruation Bathroom* was mentioned in art, feminist, and mainstream media from the 1970s onwards. Early reviews usually included a very brief mention of the room, although it was seldom described or depicted in detail. In February 1972, *The Los Angeles Free Press* wrote of ‘...bathrooms with themes of lipstick and terror’ in its review of *Womanhouse*, conflating Chicago’s bathroom with that of fellow artist Camille Grey and with no mention of periods.<sup>59</sup> One month later, *Everywoman* also compared the washrooms: ‘fantasy bathrooms of blazing scarlet with fur-lined tubs, and reality bathrooms in stark white with bloody Kotex on the floor.’<sup>60</sup> In contrast, writers of critical menstrual history and culture spent extensive time exploring the work.

*Menstruation Bathroom* is second only to *Red Flag* in its repeated citation in critical menstrual literature from the 1970s onwards. Part of the reason is the re-staging of some of the *Womanhouse* rooms in the following decades, as well as the media attention that followed. In response to the 1995 exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, *New York Times* journalist M.G. Lord even worried about the authenticity of the work: ‘Nor has Ms. Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom* lost its capacity to disturb – though it is far from an exact replica of the original.’<sup>61</sup> Lord, like others before her, had been in direct contact with Chicago, this time about why the installation looked different from the 1970s version. The artist told Lord: ‘... it’s not a museum of menstruation, but there has been a major change in the size and shape of Kotex and Tampax since that time’.<sup>62</sup> Since the 1970s, a Museum of Menstruation had indeed

---

<sup>59</sup> William Wilson, ‘Lair of Female Creativity’, *The Los Angeles Free Press*, 21 February 1972. Clip found in the Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library. *Womanhouse* was also reviewed by *Time* and *Ms*.

<sup>60</sup> Unknown author and title, *Everywoman*, March 1972. Clip found in the Judy Chicago Papers, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>61</sup> M.G. Lord, “Women's Work Is (Sometimes) Done,” *The New York Times*, 19 February 1995., 37.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

been founded by curator and collector, Harry Finley, and Chicago was correct in pointing out the innovation in the menstrual product industry, again solidifying her on-going interest in the corporate side of menstruation. Despite these changes in the menstrual cultural and corporate landscape, *Menstruation Bathroom* continues to be referenced by menstrual activists as an important and unique moment, and their support for the work has been unwavering compared to the strong focus on other aspects of *Womanhouse* in art history.

### **Menstruation in the 1970s**

In their summary of the era, writers Delaney, Lupton and Toth describe menstruation as an intensely strong taboo in 1960s North America, and pinpoint the *mid*-1970s as a time when there was ‘finally a sense of freedom in the air’.<sup>63</sup> This makes Chicago’s *early* 1970s interest in exploring menstruation publically in her artwork extraordinary. In the late 1960s, when Chicago was first considering menstruation critically, periods were considered something to hide. Young girls and teens were instructed by product-sponsored booklets to uphold what historian Julie-Marie Strange has defined as ‘menstrual etiquette’, by keeping the topic private, staying clean, and purchasing pads and belts.<sup>64</sup> As a Jewish girl, Chicago would likely have been aware of special traditions and rituals, due to the observance of menstrual separation and the rules involved, and the many debates for and against these traditions within the Jewish community at the time.<sup>65</sup> Overall, the enormous communal effort involved in the

---

<sup>63</sup> Delaney et al., *The Curse*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> Julie Strange, "The Assault on Ignorance: Teaching Menstrual Etiquette in England, C. 1920s to 1960s.," *Social History of Medicine* 14, no. 2 (2001).

<sup>65</sup> Traditional Jewish scripture states that husband and wife should not spend time together, touch, have sex, or sleep in the same bed while she is menstruating. A ritual monthly bath is also part of the tradition, to cleanse and purify women once the menstrual blood has stopped for the month. For more on Jewish menstrual tradition see

hiding of menstrual blood was performed so successfully by women that it may as well not exist. This may be why the visual arts made such a striking intersection in this invisible culture in the 1970s, specifically by challenging the boundaries between indexical signs and signifier.

