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## History Painting for the Fleeting News-Hungry Masses

From the banal to the harrowing, Nancy Chunn's imagination throttles the news

By CARRIE MOYER



*Alan Zindman/Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York*  
Nancy Chunn's "Africa," (1983) depicts the continent nearly strangled by an agricultural device.

Nancy Chunn is best known for "Front Pages," a serial work in which the artist added commentary and glyphs to every front page *The New York Times* published in 1996. Worked directly onto newsprint, corny drawings and rubber-stamped rants record the artist's daily reactions to "all the news that's fit to print" and the immediacy and sheer accumulation of words and images coalesced into a vivid, snarky diatribe of a self-described "political junkie."

Chunn's current exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery presents a sampling from the various bodies of work produced since 1982 and provides a larger context for "Front Pages." Although the formal attributes and facture of the paintings shift from series to series, the artist's outraged fascination with geopolitics, consumerism and the absurdity of contemporary mainstream culture remains consistent throughout.

In the "Predator Series" from 1982, storybook tableaux feature animals coolly enacting our worst human instincts. The earliest works here, "Cheetah," "Vulture" and "Bat," evidence a sardonic sense of humor, graphic composition and a matter-of-fact line, making for deceptively simple yet potent paintings.

In "Africa" (from the "Countries in Crisis" series), a map of the continent is raked over with what looks to be some sort of medieval torture device. (The press release identifies it as agricultural machinery.) Chalky white lines articulate the shapes of each country as if on a blackboard and are filled in with the candy colors of cheap maps. The dry, scumbled surface of the paintings, deadpan mien and disquieting juxtaposition of recognizable and abstract imagery place Chunn in the good company of Leon Golub, the elder statesman of American political painting.

By the late 1990s, Chunn started incorporating the computer into her art-making process and, what began as a mediated stream of iconography in "Front Pages," turned into a deluge by the time she painted "Land of the Stupid" in 2001. Her stringent design sense gives way to an orchestrated overload of generic signage and text, bound together by the pop colors of advertising. Painted in response to the botched 2000 presidential election, this is a sprawling, ironic narrative that has more to do with the slick surfaces of supermarket circulars than the physicality of traditional easel painting.

Chunn's personalized deployment of a computer-generated sign system reveals an interest in both the proliferation and the presumed "universality" of such icons and is reminiscent of younger artists such as Deborah Grant. Apparently resistant to the flip-flopping trends of the art world, Nancy Chunn is an artist who has managed to stay "on message" no matter what. Maybe she should run for president.