

EXHIBITION

Art and Language

By Chris Gilbert

"Nancy Chunn: Front Pages 1996"
At the Corcoran Gallery of Art to March 1

A more appropriate economy of means informs the work of Nancy Chunn. Two flights up at the Corcoran is the much less affected and avowed *gabbing* with pictures of her "Front Pages." For this project, the artist doodled over *New York Times* covers throughout the 366 days of 1996. In preparing for the work, Chunn wisely armed herself with interventionist tools that are not strictly textual: Handmade rubber stamps and opaque watercolors are superimposed on the news stories to create an understated graffiti or commentary on the daily round of events. Thus, upstairs at the gallery one finds economy of means, a willingness to improvise, and dynamism; downstairs, it is all static concept and pretentious program.

In reading Chunn's account of how she made her work, we realize how much her ideas evolved in the process of making the art. One suspects she employs something of a naive voice for her statements, yet she claims to have, in effect, surfed the months, discovering themes along the way. In January, she found "the Big Snowstorm," in February "the beginning of the election campaign," in March "a large series on downsizing," and so on.

And pretentious (or heady) it is not. Almost any overblown and trite theme one can construct—e.g., that she is making her art against a landscape of information or that she is coping with "information overload"—is belied by the fact that Chunn merely extrapolates an activity that every literate adult has taken up in moments of breakfast-table atavism.

A multiplicity of themes, an absence of any one political message, and a virtual eschewing of low humor keep this project bobblingly afloat and full of surprises. In her present incarnation, Chunn remains obviously, if rather tamely, liberal, but that is not so much a political position in America as a willingness to think about politics. Only a few times does she emerge to make a statement out of an entire page. A rightly aggressive "IT'S WORLD AIDS DAY STUPID" and the familiar red ribbon cover Dec. 1. Yet she also makes "all-over" pages for Clinton's re-election and for Christmas Day.

A final and mysterious plus comes in the form of a meaningful connection with art history. Just as in Sol LeWitt's drawings, obeying the program yields a mysteriously beautiful, almost inhuman object; Chunn's self-imposed page-a-day plan and calendarlike arrangement work to cover the walls with large compositions that are all the more striking for their being, in part, unforeseen. In fact, the absence of hand and the by-the-numbers layout create structures that are both alien and commanding. These compositions are somewhat sublime, as if the stuff of the news and the gaping chasms and horrid peaks of nature were not, in the end, very distant relations. **CP**



Chunn's August 1, 1996, 1996, right