Furthermore, Chicago's interest in the branded history of menstruation was both relevant and timely, as the industry grew and disposable products became normal. By the 1970s, most girls and women in the US used products from a handful of corporations, such as the US-based pad brands Kotex (Kimberley-Clark) or Modess (Johnson & Johnson), or lone tampon manufacturer Tambrand Inc.'s Tampax. These disposable products were used by the majority of Western women by this decade, but were by no means beloved, as market surveys showed that the younger pad users found them stiff, uncomfortable and even 'diaper-like', whereas some tampon users disliked the message that tampons were morally objectionable due to the (false) implications for their hymens.<sup>66</sup> Both consumer groups were also unhappy with patronising and confusing marketing and advertising, and the high price placed on what they perceived to be essential products.<sup>67</sup> In the meantime, reusable options such as knitted squares, belted structures, and cloth pads fell out of fashion. A new generation rejected the washing involved and accepted what Roseann Mandziuk has defined as a message of modernity in new advertising.<sup>68</sup> The commercial failure of the first menstrual cup (the Tassette and Tassaway) in the 1930s also revealed a continued discomfort among North

---

Rahel R. Wasserfall (ed.), *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> Snowden, 'The Tampax Report'. No users liked that they had to spend money on the products.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Mandziuk, "'Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake": Modernity and the Mortification of Menstruation in Kotex Advertising, 1921-1926.'

American girls and women with touching the body or seeing menstrual blood.<sup>69</sup> As menstrual blood was becoming increasingly commercialised, advertising took on the role of visually representing 'the secret' of menstruation, introducing 'silent wrappers', 'discreet packaging' and coded product names (Whisper, Secret, Dr White's...). Yet, by the early 1970s, most women in the US opted for disposable (and, at the time, flushable) pads and/or Tampax tampons, or skipped several menstrual cycles by manipulating the increasingly popular hormonal birth control pills.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of societal discourse, there were few public figures, including public health officials, who spoke about menstruation prior to the 1960s. Medical research was focused on negative aspects of the menstrual cycle, notably how to eliminate entirely menstruation through the use of hormonal birth control (creating profit for the pharmaceutical companies involved), or the pathologizing implied by the relatively new term 'Pre Menstrual Syndrome'. This was a 'disorder' established by British doctor Katharine Dalton, who sought to prove a link between women, madness, criminality, and menstruation through surveys of menstruating women, including those serving prison sentences (most of whom had been prosecuted for sex-work, which was illegal at the time).<sup>71</sup> The Boston Women's Health Book Collective challenged this status quo in the US, by publishing the first pamphlet-edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in the late 1960s, although the first editions included little discussion of menstruation, and cited

---

<sup>69</sup> Kelly O'Donnell, "'The Whole Idea Might Seem a Little Strange to You': Selling the Menstrual Cup,' *Society for the History of Technology Technology's Stories* 12 (2017).

<sup>70</sup> Vostral, *Under Wraps*.

<sup>71</sup> Katharina Dalton, 'The Premenstrual Syndrome,' *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 4818 (1953).

Dalton's later disproven theories.<sup>72</sup> This disinformation created intense anxiety for people who menstruated.

Ethnographic surveys from several Western countries show that if girls or women 'leaked' a spot of blood onto their clothes, the overwhelming response was one of enormous fear, with a noteworthy amount of young women wishing they 'had died' instead.<sup>73</sup> The taboo was so strong that girls with severe pain and bleeding (who may indeed have had endometriosis in a time where menstrual pain was considered medically unimportant) stayed home from school in fear of bleeding publically.<sup>74</sup> By focusing on menstruation in the early 1970s, Chicago was making the personal political.

### **Menstrual art in history**

Making art about menstruation was unusual in 1970s North America, but where does it sit in the broader history of art? Although blood and reproductive themes had been explored in art prior to the 1970s, Chicago was aware of the absence of direct representations of menstrual blood: 'I knew that there had been very few references to menstruation in art history and

---

<sup>72</sup> The Boston Women's Health Book Collective first published a pamphlet, later developed into *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book for and by Women* (Boston: New England Free Press, 1970).

