A worthless attack on Goya

The Rape of Creativity by Jake and Dinos Chapman

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Exhibition at Modern Art Oxford through June 8, 2003

We have made passing reference to Jake and Dinos Chapman before. As part of the febrile *BritArt* movement they have featured in such lurid and shallow shows as *Sensation* and *Apocalypse*. Their works have been shown as part of the re-launch of Tate Britain.

These "[b]ad boys of British art", according to the publicity for this latest show, "go all the way" (*The Sunday Times*). None of this, it must be said, is encouraging. Their latest show, though, requires comment. In some ways it highlights the crisis of perspective of a whole layer of artists. What also makes it worthy of comment is that it is filtered through their continuing fascination with the work of Goya.

The exhibition divides, broadly, into three groups. The title piece occupies a room to itself. A room of sketches and drawings focuses on two McDonald's-related pieces, *Last McSupper* and *Unholy Trinity*. Most publicity has been generated around the display *Insult to Injury*. This latter piece—the elaborate drawing of cartoon faces onto every one of the prints of Goya's *Disasters of War* series—lays bare the cultural crisis represented by the Chapman brothers, but its expression is to be found in the other pieces here.

The Rape of Creativity is a room-sized tableau. A dismembered corpse lies against a tree, a dog runs off with a severed hand. (There is more than a hint of Goya here, too. One of the Chapman brothers' earlier engagements with Goya's work saw them reconstruct with model soldiers the atrocities of the *Disasters of War* series, most notably the brutal *Great feat! With dead men!* that also features body parts arranged around a tree).

Some distance from the tree stands a run-down caravan surrounded by turds. Inside, in the squalor, a figure lies in bed listening to the radio. Pornography plasters the wall. The figure, cartoonishly bug-eyed, has an erection beneath the blanket.

This is a deeply pessimistic view of humanity. The squalor is one that is visible anywhere throughout the world of capitalism. What makes the Chapmans' vision so repugnant is that they uncritically bow down before this brutalisation of society. Everything in the caravan scene is recognisable, yet we learn nothing new about it. It has, for all the attempts to create the imagery of narrative, neither history nor future. It is as masturbatory as the image it portrays.

A great deal of skill and effort has gone into creating the tableau, yet the cartoon-like quality of the figure in the caravan thwarts any effort at gaining a deeper understanding of humanity. He can neither be sympathised with, nor despised. Whatever efforts have gone into the creation of the piece have been directed solely at creating a superficial shock impact.

This has a number of effects. Any attempts at discovering more within the work only reveal further layers of surface, not depth. The Chapmans themselves reject any criticism that seeks a deeper understanding either of a work or of its effect on its audience.

Jonathan Jones, interviewing them in the *Guardian* recently, was seduced by their glib opinions on criticism. Jones writes, "if we like a work of art we feel compelled to find depth, anger, moral fervour, spiritual truth—all the things the Chapmans claim to reject."

On the evidence here, that may well be the case. It is a cynical piece, which only encourages prostration before the accomplished fact.

Some of the reasons behind this can be discerned in the McDonald's pieces. *Last McSupper* is a bronze casting of a burger meal. *Unholy Trinity* shows Ronald McDonald crucified. Flanking him are the crucified Hamburglar and a Big Mac. There are a number of problems with this as imagery. In Christian mythology the figures surrounding the crucified Christ were thieves—the religious message being that they deserved it while Christ didn't, but were given the possibility of redemption by his sacrifice. Here all three figures are representative of the same global corporation and we are left with little but cheap ridicule.

McDonald's is the easiest of targets among anti-globalisation protesters. It has often been the target of those who have sought to promote their own protectionist national agenda (José Bové, for example). There is a sense of this use of the company in many of the sketches that accompany these works, where evil McDonald's-type clowns are covered in swastikas and commit violent atrocities. The Chapmans have used McDonald's imagery before, creating parodies of tribal masks. The masks were interpreted by some as an attack on globalisation: Jake Chapman countered by saying what they wanted was "to make McDonald's a religion".

Whether this was said in a feeble attempt at sarcasm or not, it points to their prostration before the might of the transnational companies and brands. They deify the Ronald McDonald who stalks their cartoons as an evil menace. When the Chapmans mock those who saw in their work an attack on globalisation, it is not from the standpoint of recognising the progressive developments that underlay this process but of bowing before the power of capitalist corporatism. There is no contradiction between their use of McDonald's imagery and the fact that their show is sponsored by Becks beer.

The last part of the show, *Insult to Injury*, continues their longstanding preoccupation with the work of Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828). Where previously they have childishly reconstructed his work with models, denuding it of content by reducing it to form alone, they have here taken to defacing the work itself.

