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THE CHAPMAN BROS. GOYA AND THE CRITICS

by Miles Mathis



In 2003 the Chapman Bros. reached inarguably their lowest point, defacing a rare set of Goya's prints of the *Disasters of War*. They then exhibited this defacement at Modern Art Oxford and it was nominated for the Turner Prize. In this paper I will spend very little time commenting on the Chapmans, focusing as usual on the critics. The Chapmans are another set of semi-retarded, cross-eyed products of a broken family, I suppose, and only merit our pity. They look like children who have been beaten on the side of the head with tire irons, and so the best initial assumption would be that that is what they are. I could not even be bothered to research them, to find something more precise to say. I haven't the time. I only hope they have consumed too many drugs to procreate. What is surprising or shocking about the continuation of Modern art isn't that people like this exist and do things—the gene pool has been polluted from the beginning—it is that they are now promoted, protected, coddled, and extolled by the major institutions and publications, and by people who claim to be educated. In my most generous moments, I think perhaps *this* is the intended—so far unread—message of the Chapmans: that society is now so degraded that no one will stop them from doing what they are doing. Like a child that wants to be spanked—to see it proved that life has some order—the Chapmans may wish to be jailed, beaten, or hung by their testicles, as proof that society is not completely broken.

I *did* take the time to search for critical responses to this defacement of Goya, and was not surprised to find nothing one would call logical or in proportion. About the strongest thing I found was from Robert Hughes, which is *not* shocking: Hughes can normally be counted on to be out front in telling the truth, even when he is not telling enough of it. Hughes called the Bros “twerps” and said they would

soon be forgotten. True, but not in proportion. I had hoped to find a more extended commentary by Hughes, since I was curious to see what he said about the Rauschenberg connection here. Remember that Rauschenberg is very famous for erasing a De Kooning, and Rauschenberg is a favorite of Hughes (as we see in the 2009 Hughes film [The Mona Lisa Curse](#)). Why are the Chapmans twerps but Rauschenberg is not? Hughes must intuit that the Chapmans got the idea from Rauschenberg—they aren't smart enough to have their own ideas.

The next best response I found was from Paul Bond at the World Socialist Website. He found the Chapmans disgusting, but his article still wasn't in proportion to the crime and didn't suggest the logical answer.

All the other critics were either in favor of the Chapmans (Jonathan Jones—*the Guardian*, Richard Dorment—*the Telegraph*, Christopher Turner—*Tate, etc.*) or didn't seem to care much one way or the other (Stuart Jeffries, Fiachra Gibbons, Alan Riding, and David Lee). Lee at *the Jackdaw* was perhaps the most depressing, since he has done some good work exposing corruption at the Tate Modern and I expected more from him. He wasn't sure if this was an example of the Chapmans good work or bad work, and misdirected his readers by saying that there are plenty of sets of *Disasters of War* left. That is both false and misses the point. It is false because there are about 1,000 sets total, and many of these are inferior. A thousand sets isn't much in a world of 7 billion people, especially once you start allowing owners to deface them. It misses the point because this is a limited set, whether we agree it is limited at 1,000 good sets or 20. According to the laws that apply to living artists in Europe and the US, prints are not protected from defacing, but limited editions are. This Goya set obviously falls into the latter category, because prints from such plates are limited by their very nature. Every printing degrades the plates, and no known process can restore them. With an artist of Goya's stature, this is a bottom-line sort of fact, and would be seen so in court. But even if all that weren't true, Lee still misses the point: we shouldn't be destroying important pieces of the past on purpose, and we shouldn't be defining Modern art as the destruction of past art. That is so clear and straightforward that it shouldn't even need to be said. In an age of sense it wouldn't need to be said.

In Hughes' recent film, he said he got into the business of art after working at the 1966 flood of Florence. Protecting the art seemed so important to him he wanted to make it his life's work. We should ask if the critical response to the Chapmans fits that attitude toward art, and not just regarding the critics who supported them, but regarding Hughes himself. Has Goya been protected from the flood, or are the waters still rising? Yes, Hughes made his film, but has Hughes or anyone else petitioned any Congress or Parliament to prevent the Chapmans from buying the *Third of May* and lining their toilets with it? Answering that it is out of their price range doesn't serve, since that means it just takes some richer asshole to do it. Besides, if the Chapmans find they can increase the value of a Brueghel by defacing it (see below), they may be encouraged to do the same thing with a major Goya. *Third of May* by Goya, \$40 million; *Third of May* improved by Chapman Bros, \$140 million. If Damien Hirst sells his diamond skull, he can actually afford to do something like that.

