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FINE ARTS

For some time now, one of the more tiresome tics of general-readership art writing has been the accusatory repetition of the word "didactic"—a dismissive code, both smug and defensive, meant to justify the writer's squeamishness in the face of artworks with discomfiting social content. Unfortunately, since politically oriented art is as subject as any other to rhetorical flaws, there has been plenty of drab and gauche work around with which to tar the rest of what, over the last two decades, has actually been a vital aesthetic current. But lately a number of artists, particularly those old enough to have observed or rather endured from the inside this country's punitive recent reaction to socially probing art, have been figuring out ways to pursue their public concerns while also creating a visual sumptuousness to outmaneuver the labels used against them. I don't know whether this was a deliberate goal of Nancy Chunn's in "Front Pages 1996," but certainly the show was in every way true to her history as a political artist while also being one of the more spectacular gallery sights of this season.

Every day last year, Chunn took over the front page of *The New York Times*. In a process that looks spontaneous but must have involved both foresight and considerable concentration, she covered the news with replies to it—with images and verbal quips rubber-stamped and drawn in pastel directly over the newsprint. The resulting 366 pages (1996 was a leap year) were hung abutting each other in large grids grouped by month. Chunn's images could be as simple as, say, a black frame around the photograph of Barbara Jordan published on her death, or stamps of smiley faces applied to stories about politicians. They could also be more ambitious, particularly as the year went by and Chunn both hit a rhythm and raised the stakes. The most striking passages dealt with the destruction of TWA Flight 800: Chunn filled the whole text and picture space of every article on that subject (which took up a lot of column inches) with a blue field, across which passed little angels. As you watched, these blue geometries suddenly almost monopolized the *Times*' front page, then dwindled, then started disappearing and recurring, flickering on and off, charting both the importance of this event in public consciousness and



Nancy Chunn, July 30, 1996, 1996,  
ink and pastel on newspaper, 21 1/2 x 13 1/2".

the unresolved limbo in which it still remains.

Probably everyone who reads the *Times* talks back to it to some extent, in a stream of inner muttering about both the events recorded in the paper and the paper itself. "Front Pages 1996," 1996, translates this constant comment into visual terms. True, many of the comments are verbal ("HOLD YOUR NOSE AND VOTE," writes Chunn on Bill Clinton's reelection plans), but one is looking at a kind of rich pattern, the black and white newsprint forming a ground on which colors and motifs arrange themselves according to a scheme that seems fluid but not accidental, responding as it does to both the *Times* editors' space and placement decisions and Chunn's own aesthetic and moral urges. Properly postmodern, the work is a grab bag of imagery, from comic strips to Renaissance *putti*, from signage to Ed Paschke-esque chromatic games. It is also ceaselessly inventive, as when, bubble-like, the glass balls on the Christmas tree that fills the December 25 page frame some of the faces in that day's photos—Yasser Arafat and Benjamin Netanyahu. And oddly enough, the work has a sociopolitical version of the classic formalist push-pull, as the eye is dragged back and forth between foreground and background, the *Times* and Chunn's additions to it, in a constant, absorbing tension and interplay. Meanwhile, the work as a whole has the effect of a Joycean stream of consciousness: making your way through its temporal flow is like being inside a mind as it copes with quotidian public life. Dense and detailed, the work is provocative, gorgeous, and as full of incident as—well, as the daily news.

—David Frankel