<sup>73</sup> See for example Denise Malmberg, *Skammens Röda Blomma? Menstruationen Och Den Menstruerande Kvinnan I Svensk Tradition (from Swedish: The Red Flower of Shame? Menstruation and the Menstruating Woman in Swedish Tradition)* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1991); Norwegian Ethnographic Survey, 'Hygiene in Older Days,' (Oslo: Norsk Folkemuseum, 1993); Ruth Tsoffar, *The Stains of Culture : An Ethno-Reading of Karaite Jewish Women* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> Brendan H. O'Connor, Rachel K. Jewkes, 'Crisis in Our Schools: Survey of Sanitation Facilities in Schools in Bloomsbury Health District,' *British Medical Journal* 301, no. 6760 (10 November 1990); Lara Freidenfelds, *The Modern Period : Menstruation in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

certainly not from a woman's point of view.'<sup>75</sup> Her interest in menstruation parallels that of other women artists. As art historian Ruth Green-Cole notes, there were already several established artists working on themes of reproduction in the late 1960s, including Shigeko Kubota and Carolee Schneeman.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, there was something distinctive about the menstruation work made by women in the 1970s, including the focus on showing menstrual blood and the internal and external fights involved in showing such images. Overall, the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement and consciousness-raising groups made previously taboo material more accessible and viable to explore, but the topic of menstruation remained controversial.

Like Chicago, feminist theology student Emily Culpepper faced barriers when she wanted to screen a visualization of menstruation at Harvard Divinity School in 1971.<sup>77</sup> *The Period Piece* included a vaginal self-examination during menstruation, and used documentary film tropes to explore negative and positive narratives of menstruation. Culpepper had to fight to get the film produced, and was supported by Miriam Weinstein (mother of Harvey) to demand her work be taken seriously by a male professor known for sexual harassment and a distaste for feminist subjects.<sup>78</sup> The film reached the feminist circles of Boston (including the Book Collective) by the mid-1970s, and later became a cult classic of the menstrual art genre. At the same time, in the UK, Judy Clark collected and prepared her menstrual blood for her first

---

<sup>75</sup> Chicago, Note on *Menstruation Bathroom*, *Womanhouse*, October 1977.

<sup>76</sup> Green-Cole, 'Widening the Circle', p 12. On collaboration and feminist art in the decade, see Amy Tobin, "'I'll Show You Mine, If You Show Me Yours": Collaboration, Consciousness-Raising and Feminist-Influenced Art in the 1970s', *Tate Papers* No 25 (2016).

<sup>77</sup> Gannit Ankori, Emily Culpepper, Karen King, Sarah Peck, Claudia Highbaugh, 'Positively Breaking Taboos: Why and How I Made the Film the Period Piece,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 2 (2006).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

exhibition, framing her used pads in rows and diagrams alongside body hair and nail clippings in a well-received debut exhibition that nevertheless made some audiences confused as to what what they were seeing.<sup>79</sup> Also in London, Catherine Elwes bled freely during a performance at the Slade School of Art in *Menstruation I* and *Menstruation II*, working, eating and sleeping as blood fell on the ground around her. In 1972, Carolee Schneeman began her *Blood Work Diary*, made during a single menstrual cycle, featuring menstrual blood fixed in egg whites and smudged onto the journal's pages. Facing much of the same criticism of essentialism, dismissal or confusion from the established art world and audiences, these female artists seemingly stopped caring about their own or others disgust within the span of a few years. The importance of the larger women's liberation movement for providing support and purpose is acknowledged in most of their writings, as is the case with Chicago.

