

Timely comment

All the news that fits,
artist Nancy Chunn embellishes

WASHINGTON—It may be the front page of The New York Times, but is it "art?"

Yes, of course it is—at least after Nancy Chunn gets through with it.

Chunn is a longtime New York artist of the downtown persuasion, frequently exhibited in SoHo Galleries and the like (and sometimes in Chicago), as well as a lady with a close personal relationship with her daily newspaper.

"I always talk back to it," she told me on a recent visit here. "Sometimes it makes me so mad. One day my significant other suggested I talk back to it with art, and so I did."

Using pastel as a medium, she began attacking and embellishing the stories and pictures on Times' front pages with comments, drawings, caricature and devilishly clever coloration.

For example, any actual woman who actually appears in an actual front page picture in the Times she automatically colors pink.

"I do that," she said, "so that when you look at a month's front pages, you can see how infrequently women actually appear."

Sometimes she'll merely letter over a story with stark, official commentary: a Howard Bealesque "We're Not Going to Take It Anymore" over a story about government budget cuts, or a "Don't Let Them Croak" next to a photo of a frog and a story about relaxation of environmental protection controls.

Other times she's more elaborate. A story on the flaws of managed health care she decorated with rows of little blue crosses and a drawing of a pulled electric wall plug.

At still other times, she's downright Hogarthian. Confronted with a front page picture of two idiotically beaming corporate CEO types, and the headline, "Celebrating a Telecommunications Marriage," she decorated the picture with lots of lovely white wedding bells and ribbons and stuck bouquets of white roses into each CEO's hands. Over all this she drew, "SAME SEX MARRIAGE."

I should hasten to note that I

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am no expert on art. There are days when I couldn't tell a Fauvist Pre-Raphaelite Expressionist from a Baroque Cubist Minimalist. My knowledge of art is so small it could fit into the brain of a newt or flea, or a congressman. Actually, my artistic knowledge is so tiny it could fit into the brain of an art critic—a life form about as relevant to the general run of humanity as Arctic Ocean tube worms.

But, like Siskel and Ebert with their thumbs up and thumbs down, I know what I like—and don't.

I don't like the "art" of Ellsworth Kelly, especially his "White Square"—a painted white square with a frame around it—and "Black Square"—a painted black square with a frame around it—as profound as the critics think they might be.

I don't like the "art" of Emille Benes Brzezinski and her "Apotheosis, a Reconstructed Forest"—varnished sections of tree trunk set out oddly about museum floors—except, of course, as a place to sit.

I don't like the "art" of Jenny Holzer, which is nothing more than aphorisms of monumental banality and incomprehensibility spelled out on surfaces and objects, though Holzer was selected to represent the United States in prestigious international competitions.

But I do like Chunn. There may be a little of Holzer in some of Chunn's antic declarations and scrawlings, but, coupled with newspaper articles as they are, they make sense. They are a meaningful whole.

And, they are art.

Consider her artistic reinterpretation of one Times front page bearing a photo of Vice President Al Gore as his inexpressive, consummately hesitant self, and one of those dull, dreary, endless analysis stories about his political ambitions.

Artist Chunn changed it all into art by decorating that area of that particular front page with fleecy, wistful little clouds, each support-



One of Nancy Chunn's front pages of The New York Times, which go for \$2,500 each.

ing a miniature U.S. Capitol, and voila! She transformed those three small columns of political sludge into what could have been a Mantegna or Bellini Renaissance painting—with a theme perhaps of godlike ennui.

The critics haven't fully weighed in as yet, but museums apparently appreciate Chunn's art as art. She's transformed an entire year's worth of New York Times' front pages into art—1996, a leap year with 366 front pages—and they're on display as a single exhibit at Washington's excruciatingly prestigious Corcoran Gallery of Art through March 3.

Her New York gallery is selling such pages (worth only a buck without her embellishments) for \$2,500 each and more (and she turns out one a day!).

In fact, the New York Times itself bought an entire month of them and had them installed on its newsroom wall.

I might commend the example to newspaper editors whose circulation figures are descending like Steve Fossett's round-the-world balloons. When you look at the dull, dreary news sludge that daily pervades so much of the space—"Clinton-Dole Fight on Health Bill Is Preview of Campaign to Come," "Eritrea: African Success Story Being Written," "Concern is Voiced Over the Quality of Economic Data"—Chunn's scrawls, colorings, cartoons and pungent exclamations are the only interesting thing about those pages.