

JAKE + DINOS CHAPMAN THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND

GALERIE RUDOLFINUM
SLEPÝ VEDE SLEPÉHO
3/10 2013 — 5/1 2014

JAKE AND DINOS CHAPMAN

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Press release

Galerie Rudolfinum
3 Oct. 2013 – 5 Jan. 2014

Exhibition curator: Otto M. Urban

Galerie Rudolfinum presents an exhibition by leading British artists **Jake** and **Dinos Chapman** entitled *The Blind Leading the Blind*. The exhibition, which presents an overview of works created from the 1990s to the present day, is the largest-ever exhibition by these two artists in Central Europe. “The Prague exhibition of the Chapman brothers is unique in that it presents older works in a new context, meaning that their new installation offers the possibility of creating a new point of view and the opportunity for new interpretations,” says curator Otto M. Urban.

In five thematic units divided up into the various exhibition rooms, the exhibition presents sculptures, objects, paintings, drawings, and etchings. In these installations, sculptures, paintings, and drawings, the Chapman brothers use cynical and sarcastic humor to call attention to today’s depraved political, social, religious, and moral state of affairs.

In terms of subject matter, the various cycles touch on themes that the Chapman brothers have been working with since the beginning of their artistic career. One fundamental influence in their work is their inspiration by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, and the exhibition presents the brothers’ 83 etchings of bold and distinctive variations on Goya’s famous cycle *The Disasters of War*.

“The Chapman brothers work with Goya in a somewhat parasitic manner. The way in which they use – or rather, abuse – Goya’s work is far from pious or adoring. In fact, it is more of a strange, almost perverse relationship of love and hate, the intoxicating delight of torturing the person we love the most. Goya’s prints are drawn over and smeared, are given new motifs, and in some cases completely painted over. It is as if Goya’s work had been only partially completed and opened up to additional artistic input and manipulation,” says Urban.

One important element in their art, which the Chapmans have been working with since the 1990s, is the “study” of mutant mannequins, genetically mutated figures through which they explore the boundaries of generally accepted morality and try to provoke a change in the perception of ingrained gender and sexual stereotypes. At the Galerie Rudolfinum, this series of works is represented by libidinal objects of Siamese beings and figures of children with distinctive phallic and other symbols on their faces.

Another important theme in the art of the Chapman brothers is Nazism and fascism. The cycle exhibited at the Rudolfinum offers a precipitous look at the transhistorical concept of “absolute evil” symbolized by the Nazis and the horrors of the Holocaust. The monumental installation consisting of two dozen Nazi figures was specially adapted for the needs of the Galerie Rudolfinum.

The Prague exhibition also features a sarcastic excursion into the anthropological world of fetishes in contemporary society, represented by bronze sculptures resembling a collection of African art, in which we discover the corporate logos of fast-food restaurant chains.

Not even intimate aspect of life such as sex and death are taboo for the Chapmans, whose objects with

these titles uniformly evoke shocked reactions.

“The art of the Chapman brothers is accompanied by words such as scandal, controversy and provocation – in the critical sense, of course – as well as superficial endeavors whose only aim is to make themselves visible. In the end effect, the only thing that is scandalous is the attitude of certain critics and moralizers,” says exhibition curator Urban. Critic and journalist Johann Hari even compares the art of the Chapman brothers to “punk art that spits in your face”. As the Chapman themselves say, their art is more analytical than critical.

Just as Bataille described his relationship to aboriginal rituals in the hope that he might, if only for a moment, return modern society the symbolic power that it lost long ago, so too – in their cycle *The Chapman Family Collection* – do the Chapman brothers work in their own unique way with similar cultural-anthropological themes. In so doing, they call into question their validity and, above all, their topicality. This set of 11 bronze sculptures reminiscent of African fetishes contains motifs based on the corporate symbols of the global fast-food giant McDonald’s. For the Prague exhibition, each work was labeled with an eight-digit number representing a functioning telephone number to a selected McDonald’s in Prague. Everything is further amplified by the manner in which the work has been installed and illuminated. The viewer does not see merely a “collection” of African art, but also consumes the images of French fries and hamburgers found on these objects. Some of the objects are references to the work of other artists, such as Constantin Brancusi’s *The Column of the Infinite* from 1938, which the Chapmans have assigned the head of Ronald McDonald, whose uniform clown grimace they place on the level of religious rite. In this context, the questions of “commodity fetishism” evoked by the Chapman brothers are less a criticism of globalized consumer society than a sarcastic analysis of its current state.

The collection of sculptures is supplemented by a series of drawings entitled *Drawings from the Chapman Family Collection*, in which the Chapmans combine corporate symbols with fetish sculptures and let them come alive along with other figures in dark and personal mini-stories.

