

Nancy Chunn

Ronald Feldman Gallery, NYC
May 1989

NANCY CHUNN RECENTLY declared to a convocation of feminists that she once had to be restrained from putting her husband's name on her canvasses because so many of the ideas were his ["Beyond Survival" panel, this issue] — hardly what the audience of faithful had come to hear. Chunn's recent "political" paintings, in so far as they are political, depart from the usual tone of that genre as well. The preachment we have come to expect of "political" art is, "you are a fascist, or an accomplice, or at least you go shopping and I am the moral being sent to scold you." (The fact that the audience is almost certain to consist of the already-converted seems not to lessen the artist's satisfaction.) Chunn's stance is more like the Sieneese painter of a pietà: in awe, pain and grief, even a sinner can perceive great beauty.

Where a stylistic reference is apparent for the work, however, it is not 14th century Italian, but Oriental (although the artist herself is not Oriental, despite the suggestion of her name). For these paintings, Chunn more or less literally enlarged black and white outline maps of various foreign states, filling in spaces and background with medium thick impasto of dark, close-valued matt colors — muted maroons, blues, taupes, blacks. Over parts of painted map and/or background, shiny black lacquer-like painted "chain" motifs are superimposed.

The description sounds as unpromising as Chunn's declaration about her husband's influence. In fact the works radiate an elegaic beauty and meaning. The emotion of abstract art, if any, is often conveyed by a prior announcement telling us what we are going to feel. Chunn shows her beautiful distant places, Kurdistan, for instance, or Korea, literally in chains: the feeling is integral to the image. Clearly "representational," the maps are at the same time an abstraction that has been additionally abstracted during painting. The tension in this three-way balancing act heightens the aesthetic kick of the art. It also broadens the artist's position. Chunn is agonized and "spiritual" all right, but her work conveys subtleties and complexities enough to distance it enough so that we and it can breathe.

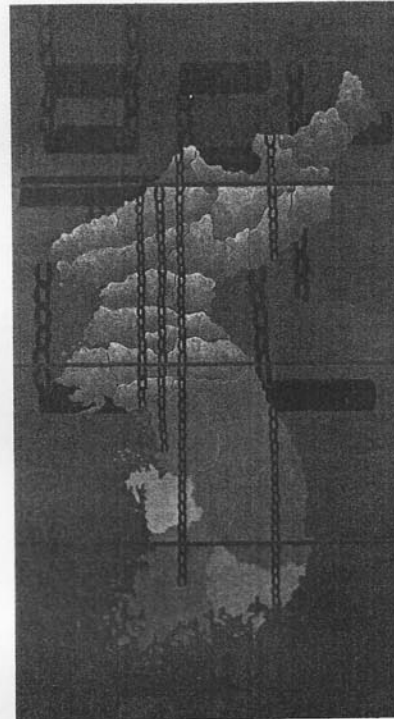
— Judy Seigel

Women Artists News

14 nos. 1 & 2

(Spring/Summer 1989): 47-48

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Nancy Chunn, "Korea, Divide and Rule," 1988