

The Arts

McHeart of darkness

The Chapman brothers have abandoned shock tactics and sex to tackle... McDonald's

by Nick Hackworth

FOR notorious perverts, Jake and Dinos Chapman are awfully nice. As they potter about their studio preparing for their new show at White Cube, which opens today, they smile, make tea and chuckle paternally at the antics of Kylie, Jake's hyperactive, slobbering dog. Yet even in an art scene famous for its bisected cows and soiled beds, the brothers have stood out for creating art that stretches the boundaries of taste.

Jake and Dinos, 36 and 40 respectively, began working together in 1991 after both graduated from the Royal College of Art. They quickly became attracted to model-making — what they describe as “the most neurotic medium possible”, because of the slavish and time-consuming attention to detail it requires — to give form to their creative impulses.

They have operated on life-sized shop dummies to create mutant children with erect penises for noses and sphincters for mouths, and deformed adults sporting outbreaks of displaced sexual organs. In 2000 their ambitious work *Hell* was the showpiece of the Apocalypse exhibition at the Royal Academy.

A massive tableau arranged in the shape of a reversed (Hindu) swastika, it comprised more than 5,000 tiny, mutant Nazis engaged in a surreal orgy of death and destruction. Censure from the great-and-the-not-so-good inevitably followed every major public showing of their work. Though it attracted critical acclaim, detractors accused *Hell* of being a puerile send-up of the Holocaust, while the brothers' contributions to the notorious *Sensation* show — Tragic Anatomies among them — caused Julie Burchill to brand them “fascists” and Rudolph Giuliani to condemn them as “perverts” when the exhibition toured to New York.

Since *Hell*, undoubtedly their most important piece to date, little has been seen of the Chapmans, raising expectations about the new work unveiled in their solo show, *Works from the Chapman Family Collection*.

The priapic members and sphincters have disappeared, and what's on display is unlikely to offend even Rudi Giuliani. Though the instant shock value is absent, the playful and intelligent malevolence that characterises their work and has made the Chapmans among the most interesting artists of their generation remains.

The exhibition consists of 34 wood carvings that are presented as part of the Chapman family's fictional collection of ethnographic objects. To strengthen the conceit, they are

being displayed in the gallery as they would be in a museum, titled only with mock museum reference numbers, spot-lit and mounted on heavy plinths in an otherwise dark interior.

The pieces, all hand-carved by the brothers, indeed look like authentic tribal objects, bought or stolen in Africa in the last century, with the dark lustre of the wood and faded traces of pigment giving them a credible patina of age.

It is, however, the reference that all the pieces make to the grotesque visual universe of McDonald's that betray their modernity. The cartoon characters that

populate the packaging for McDonald's thus find themselves appearing in altogether stranger places. The face of one tribal figure, apparently carved out of ebony, is that of Hamburglar, the infamous McDonald's burger-thief.

Another is graced with the grinning head of Ronald McDonald. Grimace, the rotund, purple creature who is one of Ronald McDonald's closest friends, is incarnate here as a three-foot high

monster, clutching a carton of fries and a soft drink.

Some of the pieces, though, make much subtler references to the burger chain, and look simply like the real tribal objects they ape. As ever with the work of the Chapmans, it is diffi-

Commercial art: the Chapman brothers have turned the McDonald's character Grimace into a tribal artefact

cult to determine at whose expense the artists deploy their humour. Certainly these figures are not intended to be simple jibes at the kind of global capitalism of which McDonald's has long been an emblem.

As Jake says, “McDonald's is an attractor for so many different moral discourses on capitalism which are incredibly crude and funny — like the whole anti-globalisation thing, which is essentially a luxury of the West.”

Besides, in the opinion of the Chapmans, the business of trying to pin specific intentions on artists and their work is a fruitless and archaic waste of time, harping back to the Romantic belief that the great artists were those who expressed their unique, authentic souls in their art.

In this day of global networks of information, money and power, the Chapmans suggest that is more useful to imagine artists to be like computer processors, manipulating the information, which flows into them from the world at large, to create new, different and altered information.

CRUCIALLY, that information is not necessarily made with any specific end in mind. It could simply be a by-product of our information and object-saturated world. As arch as this may sound, the works from the Chapman Family Collection are peculiarly appropriate art-objects for our society, in which the aesthetic values and knowledge of different cultures and different ages are constantly mangled together in the great blender of consumer culture.

With this new work, the gratuitous shock has gone; the subversive wit remains.

● *Works from the Family Collection* is at White Cube, N1 (020 7930 5373) until 7 December.



'Jake and Dinos have stretched the boundaries of taste'



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