One other critic has attacked the Chapmans, and he did it with as much heat as Hughes and perhaps more. That is Charles Thomson, the founder of Stuckism. I read his article "[If Hitler had been a Hippy](#)" at *Counterpunch*, and the boy can write. Unfortunately I couldn't find anything about the Goya defacement from Thomson. Google seems to be interfering with Thomson, since typing in "Charles Thomson Chapman Brothers" didn't even take me to the *Counterpunch* article, much less Thomson's other articles. So I may be missing something here. At any rate, I recommend someone should look into why Google is blocking or downlisting Thomson: I suspect a great story lies deep there, one that may lead back to the same players Thomson (and David Lee) are criticizing. I also recommend

Thomson to my readers. I have said elsewhere that the Stuckist manifesto is misguided and that the Stuckists can't paint, but Thomson can certainly write. He is doing good work in that regard and we are glad to see him at *Counterpunch* and *Jackdaw*. He is also a top-notch activist, and works harder than anyone to picket and harass the London powerbrokers in art.

However, I could not find the proportional response even from Thomson, nor the correct solution. What is it? David Lee has said that we need a new Goya to comment on the present imperialist wars, and while that would be great, what we need just as much is a new Cellini or Caravaggio to bust some heads in the artworld. We don't need buckets of red paint or pies thrown at these people, we need to punish them in ways they understand. I would suggest a return to dueling. It is too easy to be fake tough guys in art when you are surrounded by a bunch of women and their cuckolds. The Chapmans have threatened and pushed around women, but you don't see them pushing around anyone their own size. If Goya did come back, he would no doubt be anxious to comment on US and European imperialism in the Middle East, but he would be even more anxious to beat the living shit out of the Chapman Brothers for destroying his prints, and the crowds would be gigantic to watch him do it. I suspect the Chapman Brothers would be first in line, since they have been begging for a beating for years. Even though they have been very naughty, we haven't been spanking them, and they have been left to spank themselves. That can only be annoying, for them as much as for us.

But seriously, we all know dueling and fighting are illegal, and that the Chapmans are protected in other ways, so although it may be the proportional response, it can't be the correct solution. We live in a world of laws now (or so we are told), so the solution must be legal. We simply have to extend the artists' rights we already have to artists that are no longer living. We make them retroactive and permanent, both forward and backward in time. The solution is so simple that we may be surprised it hasn't already been enacted. We may be surprised that no critics—who are such great lovers of art—have suggested it.

And this brings us back to Rauschenberg because, as Hughes shows in his film, Rauschenberg was instrumental in petitioning Congress to pass the VARA [Visual Artists Rights Act] laws in the US. Twenty years before VARA was passed, Rauschenberg pushed for monetary rights of artists (after being screwed by the dealer Robert Scull). These rights were extended into “moral rights” by the Berne Convention in 1986 and then by VARA in 1990. Moral rights included the right not to have your worked defaced, changed or destroyed by future owners.

With that in your head, you may want to go back to Rauschenberg's erasing of De Kooning. You see that Rauschenberg is wildly inconsistent; and by not calling him on it, so is Robert Hughes. Rauschenberg wants artists' rights when they suit him, but not when they limit his freedom to be a shallow asshole. For even without bringing the artists' rights into it, his idea to erase the De Kooning was a bad idea, on many levels. To start with, it didn't give us a more interesting image, so the idea was inartistic from the beginning. Some argument may possibly be made for a better artist redoing the work of a worse artist, to make it better. For instance, if Leonardo had reworked a student's painting, we would tend to forgive him for it. But no such argument can be made for the Rauschenberg image. Next, we may look at the normal apology for Rauschenberg, which is that he got permission from De Kooning to do it. Again, that just proves that we aren't dealing with artists here. A real artist would never put a bad piece of work on the market, and would never agree to the destruction of work that he had sold. If the work needed to be destroyed, the artist would have done that himself rather than let it leave the studio. In a real art market, an artist agreeing to the destruction of his work would negatively affect his market, since it would be clear to his buyers that he cared nothing for his work. But in Modernism, the reverse is true. The buyers act irrationally, by thinking more of the artist for including

himself in these games. This is proof not of the importance of what Rauschenberg did, as a matter of theory or something; it is proof that we aren't dealing with art and artists here.

