

NANCY CHUNN: IN HER OWN VOICE



With the intent to provide an overview of the evolution of her work, Nancy Chunn spoke about her current exhibition at the Feldman Gallery.

Over twenty years ago, I started to think of a topsy-turvy world, somewhat inspired by the thinking from the medieval period in which surfs became kings and kings became surfs, and decided to deal with animals and have them nibble on humans as opposed to the other way around. All of the paintings from this period depict the human body with an animal: the cheetah with a human rib, the bat with a hand, and a vulture with a leg. I went to the Strand bookstore to find images to combine to form the animals: the head of the cheetah comes from one image, its position from another. Misfiled within the animal section was an old atlas that used only five or six colors, the same ones we looked at as kids. I had always wondered why Brazil was yellow. Did that mean something? Then I thought that countries are also predators, and I knew my next direction.

Predator
Series
(Animals)
1982

First I worked with continents. I combined maps, using their colors from the 60s, with farm machinery: for Africa an agricultural tool that runs through the earth to prepare it; for the Middle East, an auger that makes holes for fence posts, and has associations to drilling oil. I had in mind both construction and deconstruction. Farm machinery is American made, sold all over the world, and something that we make very well. I actually was getting a publication called *Equipment Guide News*; embedded within was a card that one could check off to get more information about a particular machine, which I would do. There was also a machine of the month, with a double spread and in color. It was fabulous.

Then I selected individual countries. *Kampuchea* is based on a tracing of the map of Cambodia, sliced like slabs of bacon, with finger wheel rakes. They are very beautiful, like pinwheels, and their delicacy reminded me of the hats that Southeast Asians wear. Other countries became groupings of meat hanging from butchers' hooks. I had been a vegetarian for years. Most people watch the news during dinner. Perfect: watching all the shit going down.

Mapped
Countries
in Distress
1984 – 1989

A series of divided countries, *Germany/Korea/Ireland/Vietnam*, included an implement that breaks up rocks for planting. The way I painted the countries was influenced by the rock paintings of Magritte whose work I love, his trompe l'oeil. *Lebanon* is one of my favorites with the marvelous rock-saws with bits that look like dog weenies or lipsticks.

Then I got hung up with chains, painted in high gloss and combined with maps and cultural references of individual countries, which involved a lot of reading and note taking. The first, with one of my best titles, was *Afghanistan: "A Whole Nation is Dying: People Should Know."* – *Mohham Eshaq*. Well, they know now.

Famine was painted after the famine of 1984/85. To suggest the skull-like form of the shape of the map of Africa,

I used the Peters mapping system, which distorts shape but replicates size, rather than the more commonly used Mercator system, which does the opposite. The chains in *Korea: Divide and Rule* spell out the words "divide" in Korean characters. *Iran/Iraq: Bangs and Whispers* is based on a Persian miniature; the chains become Islamic patterns. Most of my decisions are based on content, not form, but in choosing a color for a section in *Philippines: Guns, Goons and Gold*, the content and form came together. The color I wanted in the area where a particular island was located matched its association with Islam.

Kurdistan is a country that doesn't exist except in the hearts and minds of the Kurds. Occupying Iran, Iraq, Russia, Syria, and Turkey, the Kurds are hated by all of these countries and vice versa. I used symbols of weaving and bones because the Kurds are always getting sold out. We're still selling them out as they are not at the table, and they were our only friends in that whole bloody country (Iraq).

In 1989, I began my series of China. I wanted to explore one country in depth; I had always been fascinated by China (the starving children etc.), and it was the time of the Tiananmen Square repression. I thought instinctively that China's history would reveal that this was nothing new: "Business as Usual." I decided to "go there" and began to read extensively about China. As the books dealt with the country, dynasty by dynasty, I organized the series in the same way.

The China
Series
1990 – 1995

I wanted to devise a system that would discuss the politics, economics, religion, art, culture, and madness – wars, that kind of thing, and went back to my working method in the Predator Series when I combined images. I decided to rearrange existing images from Chinese drawings that retell the story of the times. I tell my students this: You'd be surprised how consistent your work is although it looks very different.

With the Ming Dynasty, my idea was to make the painting look like the proverbial Ming vase – the shiny surface, the blue and white color; it's a ceramic piece. Tracing the history of the dynasty, it is to be read chronologically from right to left, from light to darkness, from a positive beginning to a conclusion of war and craziness, which is how all of the dynasties end. The first panel retells the exploration of Zheng He, a eunuch and incredible maritime genius, who has recently been credited with discovering America. The second panel depicts an agricultural society and wars. The third panel is about manufacturing, wars with Japan, trade with the West, businessmen and erotica – the first time I used sex in a painting, which I always thought was cheap and was to be avoided like the plague. There are some nasty things revealed. The last panel is all war: huge battles between the Ming and the Mongolians from the North, which led to the Ching Dynasty, which I have yet to do.

