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Exhibition Review

'Jake and Dinos Chapman: Come and See'

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THE CHAPMAN BROTHERS HAVE BEEN HAVING A LAUGH FOR TWENTY YEARS. They are the clowns of contemporary art, mischievously mocking the notion of causing offence, would-be progeny of the Marquis de Sade, ridiculing an art world that continues to endorse them. According to the conservative press, in general, the joke has been at our expense. These fraternal collaborators have always been 'getting away with it', producing *Viz* comic-style humour under the auspices of patrons who have more money than aesthetic or conceptual sense. Where is the artistic merit? Where is the skill, the craftsmanship? Why are they always trying to alarm us? Even *The Independent's* review of this exhibition claims that the Chapmans 'still have the power to shock' though to be shocked is to demote the weight of dark humour that pervades their work.¹ It also causes me to wonder whether the writer in question has ever seen the television news, or even the pages of their own newspaper, for that matter. Real, visceral shock is outside the gallery in our frenzied, aggressive world, not here in an uncanny arcade of fun.

As we become acquainted with the Chapmans' multi-media surreal debauchery, we might see that the amusement is mediated not through their success as artists 'getting away with it', but rather that their depictions of absurd and often belligerent worlds are in themselves humorous. Here, in a comprehensive exhibition, just shy of being a retrospective, they display a busy compilation of anti-consumerist messages, satires on art history, and their renowned penchant for the gruesome. The viewer is confronted by a bestial taxidermy of Norman Bates sensibilities where a fox mounts a rabbit and the rabbit mounts a smaller animal like rutting matryoshka dolls; adjacent to this are bronze sculptures of efficient *Little Death Machines* (2006-2008) where a hammer prepares to strike a brain, and most significantly, a series of vitrines containing thousands of dinky Nazis being tortured whilst, in the same landscape, an equally miniscule Ronald McDonald is nailed to a cross (in other scenes, McDonald himself turns executioner). In a small cinema a short film depicts the lives of Van Gogh, Pollock, and Warhol, with the artists played by liquid-filled marigolds that are inevitably splattered to death. Observing all of this, appearing in each room, (including the cinema where one has no choice but to sit next to one), there are life-sized shop-window mannequins of Ku Klux Klansmen, set in positions where they peruse the exhibits, or stare vacantly ahead like automatons, bored. The Klansmen have no reason to be remote amid this spectacle though. This is an entertaining exhibition, full of 'Hammer Horror' humour covering all media, including altered nineteenth-century oil paintings where the brothers have delicately added rotting flesh to the original portraits, thereby representing a series of disfigured souls that could be stored in the attic with Dorian Gray. No skill? Iconoclasm, sex, death, religion, art history, consumer culture: these are the recurrent themes of Jake and Dinos Chapman. Violence is omnipresent too, of course. The Chapmans see pathology everywhere.

Given that their oeuvre demonstrates a consistent pre-occupation with violence, one has to consider what message the Chapmans wish to communicate, seemingly by inculcation. Why are they fixated with disturbing, sadistic themes no matter the genre? Why do so many of us keep looking? Is it what Susan Sontag calls 'The pleasure of flinching'?² Or is it because an audience for puerile jokes will always exist and be eager for more? If we find the Chapmans' mannequins, films, vandalised paintings, or vitrines of toy soldiers to be amusing, then what do we learn about ourselves in the process? If we find these images to be entertaining – evidently, I do – then the real shock might emanate from this self-realisation; that torture can be a jovial topic, that models of the Ku Klux Klan belong in a gallery and can somehow be justified as being humorous. In defence of those who find it all a giggle, the devilish Chapmans' work is all in the detail. When you observe those tall white-hooded dummies and notice their rainbow coloured socks and open-toed sandals, it is difficult to suppress one's laughter, as the Chapmans have caused an otherwise threatening presence to be robbed of its nefarious connotations. The KKK is mocked by the simple adornment of socks, turned hippy by a surprising line in footwear.