Goya’s influence on the Chapman brother’s work can also be seen in the sculpture entitled *Sex*, which is based on the earlier work *Great Deeds Against the Dead*, which was inspired by Goya’s cycle *The Disasters of War*. Here, the Chapmans’ interpretation of Goya is truly radical. The original work, which showed three dead bodies of castrated soldiers, has been transformed into a massive element of decay. “*Sex* presents the extravagant expressions of death, reminiscent of the paper dolls during celebrations of the Day of the Dead in Mexico. We see three corpses that are gradually gnawed to the bone by an army of insects and masses of small vermin, with the teeming creatures forming a kind of wave of purification; the worms, slugs, flies, spiders, and beetles look like they are plastic, purchased at a shop selling Halloween goods. In reality, they are cast bronze,” says art historian Christoph Grunenberg. This fleeting spectacle of life presents a decomposed picture of uncompromising decay in its pure, archetypal form.

The work can be seen both as an expression of caustic naturalism as well as an example of dark humor and the depraved visuals of the B horror movies that the Chapmans often use as a source of inspiration. The worms crawling out of the skull have horns, the bloody vampire eyes gaze at a red clown nose, another skull has been endowed with a zipper and several pairs of vampire teeth borrowed from a toy store. When looking at the zombie skeleton, the viewer may remember cheap, almost Dadaist scenes from horror movies such as Jean Rollin’s *Zombie Lake* (1981).

“Unpleasant things challenge us, tell us more about our lives, dreams and subconscious than looking at pleasant things does,” says Jake Chapman.

At first glance, the object from the cycle *Death* plays with the cheap aesthetics of “eroticized” kitsch – here embodied by a male and female blow-up doll engaged in sex on an inflatable mattress. The visual illusion goes down to the details: the dolls are not inflatable but made of cast bronze, and their bed of love is not light and filled with air, either. It, too, is made of heavy bronze. This illusion is wed with another contrast – the private is put on public display; the playful becomes clumsy and inflexible. A noble material such as bronze is painted in thick layers of paint to give it the lascivious character of latex.

“It is a sophisticated play with the delusions of what we see in reality and what we think we see. What the viewer recognizes first is an illusion that sheds itself in order to cover up and complicate the reading of

innate meanings. The Chapmans play their own game with the viewer while constantly changing the rules. In fact, understanding the ‘rules’ of this game is one possible way of understanding the work of the Chapman brothers,” says Urban.

The monumental installations ***Fucking Dinosaurs*** and ***Flock Off*** present 20 Nazi figures in black uniforms and with burnt, zombie-like faces and with smiley-faces instead of swastikas, who look at the exhibited objects and drawings in horror but with a sense of interest. The work is a reference to the exhibition of “degenerate art” – *Entartete Kunst* – held in 1937 in Munich and in other German and Austrian cities. Within the broader context, we are witness to a transhistorical phenomenon in which the subject of Nazism ceases to be a mere reference to the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust and becomes a global symbol for modern evil. We even arrive at questions as to the very existence of evil as a notion existing outside of the historical context. “It can be expressed simply – if we ask ourselves the question whether there existed evil during the time of the dinosaurs; whether there was a hell. We can go even further and ask ourselves whether evil is a mere construct of our minds”, says the curator. Any interpretation of the cycle is equally ambiguous. “The smiley faces that the Nazis wear on their sleeves instead of swastikas make it difficult to judge whether the work is good or bad. Is he a good Nazi because he knows how to smile nicely and is wearing a smiley face, or is he a bad Nazi since his grimace is worse than the Devil’s smile?” asks Jake Chapman.

In another series, ***Minderwertigkinder***, a group of girls is looking at paintings whose innocent children’s faces metamorphose into animal faces. Here we have a direct reference to horror and fantasy movies, as in *Wolf Child* – a picture of a girl whose innocent child’s face is inexorably metamorphosing into a terrifying wolf’s head. Here we find a visual and mental parallel to Neil Jordan’s Gothic fantasy horror *Company of Wolves* (1984). Like the other girls from this series, this one is wearing a brown sweatshirt with an embroidered swastika and the text *They Teach Us Nothing*.

Etchasketchathon is a series of children’s illustrations made using the chine-collé whose name comes from the popular children’s magnetic drawing tablet Etch-a-Sketch. The scenes from this series are far from idyllic, however, despite what we might expect from children’s illustrations. The figure of the girl plays with a headless fawn, some meat is rotting nearby, a plush bear is crucified on a swastika, and some illustrations feature mutated figures of sculptures.

In the series of drawings ***Bedtime Tales for Sleepless Nights***, we are witness to a combination of written text and children’s illustrations in which simple and easily remembered text containing frightening nursery rhymes is accompanied by colorful drawings reminiscent of children’s book illustrations. The texts were written by Jake Chapman, who has written several books.