Goya was essentially a product of the Enlightenment. He grew up in Spain, the most backward part of Europe, but great leaps in his work

can be seen when he came into contact with liberal critics of the Spanish monarchy, and later with the ideas of the French Revolution. The resurgence of the reaction in Spain produced in him a terrible physical crisis that left him temporarily deaf. His great series of prints *The Disasters of War*, begun in 1810, depicted the atrocities and carnage created during the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian peninsula in 1808. With the ultimate failure of the Napoleonic expedition, the Spanish monarchy was restored. The censorship resumed and Goya's public work decreased. (*The Disasters* itself was not published until 1863.)

What distinguishes *The Disasters of War* as a landmark piece of work is the unflinching honesty of its portrayal of the brutalities of the military campaign. Casual tortures are shown, the reduction of existence to a base and barbarous level, yet all with an essential human concern for the fate of the victims. It is not the point to argue whether Goya was or was not a supporter of this or that political camp: the Enlightenment created the conditions for him to create his work, and his artistic honesty allowed him to represent truthfully the human world he saw around him, in all its complexity. It is that complexity which prevented him from showing his work and it is a testament to his artistic greatness that its honesty continues to resonate today.

It is this that has made Goya the most quintessentially political artist, to whom other artists return to express the concerns of their time. Edouard Manet's great painting of the end of the Mexican regime installed by Napoleon III in 1863, *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867-68), takes the viewer straight back to Goya's representations of wartime atrocities. Pablo Picasso undertook a careful study of Goya's etchings and paintings during the preparation for his monumental work of the Spanish Civil War, *Guernica*, as well as modelling *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937) on *The Disasters of War*.

It is unsurprising, then, that a contemporary artist would look to Goya for inspiration in tackling the barbarism of our own age.

The Chapman brothers purchased a 1937 Spanish edition of the prints, which in itself is of some political significance as it was produced to highlight the barbarism of Spanish fascism. (It came with a frontispiece showing damage caused by fascist artillery to the Goya Foundation.) After some years' discussion, they set about drawing cartoon faces and puppy heads onto all the visible faces.

The exercise reeks of the actions of spoilt little rich boys exercising their worst philistine tendencies.

There are a number of ways of engaging with an artwork from an earlier period, and it has always been one of the ways in which artists have striven to take their art forward. Collage techniques, for example, are an extreme way of rearranging existing works into new forms (one thinks of the Dada and surrealist use of collage as a vital and vivid development of art). There is, then, nothing inherently wrong in taking such an approach to the prints.

The problem is that the Chapmans have so little to say. They have done this because it is something that *is not done—that is naughty*. The title of the *Guardian*'s favourable interview, "Look what we did", makes the childishness explicit.

The cartoon faces, whilst carefully executed (which I know makes me sound like a primary school teacher praising a child for skilful colouring-in), are grotesque in an abstract way utterly at odds with the concrete grotesqueness of Goya's prints. For Goya these are real people reduced to utter barbarism: for the Chapmans they are cartoon characters, whose barbarism is unavoidable and inherent.

Jake Chapman made clear their underlying hostility to Goya's vision of humanity, however brutalised, in a recent interview. He said "[Goya is] the artist who represents that kind of expressionistic struggle of the Enlightenment with the *ancien régime*, so it's kind of nice to kick its underbelly. Because he has a predilection for violence under the aegis of a moral framework. There's so much pleasure in his work."

This says more about Chapman than Goya. Whereas Goya struggles with the violence and barbarism of war, while still reflecting the great leap of the Enlightenment, the Chapman brothers seek only to show violence. Goya, the product of an age witnessing a fight for the idea of progress, is attacked for reflecting that striving. The "underbelly" that is being kicked is the possibility of progress overcoming barbarity, when all the Chapmans see is someone who revels in the depiction of brutality, pain and suffering. Goya is attacked for dealing with the violence around him whilst still working under the "aegis of a moral framework", but in truth what the Chapmans wish to dispense with is only the moral framework.

There is something stagnant in the work of the Chapmans. They have so little to say about their own world. Their evil cartoon faces wear swastikas and they paint pictures of Hitler as a clown. This wouldn't have been a particularly daring artistic statement during the period 1933-45 and today is positively hackneyed.

When Jake Chapman talks about George W. Bush and Tony Blair "talking about democracy ... as though it's not an ideology", he isn't striving to articulate some kind of progressive opposition.

He is expressing the demoralised outlook of a layer of the petty bourgeoisie whose embrace of a postmodernist contempt for ideology allows them to reject everything ... and do nothing.

However threatened and distressed Goya was by the reaction against the Enlightenment in Spain, however horrified by the carnage and barbarism he witnessed, one never feels that he stopped representing it artistically, as truthfully as he could. Artistic truth does not seem to be an aspiration for the Chapmans. If they must insist on measuring their meagre talents against the achievements of Goya, it is to be hoped that they begin to realise the futility of the task sooner rather than later.