These paintings were made before I began to work with the computer. I traced images and laboriously reduced them on the Xerox machine, working in millimeters. With surgical scissors, I cut the small images (like paper dolls) and, with an Exacto knife, I rearranged the tiny images on a piece of paper which were then enlarged on the Xerox machine and finally projected to get the proper registration for painting. I used this method later for *News Stories* in 2000. I was told this could be done with the computer, but this was not my choice. The labor was great and insane, but I seemed to enjoy doing it.

Working for two and one half years on the Ming Dynasty, I was burnt out. I taught a class at the School of Visual Arts called *Paintings and Content*. I encouraged the students to do work that had a personal interest. "If you don't care about fruit, why make a still life? Find out your obsession. Art is not separate from what you are." Then I thought that I should turn to my own country. Maybe my work should "sound" more like me. Since I chitchat and talk like a goddamn magpie, I should use my voice. In essence I took my own class. How do I spend my time? I am a political junkie, read constantly about world news, and watch TV almost 24/7. I'm always bitching as I read the newspaper, like everybody else. I began to think about the physicality of putting words on top of the articles by using rubber stamps, similar to USA approved stamps on meat. I had been working with small images in the China series; maybe I could make up images that would be appropriate and general such as explosions, dead bodies, happy faces, bombs, donkeys, and elephants. The first rubber stamp that I made, and this is true, was MADNESS. I thought, this is it. It all comes down to madness and, as they say, the rest is history.

Front Pages
1996

The project turned into *Front Pages*, where I added commentary on every front page of *The New York Times* for the year of 1996, a widely successful project that was well received by the press and the public. This was the year before *The Times* started using color. For this current exhibition, I decided to include the month of September because many of the stories were related to our time: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Kurds, and my comments to Clinton's air strikes: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

I didn't want to become "The Poster Girl of *The New York Times*," so it was time to do something new. I liked the stamps and bright color, but decided to return to painting and to use acrylic for the first time. Based on the four seasons of one year, I picked the most interesting news stories and used many of the images that I had previously used on the newspapers. The stories included Columbine, Kosovo, the USA women's soccer team, the death of Princess Di, and the Clinton scandals. The last painting, *Land of the Stupid*, covered the 2000 election and the Supreme Court decision, and, since it had to be completed quickly for an exhibition, marks the first time I used the computer.

My exhibition, *News Stories*, opened one month after 9/11. Images reproduced on the announcement included burning buildings, and I was asked: "How did you know?" But, of course, these images had nothing to do with 9/11 but were from the Turkish earthquake. The show opened the first day of the Anthrax scare.

New Stories
1999 – 2001

For my next series, I wanted to come up with a new system that would vary the composition, eliminate the bright color, and continue my interest in stamps and talking about our times. This led to the simplified grid, painted white. While working on 9/11, which I was compelled to do, I made some smaller works based on the Catholic Church, *Sin of our Fathers*, and the Enron corruption, *Come on Get Happy*.

9/11
2002 – 2004

9/11 is to be read from left to right across both towers. The first square is blue because it was a beautiful day. Then you see the map, airplanes, bang, bang, bang, the rescue firemen, Afghanistan, coping methods like sundaes and drugs, the War on Terror, Bin

Laden, the Patriot Act, grenades, airline security, jailing and deportation of Arabs (while the war in Afghanistan goes on), then the culture of fear. There is no reference to Iraq. Iraq has nothing to do with 9/11. The last two lines are my commentary: Where is justice going? This thing (mess) is never going to end.

As natural as B follows A, so *Chicken Little* follows 9/11. Towards the last part of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, Professor Barry Glassner talks about his book *A Culture of Fear*, which has been going on for a long time, including fear of minorities and welfare mothers. This is brilliant, I thought. I'm going to do *Chicken Little*, from idiocy and stupidity to poignancy. I imagined 10 different scenes, each describing all of the possible dangers in that place. The first scene, *In the Garden*, will be included in the exhibition and depicts such dangers as spiders, bees, poison ivy, chain saws, sunburn, mudslides, tornados, and earthquakes. With a reference to Foxy-Loxy, *Chicken Little* finds her destiny.

Chicken
Little
& The
Culture of
Fear
2004 –

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Excerpted by Peggy Jarrell Kaplan
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