The series ***Southsea Drawings*** depicts children’s connect-the-dots drawings, accompanied by titles taken from the opening words of selected short stories by H. P. Lovecraft.

The Shape of Things to Come, the title of a 1979 film by director George McCowan, is also the title for a diorama created by the Chapman brothers in 1999–2004. Diorama are usually found in museums and are supposed to evoke a particular historical or mythological event. Time stands still and inspires the viewer to consider what came before and what will come after. Jake and Dinos Chapman have been systematically working with this “medium” since the late 1990s. In their hands, the display cases are filled with thousands of figures and apocalyptic landscapes. The painstakingly detailed scenes and countless constellations refer to scenes from epic war movies. “In the architecture of the destroyed church, the diorama *The Shape of Things to Come* is reminiscent of a war scene from Elem Klimov’s 1985 Soviet film *Come and See*. The display case is filled with figures of monsters and their victims. The terrible theater is a textbook display of the extremes of human behavior,” says the exhibition’s curator.

In their works dedicated to the “study” of mutant mannequins – in particular the sculpture ***Return of Repressed*** – Jake and Dinos Chapman present a burlesque cabaret of the human anatomy the hands of science. The centaur-like, mathematically standardized figures of indeterminate age and gender contain the harbinger of something frightening. Battered codes of human DNA ripen into naked, genetically mutated figures of zygotic beings, some of which could have come from the Island of Doctor Moreau. *Return of Repressed* – a Siamese being with one body and two heads whose shared face is dominated by a female sex organ – may be a reference to the iconic dolls of German-French artist Hans Bellmer and his strange

anatomical cabaret.

The Freudian notion of sublimation can also be found in another work with a strong libidinal charge, **Bloody Fuckface** – a child with a pronounced male sex organ in its face, which also features an anal opening. The work's impact is further amplified by its installation in a display case filled with red color resembling a pool of blood.

Among other things, the sense of dread evoked by these plays of nature (or rather, of the Chapman brothers) inspires us to wonder about the inspiration for such horror. "Mutant mannequins have their history, whose roots go back to Renaissance wax figures that were used as study aids by students of medicine. Today, however, they strike us as distinctive sculptures, have lost their original educational meaning, and are more reminiscent of creatures from horror films inspired by the writings of American author H.P. Lovecraft," says exhibition curator Urban.

The polymorphic sexual beings' libidinal character allows us to find psychoanalytical interpretations and meanings. In this context, art historian Christoph Grunenberg hit the nail on the head when he says that the works may serve as "transcripts" of the contents of Freud's unconscious. As presented by the Chapmans, sexuality, gender and libido are not fixed entities, but rather mental concepts that evoke a whole series of ambivalent feelings – from fascination and excitement to disgust or absolute failure to understand.

In relation to the mutant mannequins, we can also speak of the possibilities of a Bataille-like transgression that is closely tied to the experiences of sexuality and the overcoming of sexual taboos, including (in the broader sense of the word) moral taboos. Of course, the questions of "bioethics" and genetic engineering offer themselves as well. "People are very nervous about these gray areas of their own morality. They desperately try to put everything into a comfortable box, but the moment you confront them with something that doesn't fit, they start to shriek threateningly and to wave their arms, which is precisely the feeling that we want to evoke. This effect strikes us as far more interesting than the object itself," explains Jake Chapman.

The Galerie Rudolfinum's lecture department has prepared a **series of accompanying programs** to the exhibition, including lectures and guided tours.

Contact for information:

Marian Pliska, pliska@rudolfinum.org, T + 420/227 059 346

Jake and Dinos Chapman

The Blind Leading the Blind / Slepý vede slepého

Galerie Rudolfinum 3/10 2013 – 5/1 2014

Exhibition curator: Otto M. Urban

Administration: Lenka Hachlincová

Production: David Korecký

Accompanying programs: Marian Pliska

PR: Nikola Bukajová

Assistant: Šárka Komedová

Graphic design: Robert V. Novák

Editor: Zuzana Kosařová

Translations: Barbora Štefanová (CZ-EN), Jana Tichá (EN-CZ)

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Jake and Dinos Chapman, The Blind Leading the Blind / Slepý vede slepého

Full: CZK 140
Discounted: CZK 90

Your ticket is good for one admission and a selected accompanying program.

Media contact:

Nikola Bukajová, bukajova@rudolfinum.org, T +420 227 059 205, M +420 725 365 792

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Address:

Galerie Rudolfinum
Alšovo nábřeží 12
CZ 110 01 Praha 1
T +420 227 059 205
galerie@rudolfinum.org
www.galerierudolfinum.cz