The most violent of their works on display, *Sum of All Evil* (2012/2013), is equally laughable. Several glass tanks, raised to adult eye-level, teem with tiny models of decapitated bodies, accompanied by walking skeletons, copulating dinosaurs, crucifixions, and countless Nazis in various states of distress. Masses of figures create dioramas of carnage, an underworld completely devoid of logic and reason. If Hieronymus Bosch worked in the medium of two-inch plastic models.... The scene should be repellent, but again it is about detail,

meticulous in this case, and on closer inspection it is likely to cause nervous laughter. The Chapmans want us to lean in and inspect their work, particularly here where the infinitesimal touches are more important than the ants' nest of activity viewed as a whole. What could have been disturbing soon becomes comical as one picks out the finer points of the orgy. The male dinosaurs' tongues protrude and slobber as they fornicate; the people being crucified are duplicates of consumerist icon Ronald McDonald, and some figures happily water-ski as a woman is eaten by a shark. Meanwhile Hitler stands by watching the chaos, casually holding the strings to four balloons that would otherwise rise to the ceiling of the glass case were the Führer to lose his grip. The vitrines have writhing bodies that are surprisingly reminiscent of Giovanni Pisano's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1302-1310), his sculpted pulpit in Pisa Cathedral, and they could, as some have suggested, represent a twenty-first century Dante's Inferno. No craftsmanship? There are no humorous touches to be found in Tuscany though, whereas the Chapmans' apocalyptic vignettes are secular, sardonic and self-consciously juvenile. These nihilistic riots do, I confess, appeal to the child in me. If this were the 1970s my sister would ask for a doll's house whilst I would write a crayoned note to Santa kindly requesting one of these endlessly fascinating glass cabinets that are monumental in scale yet minutely detailed.

The cycle of bloodletting does have a more serious side. Whilst being derivative of their *Hell* (2000), which was aptly immolated in an arsonist's fire in 2004, the Chapmans' *Sum of All Evil* is more than a comical take on the worst excesses of the twentieth century and beyond. What is often missed is that the Nazis are the victims here, not the perpetrators. This is justice, then, Chapman style. According to Dinos, we should note that, 'The Nazis in this hell never die, they just get recycled and come back more damaged'.³ The Nazis are those upright skeletons, somnambulistically approaching a further round of agony. If the landscapes cause one to pity the miniature victims, one is sympathising, not just with a punctiliously decorated plastic figure, but a Nazi one at that. The chaotic scenes make an important temporal point too. In *Fucking Hell* (2008), a precursor to *Sum of All Evil*, the most important detail is a simple stray car tyre rolling along the ground, which is vital because, according to Jake Chapman: 'The magnitude of the atrocity occupies the blink of an eye - that for me is the essence of the piece.'⁴ Yes, all the horror we observe before us that could take an hour to cover the finer detail of... happens in a split second. The same applies to *Sum of all Evil*. Though the scene is energetic, it is freeze-framed. It is a transient moment. This is where we might relate the piece to the mayhem of the world outside the gallery. After all, globally, where violence is concerned, there is little respite. If *Sum of all Evil* has any shock value it might lie in the disturbing fact that if these horrific scenes were based on real events the field of corpses would still be much less terrifying than Treblinka, the Rwandan genocide or the Srebrenica massacre.

Come and See is a circus that encapsulates the clowns of contemporary art. Though the Chapmans have become, like most artists, prone to self-plagiarism, re-hashing familiar themes, subsequently in danger of paradoxically weakening their effect by repetition, they remain provocateurs in an often passive British art scene. But the disturbing nature of their work has been over-emphasized. There is nothing in their creative arsenal that could ever truly shock and repel, nothing that could equal the distress of seeing Buñuel and Dali's surrealist masterpiece *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) with its infamous eyeball-slicing scene. Instead they are middle-aged artists who cause this middle-aged reviewer to smile and occasionally laugh to himself too. That

violence can be funny is something to ponder, but I refute the idea that the Chapmans have been trying to shock us all of this time. Upon leaving the gallery I notice that bathetic character Ronald McDonald again. This time the Chapmans have him piloting a plane that heads toward the Manhattan skyline. The work is a large, brightly coloured carpet fixed to a wall. Its title? *The Axminster of Evil* (2008). Even the puns are amusing. Send in the clowns.

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Notes

- ¹ Adrian Hamilton, 'The Shocking Truth', *The Independent*, 1 December 2013, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/the-shocking-truth-why-jake-and-dinos-chapmans-tactics-are-wearing-thin-8976049.html>> [accessed 11 December 2013].
- ² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 19.
- ³ Will Self, 'The Sixth Reich' in *Jake and Dinos Chapman: The End of Fun*, ed. by Honey Luard (London: White Cube/FUEL, 2014), p. 12.
- ⁴ Self, 'The Sixth Reich', p. 13.