But let us return to the critics. As I said above, the solution is so clear and so easy to put into law that we must be astonished not to find it in the literature *or* the law. Ask yourself how likely it is that real art critics would miss it. Not one person thinks to suggest that we need a new law protecting Old Master works from this sort of crime? Hughes even gives the Chapmans the bigger idea: he says, "What next, drawing Mickey Mouse heads on the Sistine Chapel ceiling?" That sounds cutting until we remember that there are currently no laws against it. With enough money or influence, we suppose the Chapmans could actually do it. The only thing that is stopping them now are the Vatican guards and the height of the ceilings. Suppose a new Pope found the idea interesting, for his own reasons? The art of the world is far more vulnerable than you think, and this act of the Chapmans makes that clear.

Remarkably, no critics have come to that conclusion, not even Hughes, Thomson, or Bond. The Chapmans had done their best to see if someone still cared about art, and they have proven that no one does. It is as if the Chapmans had grabbed one of the daughters of the critics and had threatened to cut her throat. Finding no outcry, the Bros actually did the deed, but still no positive response. Half the critics found the murder intriguing, and the other half simply reported on the amount of blood on the ground. If we add to that the lack of response from the readers of the magazines and newspapers, and from the government, who also don't seem to care one way or the other, we have, I think, a *curious circumstance*.

As an example of this, we may look a bit more closely at the "review" of Richard Dorment, who titles his article at the *Telegraph* "[Inspired Vandalism](#)". The Chapmans at their manufactured craziest can't compete with the insanity of Dorment, who says:

But look again, and you see that the delicacy of their draughtsmanship is anything but disrespectful. Every line is an act of homage to a revered Old Master. What's more, their solemn concentration on the meaning of the images actually enhances the horror of each print, because the perkiness and indifference of the mask-like faces serve to bring out the obscenity beneath the violence.

I have to think the Chapmans themselves are shocked and repelled by this. The Chapmans try to shock the critics, but can't compete with them no matter what they do. Look at the image above. Do you see any delicacy of draughtsmanship? Does that look like an act of homage to you? Again, I can't help but go back to the murder analogy. Dorment is looking at his own daughter here, her empty eyes peeled back in her head, and because the murderer drew some smiley faces on the ground with the blood, Dorment can only admire the "enhanced horror" achieved. To me, Dorment is just that ghoulish. The Chapmans may be defectives, but Dorment outdoes them. He is a zombie, a psychopath. I have no real fear of the Chapmans, since real psychopaths don't pose like that. But Dorment, in admiring the crime scene in such a way, is truly scary. I honestly wouldn't turn my back to him.

Again, maybe that is the point. The Chapmans may read my paper and go, "FINALLY!"

Jonathan Jones is equally zombie-ish, saying:

Violet and white bursts of colour, the clown heads and puppy faces are astonishingly horrible. They are given life, personality, by some very acute drawing, and so it's not a collision but a collaboration, an assimilation, as they really do seem to belong in the pictures.

I can hear the Chapmans screaming, “No they don't!” Just look for yourself. Would any sane person mistake that for “acute drawing”? Jones admits in this article that the Chapmans don't want positive reviews, but he can't help but give them one anyway. The more shallow, disgusting, and criminal they are, the more he likes it. Like Dorment, he is a psychopath who can't get the right message from the crime even when the Chapmans tell him what it is.

You may say, “Well, that is all part of the game. The Chapmans ask for shock and the critics refuse to give it to them. Every crime is assimilated, making it no longer a crime.” The problem with that explanation is that it has no rational ending. Yes, the critics have turned the tables on the Chapmans, shocking *them* by withholding the right reaction. But this leaves the actual crime out of the equation. If we go back to the murder analogy, it is like withholding punishment from the murderer in order to “murder” his belief in the law. Instead we embrace him, make him rich and famous, and beg him to do it again. Sounds psychologically rich stated that way, almost a treat for Deconstructivists. But there are two problems: 1) the daughter is still dead, 2) the murderer had no belief in the law to begin with, which is why he acted like he did. He hasn't been taught anything. And by withholding punishment, we simply encourage more murders. The murderer wouldn't be shocked straight by the embrace, he would just murder that much more quickly. That is precisely what we have seen in the artworld. Not only have the Chapmans continued to deface old works (most recently a follower of Brueghel), but others have followed their lead. Not only have no laws been passed, but higher prices are encouraging more such defacements. The Chapmans bought the latest painting for €55,000, and their revised painting is on the market for €850,000. The embrace has not appeared to have scared them or anyone else straight.

