

REVERBERATIONS

John Rockwell

Shocking! Offensive! But Being Pleasant Is Beside the Point

Although the phrase "shock and awe" has become as clichéd as the suffix -gate, it has dutifully been evoked in the British press to describe this year's Turner Prize entries. Actually, it is really only the entry by the brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman — some think it's the favorite — that has evoked, or provoked, that phrase. And awe has a lot less to do with it than shock.

Their entry, a kind of homage to Goya, is on display until Jan. 11, along with those of the three other contestants, at the Tate Modern in London. The Tate sponsors this competition for youngish British artists, with the winner to be announced on Dec. 7.

Around the gallery hang 80 reproductions of etchings from Goya's "Disasters of War" series, with clown faces superimposed over the original heads. In the middle are two painted bronze sculptures. One, "Death," includes what looks like a couple of inflatable sex toys performing unprintable acts, complete with a vibrator. The other, "Sex," is a decomposed human corpse and other animal parts hanging from a tree, with your basic assortment of maggots and "flies, spiders, lizards, mice, rats, snails, worms and centipedes," in the tally of The London Observer. And a few children's toys, for spice.

All this has excited the annual Turner Prize outcry, ritualistic by now, in the British tabloids. Jake Chapman has added to the hysteria in an interview to be broadcast tonight on Channel Four in Britain, by denouncing both the Tate Modern and the collector Charles Saatchi, the brothers' principal patrons; there is a Chapmans' show at the Saatchi Gallery in London right now.

It was Mr. Saatchi who instigated the "Sensation!" show that shocked the Royal Academy before shocking New Yorkers at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Or at least one New Yorker, Rudolph W. Giuliani, then the mayor, who fixated on Chris Ofili's elephant dung when the more shocking Chapmans were just around the corner.

The brothers' assortment of white fiberglass children's mannequins wearing nothing but wigs and sneakers, lurking in lush tropical foliage with their mutated extra limbs and aroused genitals in unlikely places on their bodies, was for me truly disturbing. Not disturbing in that I



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Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art

"Sex," by Jake and Dinos Chapman, at the Tate Modern in London, and Karen Finley, now doing "psychic portraits" at the Kitchen in Chelsea.

wanted to call the morals police, but disturbing in the way art is supposed to be: it was scary and enticing and, on the surface at least, exotically beautiful.

In his Channel Four interview, Mr. Chapman said Mr. Saatchi's gallery was, in fact, neutralizing the shock by placing it in a genteel context, "trying to soften the blow for people who may be unfamiliar with the notion that a work of art shouldn't necessarily be pleasurable."

Hello? For centuries new art has offended, challenging the purely pleasurable. From the first Modernist outrages to this day, artists have seemed to specialize in jarring the presumably complacent bourgeoisie out of their presumed reverie into a harsh confrontation with the real world, reality being defined by the artists.

But I am not writing about the Chapmans, whose latest work I have seen only in photographs, but about shock in art. Audiences and institutions have long believed that anything that unsettles is intended to provoke. The provocation hardly needs to be sexual. It can be childlike ("My 5-year-old could do that!") or primitive (Gauguin) or political (Grosz) or distorted (Cubism) or conceptually unsettling (Duchamp's urinal; Cage's "4'33'" of silence).

For a long while, when people raged against such provocations, I

would take the defiant position of assuming, unless authoritatively informed otherwise, that the artist had no intention to provoke. Morton Feldman needed to write a six-hour string quartet. Philip Glass needed to spin out his deafening electronic-keyboard arpeggiations to the end of time. Maybe even Jeff Koons needed to depict coitus with his wife at the time, an Italian pornography star and Parliament member.

Dinos Chapman may well be accurate in explaining that he and his brother have long since transcended shock in their new Goya works. "We think they're entertaining, thoughtful, beautiful, classical," he told The Observer. But there can be no question that some artists set out to provoke. However beautiful the Chapmans sincerely think their own work is, they are, of course, provocateurs. As was Goya, you might muse, with his dark visions of war or even his "Naked Maja."

Those of us who out of wisdom or self-delusion think that we've got things pretty well figured out, who think that for all the obvious horrors to be seen nightly on television, that there are values and standards and canons, will be offended by this latter-day determination to provoke. Isn't this all a little late, a little dated?

And yet complacency is always worth tweaking, and those shocking

and awe-inspiring horrors on television are indeed horrible. Goyaesque, even. The trick is not to provoke, but to provoke into a realization that the art that has disturbed you can also be "thoughtful, beautiful and classical." The Chapmans may be shuffling along in the rear of that cadre of artists determined to subvert the permanence and collectibility of the artwork. And yet their own work is worth collecting. Just ask Mr. Saatchi.

Even the most blatant provocateurs are determined to do something more, something beyond merely shock. Clowns want to play Hamlet. I thought about Karen Finley the other day while she was painting and explicating my "psychic portrait," along with that of our little dog, Gabby, in a half-hour appointment at the Kitchen in Chelsea. (Ms. Finley continues her sessions through tomorrow.)

If anyone has defined art shock over the last 15 years, it has been she, with her nudity and her chocolate and her incendiary role in the culture wars. Her psychic portraits, for which she sits demurely in a skirt and sweater and creates her very pretty little artworks — I don't mean that condescendingly — might seem a contradiction or even a repudiation.

Yet Ms. Finley has always been prim and well bred as well as extreme and outrageous; that's the dialectical secret of her charm. I don't know her or her work well enough to understand how central to her ideas of art and femininity her past nakedness has been. Self-display has often been the province of beautiful women, however ideologically explicated, as with Hannah Wilke.

Yet I'll bet that Ms. Finley's latest portraits are very much part of her entire artistic enterprise. She said at the outset of our session that she felt in an altered state when performing, that imagination itself was an out-of-body experience. She added that she had been doing psychic explorations all her life; it's just that now she's gone public.

The Chapmans' and Ms. Finley's art may or may not be great, but in the end all art must seek to disturb and provoke. Of course, there are deliberate provocateurs, sometimes for overt careerist ends. But what counts is the art. Great art is always shocking.



Peter Strummer, left, in title role of Bruce Sledge, far right, as his anyt

OPERA REVIEW

Tricking an Elde Blinded by You!

By JEREMY EICHLER

With a dizzying 63 operas already under his belt, Donizetti knew what he was doing when he made it to "Don Pasquale." Packed with memorable tunes, vividly drawn characters and the droll tribulations of its aging bachelor, the opera is the comic masterpiece among Donizetti's output, which was nearing its close when the work had its premiere in 1843.

On Tuesday night "Don Pasquale" returned to the City Opera repertoire in a serviceable production by Leon Major that was first seen at the Glimmerglass Opera in 1996. For some reason, Mr. Major moved the action back into the 17th century, which seems at odds with the emotional tenor of the comedy but does not otherwise detract. The stage direction of Albert Sherman is enjoyably zippy with a few nice touches of commedia dell'arte.

The conventional plot revolves around its title character, a rich elderly uncle who is duped into marrying a seemingly young and innocent girl (really his nephew Ernesto's beloved Norina). The ink is barely dry on the marriage contract when his