

Raven, Arlene. "In Tongues."  
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# In Tongues

BY ARLENE RAVEN

**NANCY CHUNN.** Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, through June 3.

**HELENE BRANDY.** Trubia-MacAfee Gallery, 54 Greene Street, closed.

**NANCY SPERO: Works Since 1950.** The New Museum, 583 Broadway. Part 1 through June 11; part 2, June 14 through July 9.

**ADRIAN PIPER: Merge.** Spectacolor light-board, One Times Square, through May 31.

When Nancy Chunn was painting Cambodia a strips of bacon and El Salvador as liver, she'd buy models at the butcher. But she never eats meat. Chunn struggle against a primary dread of flesh by "incarnating" the bodies of lands and water she has been painting since 1981.

Chunn is hardly alone in the dilemma that occupies the center of her art practice. Awareness of the wide-ranging, constantly shifting social implications of the personal, material body is acute right now. Because of U.S. citizens war for control of American creatures (fetuses, children, soldiers, animals) while sanctioning wholesale slaughter in the Third World hot spots Chunn paints, one is tempted to leave one's body, if just for a moment's relief from carnal conspiracy in the madness. But discourse among parts of the body politic is first of all physical in nature. No one can enter the struggle as dead meat or a brain in a jar, hoping to become a living, speaking subject. It is precisely for this living, speaking subject that Chunn labors.

Ronald Feldman's north gallery is devoted to a look into Chunn's complicated creative process, including notes about and studies of one painting. In the front room, where six exquisite large paintings (maps of Ethiopia, Korea, the Philippines, Iran/Iraq, Kurdistan, and Haiti/Dominican Republic) hang, this struggle to embody can be sensed in an extraordinary formal tension. Closely modulated, elaborately mixed colors are laid on in many thin skins, remaining close to the bone. Darkly radiant, these paintings are never sumptuous. Chunn's strict restraint of means and tight structuring wrap the conflicts that are inherent in her subject matter and her compositions into a dynamic deadlock. The dichotomy declared in a title like *Haiti/Dominican Republic: Terror in Paradise* materializes when Chunn joins two separate canvases to paint the island whose two nations pull apart in opposite directions. Chains and outlines hold the form while muzzling and binding its parts. Chunn's visual language is active and ambivalent, always pondering the uneasy relationships between body/image, social environment, and collective identity.