## Legacy

As detailed above, Chicago was concerned with the potential dismissal of the subject matter by the established art world, and took active steps to secure a legacy for her work. One example of this was her donation of one *Red Flag* print to the Museum of Menstruation (MUM) in 1998.<sup>80</sup> Overall, the print run was 94 (as inscribed on the original) thus facilitating extensive circulation, donation, and display. MUM has been online only since the 1980s, and is dedicated to collecting, analysing and documenting menstruation through objects and history. Curator Harry Finley has written of how he had contacted Chicago's non-profit *Through the Flower* in order to seek advice about supporting another artist who was receiving

---

<sup>79</sup> Clark writes that she thinks she was the first to do this in the UK, but that she was unaware of Chicago's work in the US at the same time. Author email with Judy Clark, 19 November 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Harry Finley, 'Judy Chicago Gives Famous Artwork to Mum,' *Museum of Menstruation* (1998): <http://www.mum.org/olnews63.htm> (accessed 26 November 2018); Astrid Madberg, 'Period Pieces: Bloody Good Art,' *Artefact* 11, no. 19 (2014).

much resistance to a reproductive justice-themed exhibition. Chicago offered support and, later, a board member of the museum met her in person as she spoke at Syracuse University in New York, and ‘immediately offered the print to this museum’.<sup>81</sup> Of *Red Flag*, Finley later wrote:

*Red Flag* may be the first work of art – and it was, and is, controversial – to show this commonplace event in many women’s lives: removing a tampon. The artist has commented that many people did not know what the red object was; some thought it was a bloody penis, showing how unwilling many women (and men!) are to look at personal, but everyday functions.<sup>82</sup>

MUM has since become an important resource for menstruation history and is frequently cited by journalists and historians. Adding *Red Flag* to this collection at a time when Harry Finley was the only active collector and curator of menstrual paraphernalia was thus an important move in ensuring a legacy for the work. The creation of *Red Flag* as a photographic lithograph was in this sense also a way of creating an artwork that existed in many editions, and thus increased the chance of disseminating its message widely.

In the same year she donated *Red Flag* to Finley’s museum, Chicago featured in a documentary about menstruation; Teresa MacInnes’ 1998 film *Under Wraps*.<sup>83</sup> In it, Chicago

---

<sup>81</sup> Finley, 'Judy Chicago Gives Famous Artwork to Mum.'

<sup>82</sup> Finley, 'Red Flag,' *Museum of Menstruation* (2002): <http://www.mum.org/armenjc.htm> (accessed 26 November 2018).

<sup>83</sup> Directed by Teresa MacInnes, *Under Wraps*, 1998: 55 minutes. Produced by MacInnes, Penny Wheelwright and Jennifer Torrance, written by Wheelwright. The film is available via the National Film Board of Canada’s website: [https://www.nfb.ca/film/under\\_wraps/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/under_wraps/) (accessed 29 October 2018).

is interviewed while preparing *Menstruation Bathroom*, and is shown painting pads and tampons with a group of women. Carefully smudging, dipping and stroking the red and brown paints into place with pencils and fingers, Chicago answers questions about making menstrual and feminist art while creating the work with a team of collaborators on the floor of the gallery. She was concerned, she told the interviewer, with getting the colours right, with getting the texture right. By participating in the film and donating *Red Flag* to MUM in the 1990s, Chicago continued to collaborate in a setting where her work would be appreciated, documented and explored. Furthermore, these choices also lent themselves to global dissemination as both the online museum and documentary film easily reached beyond their North American homes.

Since the late 1990s, Chicago's menstrual works have continued to capture the imagination of menstrual activists and feminists, who often cite Chicago's own writings. New online feminist publications echo the first books written about menstrual culture, describing both *Red Flag* and *Menstruation Bathroom* as 'groundbreaking', and 'iconic'.<sup>84</sup> The many Instagram boards featuring menstrual art usually include *Red Flag* as an iconic historic object. Mainstream presses including *Newsweek*, *The Guardian*, and the BBC all mention or depict *Red Flag* in their post-2015 articles about the rise of menstruation activism.<sup>85</sup> Writing about *Red Flag* continues to be dominated by North American news outlets and writers, although some recent exceptions might signal more global awareness of Chicago's work.<sup>86</sup> In contrast to other

---

<sup>84</sup> Kristen Cochrane, 'A Brief History of Period Art,' *Slutever* (24 August 2015); Leah Sinclair, 'The History of Bodily Fluids in Feminist Art,' *Broadly* (6 October 2015).

