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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

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A detail from Nancy Chunn's "Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear Scene X: Poortown" (2010-11). Credit Nancy Chunn and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

NANCY CHUNN

Through Jan. 28. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, Manhattan; 212-226-3232, feldmangallery.com.

Michelangelo had the grand expanse of the Sistine Chapel ceiling to work with and the story of life from Day 1 to Doomsday to tell. It took him four years to do the job. Nancy Chunn has 11 walls of the Ronald Feldman gallery for the display of what is basically no less ambitious a project, a site-specific, 500-panel painting about the social, economic and psychological hazards of life in contemporary America.

Ms. Chunn began the project, titled "[Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear](#)," in 2003 when post-9/11 apocalyptic thinking was on the rise. She modeled her narrative on the

children's tale of Chicken Little, who, when hit on the head by a falling acorn, concluded the sky was falling, and dashed off to spread the news, attracting a posse of panicked friends (Turkey-Lurkey, Ducky-Daddles, etc.) as she went. In Ms. Chunn's telling, the acorn is replaced by a falling television set, and Chicken Little's flight takes her through a world as reported, and shaped by, the 24/7 news cycle: polluted landscapes, impoverished cities, failing hospitals, paranoid politicians. The original fairy tale concludes, in some editions, with Chicken Little falling into the clutches of Foxy-Woxy. In the Chunn version, she ends up being arrested on a bogus charge (for removing a mattress tag) and jailed, among a crowd of celebrity no-goodniks, in the prison called Fox News.

Every character she's trapped with — from Clarence Thomas to Ann Coulter, and Ronald McDonald to Donald J. Trump — is identified by name, occupation and infamy in free printed exhibition guides. Produced, like the paintings, in a crisp Pop style and annotated with mordant commentary, the guides amount to a take-away show on their own and are well worth spending time with. The Sistine ceiling is about salvation; Ms. Chunn's rich, funny, furious project is about her growing desperation, and she's by no means finished with it yet.

HOLLAND COTTER

Chicken Little as a 9/11 metaphor

Painter Chunn captures fear with some humor

By Cate McQuaid



RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK

Panel details from Nancy Chunn's "Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear" at the Museum of Art at Rhode Island School of Design.

PROVIDENCE - Painter Nancy Chunn is a news junkie who has admitted to ranting at her television set. Her comic, sprawling, poppy, and dire installation of paintings at the Museum of Art at Rhode Island School of Design, "Chicken Little and the Culture of Fear," springs from her post-Sept. 11 examination of the aura of panic that dominated the last decade.

This is a big series of paintings, and it's not even finished yet. Chunn has a history of making ambitious series. Every day in 1996, she painted visual commentary over the front page of The New York Times. She's been working on "Chicken Little" since 2004, and anticipates finishing it in 2014. It will comprise 11 multi-panel scenes, each a chapter in the chaotic, unfolding story of Chicken Little. Six are on view here.



RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, NEW YORK
Detail from Chunn's "Chicken Little" panels.

Everyone knows Chicken Little is a nervous Nellie, set off by an acorn or a pebble hitting her in the noggin, and running frantically about telling all her friends that the sky is falling. In Chunn's final chapter, which she has not yet made but has described, the jittery protagonist will land a job as an anchor at Fox News, elevating her fear mongering to terrific heights.

Chunn paints Chicken Little, and her cronies Turkey Lurkey, Loosey Goosey, and the rest, crisply in flat, bright colors, the way they might appear in a cartoon or comic book. And, as in a comic book, certain panels telescope in on details, while others give us wide, bustling shots.

The experience of viewing this immersive installation is nothing like reading a book. There are no less than 38 panels in a given chapter, and some number in the 60s. Each chapter is mounted against a bubble of color painted on the wall, which gives order to the overarching narrative. But the individual panels, while arrayed with a clear spatial sense of the story, read almost kaleidoscopically all over that bubble, bouncing the eye this way and that in a manner that echoes Chicken Little's own darting, panicked glances.



THE MODERN INSTITUTE/TOBY WEBSTER LTD
"Procession," from Jeremy Deller's "Manchester Tracks."

Our querulous heroine goes from the garden, where a falling television (one of Chunn's iconic symbols) knocks her on the head, to a bathroom filled with hazards - electrical devices, puddles, tumbling flower pots, an alligator in the toilet - and on to the kitchen, with all its terrors, and the bedroom. There, in a disarray, she tugs the label off her mattress and is promptly arrested and carted off to Rikers Island.

Chunn presents her epic tale with such a light touch we cannot help but laugh, even as the unnerving details accumulate. Her point is needle-sharp. From mattress labels to terrorism, fear breeds on itself, and we live in a society that broadcasts and preys on it. Laughter may be the only antidote.

British artist Jeremy Deller takes a more heartening view of humanity. He is fascinated with the way history courses through society. Deller's show in the RISD Museum's video gallery, "Manchester Tracks," celebrates the city of Manchester in northwest England. Deller, who was awarded the Turner Prize in 2004, has always taken the long view. His medium is not really video - video is just the best way to document what he does, which is to invite citizens to take part in large-scale rituals.

Deller is best known for his 2001 historical reenactment of a 1984 clash in South Yorkshire between picketing miners and riot police, "The Battle of Orgreave," which is not on view here. It had a cast of hundreds, both professional reenactors and ex-miners. Mike Figgis made a film of the event, which suggests it was healing for the community.

Manchester, an industrial age powerhouse, hit hard times in the 20th century. It experienced an artistic renaissance in the 1970s and '80s, producing several punk and post-punk bands, including Joy Division, New Order, Buzzcocks, the Smiths, and Happy Mondays.

Deller's diagrammatic "Shaun Ryder's Family Tree" lays out six generations of laborers who ultimately produced the lead singer of the Happy Mondays, as if all that sweat and toil culminated in Ryder's acid-toned portrait on the cover of the band's seminal album, "Bummed." It's not a stretch to think that heavy industry had something to do with spawning punk rock.

Deller's videos delight. For "Procession," the artist invited Mancunians to participate in a parade - "a way," he has said, "of showing the public itself." There's a swarthy marching band in kilts, with a swami's name prominently displayed on the bass drum. A float about french fries offers "The Adoration of the Chip." One banner reads "Unrepentant Smokers." Another quotes a Happy Mondays lyric: "You're rendering that scaffolding dangerous." Everybody appears to be having a grand time.

Part of the fun of "Procession" is that Deller also screens archival footage of previous such events, from 1914, 1961 (when cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin came to Manchester), and 1976. They are all very much alike, with details of costume, signage, and transportation changing. But a parade has always been a parade, as industry rises and falls, as the economy batters a community.

In another joyful video, "Steel Harmony, Bolton," Deller invites a steel band from Manchester to play "Transmission" by Joy Division and "Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've)" by Buzzcocks. The steel band swaddles in velvety, liquid percussion tunes associated with driving electric sounds and sometimes dark and desperate lyrics. As with "Procession," the thread is there through decades. This recapitulation of music from the 1970s honors it, and reclaims it for the present.