

'The sky is falling': Exhibit drops laughs, fear on museum-goers

Kah Yangni

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Nancy Chunn's exhibit "Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear" intertwines a classic tale with the events of Sept. 11.

The idea behind the Rhode Island School of Design Museum's latest exhibit, "Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear," began with the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. The artist, Nancy Chunn, was living in New York City at the time and, like the rest of the country, was struck by the event. She was also impacted by the neurotic media coverage in the weeks and months that followed — images of billowing smoke where the towers had been, and

bodies falling through the air.

Three years later, she began painting "Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear." Chunn took the classic story of Chicken Little — a hen who believes the sky is falling when something falls on her head — and uses it to tell the story of our modern culture of fear. The "Chicken Little" series is a narrative, following Chicken Little through 11 different scenes, including the walk from her bathroom, a harrowing road trip and a short stint in jail, focusing on a specific type of cultural fear related to each of these locations. Each scene is split into dozens of paintings that unite to create one location in Chicken Little's journey.

Chunn populates the paintings with a cast of interesting, appropriated characters and visual clichés — the Monopoly Man wielding a pitchfork and rolling a dice against the backdrop of the Goldman Sachs building, a grim reaper driving an oil truck with "DIE!" on the license plate and a smiling blonde woman in a bomb-covered wheelchair. It is Chunn's visual invention — the sheer number of ways that she is able to convey our media's apocalyptic thinking — that makes the exhibit both accessible and smart.

But the show is also artistically beautiful, blending the care of a fine arts effort with an illustrator's humor. Chunn takes trademark characters and, through her use of color and composition, successfully balances each scene, giving the viewer both a sense of the overwhelming nature of fear culture while retaining control of her medium as art. Pop blues, salmon pinks and moody purples glue the scenes together, allowing Chunn to convey both diversity and unity.

Chunn's use of the cartoon is interesting instead of cheap, each style responding to the specific kind of character she depicts. A self-proclaimed "content artist," she created this show's specific style by compiling clip art and stock photos. Chunn tackles issues of representation, challenging the apparent simplicity of the cartoon image.

"Cartoons can be quite damaging and sick," Chunn said. "There's a fractured sense where we're laughing and screaming at the same time."

The individual paintings are not organized beyond their classification in a specific scene. During her Nov. 17 Artist Talk, Chuan said that the organization of the paintings mostly reflected composition and color concerns. There is no order — each individual painting is meant to be read as a sound bite. And like sound bites, each painting melds with the next to contribute to a general sense of panic, though each painting on its own appears shallow. When the media crushes theories of our world's problems into hundreds of 10 second snippets, we are left with an interesting dual problem. We are incapacitated by both the spread of existing problems and our lack of real, actionable knowledge about any one of them. We know both too much and not enough.

Chunn said she hoped the show would make students giggle and laugh, and then call their congressmen. Her point seems to be that the cause for fear does exist. The idea, though, is to get beyond our fear enough to take action. "It's a weird world out there, kiddo," she said.

"Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear" will be on display at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum through April 15, 2012.