This means that the critical response isn't a game, or it isn't the game we are told it is. The critics aren't trying to one-up the artists in some game of chicken. No, the critics are 1) truly disturbed people who truly care nothing for art, 2) hired sockpuppets of the galleries and auction houses where these works are sold. As David Lee and Charles Thomson have documented, large sums of money are being passed under various tables, and, as in the banking industry, some of the largest sums go to government regulators, to prevent regulation. In his film, Robert Hughes opens by telling us that, apart from drugs, *art is the biggest unregulated market in the world*, and as we have seen, few laws apply, so it doesn't take much to unman the little regulation that exists.

You should have asked yourself a long time ago why magazines and newspapers would hire people who know nothing and care nothing about art to write about it? Your average reader of the *Telegraph* or *Guardian* doesn't want to hear about the Chapmans, and if they do, they don't want to hear about the “perky horror”. No, they would rather hear the Chapmans trashed. Back when art criticism really was aimed at the public, it was mostly negative, because that is what used to sell papers. People love negative criticism. Now we get positive criticism even when the artists beg for negative criticism. So we may assume Jonathan Jones and Richard Dorment aren't talking to the people who read the papers, or not most of them. They weren't hired to criticize art, they were hired to help sell it—and to generate kickbacks to themselves and to the paper in various forms. They are writing to the 1%, no the .01%. The rest of the readers are assumed by the managers to be on the sports pages or the comics pages.

You will say that even if the critics flourish under such a corrupt system, it is not clear how the papers and magazines could. Aren't they independent? Hardly. The tentacles of the corporate squid have long since surrounded all forms of media, and there is practically no difference between the US model and the UK model, though the UK model, being socialist, was more enabling to the squid from the beginning. We already know that the CIA—called the Corporation—has engulfed the mainstream

media, since the *New York Times* [told us that themselves](#). Since we have proof of one set of tentacles, we may assume any number of other sets. The cables between entities are in place, regardless, and it is not hard to imagine them as money lines. It would be more astonishing if the connections *weren't* lines of money. Given the modern world, I would say the burden of proof is on them, if they want to show they clean. Since they look dirty, act dirty, and smell dirty, the best initial assumption is that they are dirty.

This means, given only the circumstantial proofs that we have, that we may assume the art market has been corrupted on purpose, with the connivance of all concerned. It isn't only the Chapmans who are to blame, or even mainly the Chapmans. The Chapmans are just tools of hidden hands, like most of the other people who are sold to you as interesting or powerful. Yes, the art world is one more proven conspiracy, since we have seen the critics, the galleries, the auction houses, the media, and the government *conspire* to bring art to where it is now.

In his film, Robert Hughes blames rich collectors for the ruin of art, and Peter Schjeldahl [has done the same thing](#) at the *New Yorker*. But this theory is inverted like the rest. The rich collectors are sometimes part of the conspiracy, since they sometimes make a profit like the rest. But the rich collectors are more often victims of the conspiracy, since the money in art has to come from somewhere. Where there are winners there are losers, and the biggest losers in the art market have been and will continue to be the clueless rich. Yes, the art market, like the financial market, has found a way to milk the treasuries of the various nations, but the art market still gets the bulk of its profits from private collectors. It is another ponzi scheme, where the last man holding the art loses. So far, the market has been able to continue to find a richer stupider person, but this cannot go on forever. When the bottom finally falls out from under the art market, the crash will be steeper than any crash ever seen in history. At that point, David Geffen or some Japanese tycoon will see his \$200 million painting fall to a few thousand overnight. With the right confluence of events, we may hope to see Geffen like the Mayor of Casterbridge, skulking down Rodeo Drive in a crushed hat and filthy brogans, carrying an empty fifth of whisky and a birdcage (with dead bird). If he is pulling the Chapman Bros behind him on a string, so much the better.

But what is the right punishment, when we enact laws against defacement? Not just fines, since we know those don't deter rich people. Since the Chapmans “want to make McDonalds the new religion,” I suggest we sentence them to working at McD's 10 hours a day, seven days a week, for 20 years, for minimum wage (US). Then they could worship all they like. As for the critics, we need a punishment for them, too. Since they are so intrigued by destruction, I say we sew their lips shut, give them an Afghani passport and a turban, and enlist them in the Afghan infantry, to fight against our troops. That way they can see firsthand the short and longterm benefits of destruction.