<sup>85</sup> Julia Martincic, 'Let It Bleed – Art's Revival of Menstrual Blood', *The Guardian* (12 December 2016)

<sup>86</sup> See for example Chella Quint, 'Menstrual art: What is it? Why is it important?', *Outlook India* (26 December 2018); 'Anish Kapoor's Menstrual Art and the Vexed Question of Appropriation', *The Economist* (14 May 2019);

menstrual art made in the 1970s, such as that made by Clarke and Elwes, Chicago's work is still receiving most of the mainstream attention. Emerging as a key image in the visual history of menstruation, the canonization of *Red Flag* presents the same issues as those of most icons: as it grows in power and reach, it threatens to eclipse other images, thus elevating only one version of menstruation and one sole genius.

For menstrual activists and artists, the existence of over forty years of menstrual art history lends gravity to their cause, as well as an alternative visual history to dominant advertising tropes. In scholar of women's history and activism Chris Bobel's writing about the modern menstrual activist movement, the importance of activist history and legacy appears as a key issue.<sup>87</sup> In new writing about menstruation, *Red Flag* (and sometimes *Menstruation Bathroom*) finds a place among Gloria Steinem's famed essay 'If Men Could Menstruate', the re-emergence of the menstrual cup, protests against taxation on menstrual products, the fight against Toxic Shock Syndrome, and other key moments in menstrual history.<sup>88</sup> Despite Chicago's correct assertion about the established art world's slow reception of the work (as opposed to the mainstream debates about the National Endowment of the Arts funding of *The Dinner Party* and its subsequent canonisation at Brooklyn Museum), *Red Flag* and *Menstruation Bathroom* now feature as prominent images in menstrual activism, and through this celebration, both works also found a space in the art world. Chicago's choice of medium, awareness of critical menstrual discourse, writing of a narrative for *Red Flag*, and willingness to engage and participate in interviews with menstrual activists succeeded in making the image known.

---

<sup>87</sup> Bobel, *New Blood*.

<sup>88</sup> Fahs, *Out for Blood*; Green-Cole, 'Widening the Cycle'; Jennifer Weiss-Wolf, *Periods Gone Public: Taking a Stand for Menstrual Equity* (New York Arcade, 2017).

Exploring the creation, reception and legacy of these artworks gives insight into how menstrual taboos work, and how they can be changed. Chicago challenged societal disgust through visualising a taboo, and her choice of a ‘high art’ medium for *Red Flag* in particular succeeded in engaging many feminists and, later, mainstream media. Notably, *My Menstrual Life* and *Menstruation Bathroom* were far more graphic and detailed in their exploration of menstruation, whereas *Red Flag* arguably exhibits a sense of Pop Art aesthetics which may have helped popularise it amongst different groups, both because the style prints clearly, and because, despite the shock value, the arrangement is structural and focused.<sup>89</sup> In Chicago’s overall body of work, Pop Art and figuration soon disappeared – described by writer Edward Lucie-Smith as ‘representing a direction not taken’ in her work.<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, *Red Flag*’s inclusion on social media forums, in exhibitions, and popular culture today is certainly a change from the time when Chicago worried about how exactly to display it publically. Nevertheless, the radical core idea of making menstruation visible continues to provoke some viewers, and to suggest that we are not yet quite done with menstrual taboos.

In the 2010s, many artists are using menstrual blood and themes in their work.<sup>91</sup> The context is completely different to the 1970s, with more critical discourse, products and analysis available. Psychologist Breanne Fahs has shown how this new generation of ‘menarchist’

---

<sup>89</sup> My thanks to the editor for suggesting the link to Pop Art.

<sup>90</sup> Lucie-Smith argues this about *Red Flag* and the two similar figurative photolithography prints *Love Story* and *Gunsmoke*, 1972, in *Judy Chicago – An American Vision*, (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000), 40.

