

We want to commit violence to ideas

BY NICK HACKWORTH

I CAN'T think of any static image or sculpture that has the potential to shock; they just don't have the animate power of film," says Jake Chapman.

A shocking statement in itself from the younger of the artist brothers who have made a career out of creating static images and sculptures that have shocked and offended. First came the child mannequins with penises for noses and sphincter mouths, then, in 2000, their masterpiece, *Hell*, a massive tableau arranged in the shape of a reversed swastika, with 5,000 tiny models of mutant Nazis participating in a surreal orgy of death and destruction.

Such works attracted admirers and disgusted critics in equal measure. But none drew as much outrage as the prints of Goya's *Disasters of War* that the brothers defaced with comic painted faces in 2003 (the year of their unsuccessful Turner Prize nomination).

Now, for their new exhibition, opening next week, they have done it again. For this, their first London show since *Hell* was destroyed in the Momart fire last year, they have defaced 80 more Goya prints — this time, a first edition of the Spanish master's etchings, *Los Caprichos*, which viciously satirise the darkness and vanity of human life. The centrepiece of an exhibition in which everything seems calculated to offend, the new "improved" Goya prints are collectively renamed *Like a Dog Returns to its Vomit*.

Hung alongside the Goyas at the White Cube gallery are *Etchasketchathon*, *Gigantic Fun* and *My Gigantic Colouring Book*, the Chapmans' own series of etchings, some hand-coloured, which they have borrowed, cut up and reassembled from children's colouring books.

Among the horrors that these often beautifully rendered scenes depict are a rabbit that has wrenched the head off a Bambi lookalike, a paedophile clown, an owl that collects the heads of children and a little girl with necrotising fasciitis eating away at her face.

Once again the Chapmans exploit two of the few taboos left to us, the innocence of childhood and sanctity of art. But is any of it really shocking?

"I wouldn't say that our work's never been intended to produce some sort of antagonism or pleasure," Jake says. "It commits violence on a certain set of ideas, that's without a doubt. But the problem with shock is that it forecloses on any other kind of experience you could get from that work."

Let's get past the shock thing, say Jake and Dinos Chapman, whose new show includes more defaced Goya prints and a collection of dark and grotesque children's colouring-book images

"Art is a complex activity and our work is internally intense. There are structured formal activities going on that haven't really been noticed. But no matter how many indications you give, people don't get it. It's all very well being a dumb artist whose meanings and intentions need to be teased out by clever critics, but we've been pretty vociferous in articulating ideas alongside the work."

He is beginning to sound aggrieved. Misunderstood, perhaps? "You can safely say the whole business of making art has been disappointing," he admits, "especially in terms of the reception the work gets."

He is sitting with his brother Dinos — at 43, four years older, yet smaller and quieter than Jake — in an Italian café on Commercial Road, just around the corner from their studio.

They do, though, appear to think as one. Dinos picks up the theme: "There's a huge difference between wanting to be understood and people's absolute inability to get close to what we're doing."

Characteristically, Jake gets more irritated, more animated: "It's just that if you thought what you did was



Child's play: the Chapman brothers' *My Giant Colouring Book III* (2004-2005)

Gareth Winters

interesting, you would like to think that someone else's response could be more interesting, so there'd be some exponential consequence, instead of putting up an exhibition, standing around with a glass of wine at the opening, mumbling a bit and going home feeling like the most redundant f**ker on earth."

It is perhaps surprising that the Chapmans don't claim any special value for their — or anyone else's — art. "What is the function of a work of art?" demands Jake. "What does it do outside its own limits? Not much."

WHAT does matter to them is meaning. Deeply antagonistic to any interpretations that see art as a civilising and moral force, the Chapmans view it purely as a philosophical and aesthetic activity, like a complex game or puzzle.

Admittedly, the brothers use more provocative building blocks for their work than the household bricks of one of their great heroes, Carl Andre, who caused outrage when he sold his

"pile of bricks" sculpture to the Tate in 1972.

The Chapmans' raw material typically consists of images and ideas of perversion, violence and horror, yet the use of repetition in their work, as with their long-term engagement with Goya — consistently playing with his work, scrambling and reforming its meanings — is similar to Andre's playing with forms. But why Goya?

"He represents the first modern artist, the first artist with conscience and consciousness, freed from the constraints of mediating religious images to idiots. He's a hero of Enlightenment values," says Dinos.

"But," continues Jake, highlighting what he sees as a major contradiction at the heart of history of modern Western art, "some of the things that Goya says about his subjects, inscribed beneath the images in *Los*

Caprichos, like 'Wretched humanity, the fault is yours' and 'Man lives to have the life sucked from him', are deeply misanthropic and inscribed with pleasure. They are more purely about man's inhumanity to man than about evil.

"Our reworkings of Goya are meant to introduce an idea of boredom into our art rather than euphoric entertainment. It's intentionally flat work, designed to drag its feet in art's assumed march of progress towards perfection." By which I think he means that their art is designed to frustrate the still widespread belief that art and culture have a moral purpose, to help us become "better people".

Given their explicit hostility to the notion of progress, it's foolish to expect great career development in the Chapmans' work. Conceptually, it has changed little since the early Nineties. This show is more of the same in terms of its ideas, and may disappoint those looking for the spectacular shocks of old. For that, they need only wait for the Chapmans' major retrospective at Tate Liverpool next year, which will include a new version of *Hell*.

In deepest Hackney, a small army of assistants is at work in another of the brothers' studios on several new versions of the infamous sculpture. "We've made five," Dinos says, "to cover us against accident and loss. They're going to be bigger and better than the last one."

● Jake and Dinos Chapmans' *Like a Dog Returns to its Vomit* is at White Cube, N1 (020 7930 5373), 19 October to 3 December

'Our reworkings of Goya are meant to introduce the idea of boredom into our art' — Jake Chapman

The horror, the horror: Jake and Dinos Chapman with a second set of defaced Goya etchings in their east London studio



Oliver Lim