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Nancy Chunn: Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear' at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum

Nancy Chunn, Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear, Scene II: The Bathroom, 2004-05. © Nancy Chunn. Photography by Bill Orcutt. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

PROVIDENCE, RI.- Inspired by the fear and panic engendered by the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design presents Nancy Chunn: Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear, a series of paintings that represents the media sensationalism infecting our current political and cultural landscape, feeding our anxieties and distracting us from dealing with real dangers.

“Nancy Chunn’s very recognizable and humorous imagery from the childhood fable Chicken Little was created as commentary on the events of 9/11, but continues to resonate through current events,” says Interim Museum Director Ann Woolsey.

Chunn’s allegorical narrative features 339 cartoon-like paintings that reimagine the folk fable of Chicken Little. Chunn portrays Chicken Little’s exaggerated fears, (“The sky is falling!”), in a graphic style—adapting found clip art images to represent a Kafkaesque world in which danger seems to lurk around every corner. Mapped out in 2004 as a 10-year project, her 11-scene cycle—six of which are on view at the RISD Museum of Art—takes on such contemporary issues as environmental disasters, road rage, healthcare, poverty, and crime, and shows how coverage by print and broadcast media exacerbate our fears. Despite the seriousness of her concerns, Chunn’s cultural critique is infused with a remarkable sense of humor and visual invention.

“A self-proclaimed ‘news junkie,’ Chunn’s reworking of the Chicken Little fable makes us keenly aware of the foibles of our own time,” says Judith Tannenbaum, Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art. “Infusing visual invention with great wit, she enables us to gain new insights about what makes our society tick, for better or worse—from everyday domestic incidents to the grand political themes of the day.”

Chunn’s previous works explore historical and current geopolitical scenes on well-researched topics, inventing a variety of new pictorial vocabularies that provide a relationship between each subject and its presentation. For her version of Chicken Little, which is based on found images from different decades, Chunn appropriates imagery generated by the culture she is critiquing. The format of dozens of small canvases mimics the frame-by-frame channeling of the 24-hour news cycles.

Each scene is comprised of numerous canvases in different sizes, grouped on top of a colorful amoeba shape painted directly on the wall. The scenes on view in the Museum’s Lower Farago Gallery are The Bathroom (Scene II), with its products and accidents; The Bedroom (Scene IV), with the booby traps of the contemporary home; The Road (Scene VI), with its portrayal of road rage; The ER (Scene VII) and all its chaos; The Main Hospital (VIII), where, instead of safety, Chicken Little finds new fears related to the uncertainties of healthcare and medical research; and Poortown (Scene X), a poverty-stricken mirror of middle America’s worst fears.

Nancy Chunn
Nancy Chunn was born in Los Angeles in 1941 and received her BFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 1969. She moved to New York in the late 1970s. Chunn received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009, An Anonymous Was a Woman Award in 2005, and National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in 1985 and 1995. She has been represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts since 1985.