<sup>91</sup> See for example Jen and Rob Lewis *Beauty in Blood* project, Sarah Maple, *Menstruate with Pride* (2015), Chella Quint’s *Stains*<sup>TM</sup> (2011), Bee Hughes *Printed Period* (2010), Zanele Muholi, *Period Pain* series.

artists often have underlying political goals, and are thereby dismissed as merely activists.<sup>92</sup> As we have seen, this concerned Chicago in the early 1970s, and was part of her decision to create *Red Flag* in what she defined as the ‘high art form’ of photolithography. It may also explain why the educational and explicitly activist oriented play was never performed in its original format nor with Chicago involved. As art historian Amelia Jones writes, Chicago was ‘concerned with finding sophisticated forms of artistic expression’ from the days of *Womanhouse* onward, and utilised her knowledge of what the art world expected (from her experience of exhibiting with the minimalists and being recognized early) to create a space for her work.<sup>93</sup> Like Chicago, contemporary artists worry about their menstrual work being taken seriously by the established art world. Unlike Chicago however, most artists have not had their works exhibited in custom-built architectural spaces (*The Dinner Party*) or been purchased and represented by large international galleries and museums.<sup>94</sup> Instead, artists who work primarily on menstrual themes today create their own spaces for sharing their work, such as the *Widening the Cycle* exhibition in 2015, curated by artist Jen Lewis, or artist Vanessa Tiegs’ coinage of the word ‘menstrala’ – designed in part to elevate the category from mere activism to high art.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Fahs, ‘Smear It on Your Face – Menstrual Art, Performance and Zines as Menstrual Activism’, in *Out for Blood*.

<sup>93</sup> Jones (ed.), *Sexual Politics*, 61

<sup>94</sup> For example, one *Red Flag* print was bought by the SAMMLUNG VERBUND Collection, now exhibited internationally as part of the travelling ‘WOMAN’ exhibition of feminist art. Lucie-Smith, Lain and others describe *Red Flag* as residing in ‘several international collections’ without providing details.

<sup>95</sup> Jen Lewis (ed.), *Widening the Cycle: A Menstrual Cycle & Reproductive Justice Art Show. Exhibition Catalogue* (blurb books, 2015). The word ‘menstrala’ was coined by Vanessa Tiegs to represent her collection of 88 paintings about menstruation in the 2010s.

Despite some politicians, campaigners, educators, activists and health professionals' recent campaigns to end menstrual shame, art continues to reveal the hypocrisies and mythologies involved in menstrual taboos. In 2015, *Newsweek's* 'Year of the Period', artist and poet Rupri Kaur's photographic series *Period.* was censored by Instagram for featuring menstrual blood (Instagram later reversed the decision). Other artworks, notably Sarah Maple's self-portrait *Menstruate with Pride*, Jen Lewis *Beauty in Blood*, Bee Hughes *Lifetime Supply* and Casey Jenkins' vagina knitting performances have also faced the double-edged sword of menstrual art. These works, and many more, have been censored *and* celebrated in the 2010s, used to illustrate progress and cited by the menstrual product industry in their market research, while also being attacked on social media. Perhaps because of this, most of these artists recognise Chicago for her pioneering steps, many directly thanking her for raising the *Red Flag* some fifty years ago, and keeping it flying for new generations of artists and people who care about the menstrual experience.

### **Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Judy Chicago and her studio for rights to use *Red Flag* without the DACA fee, and for answering questions. Many thanks to the staff at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library for Women's History in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. A million thanks to Dr Catherine Spencer for encouragement. Thanks to the editors and reviewers for important suggestions for improvements. Thanks to Harry Finley at MUM. A version of this paper was presented at the Association for Art History conference in Brighton and at the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research in Colorado, both in 2019 – thanks to listeners for excellent questions. This research was funded by a Leverhulme Early Career Grant entitled “‘The Painters Are In’: The Visual History of Menstruation 1970-2020’.

