

Chapmans Bring Hell and Modern Art to the Hermitage

By [Daniel Kozin](#)

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Cossacks have already complained about the Chapmans' graphic work. **Hugo Glendinning**

St. Petersburg — An exhibit by the contemporary British sibling duo Jake and Dinos Chapman will leave visitors to the General Staff Building of the State Hermitage Museum shocked or delighted, but certainly not ambivalent.

The central piece of the exhibit — named "The End of Fun" — is a work titled "[Expletive] Hell." It is, in short, hellish, but that does not do it justice. It consists of nine enormous glass cubes arranged in a swastika pattern, each of which contains a three-dimensional scene of thousands of small plastic Nazi soldiers engaged in a bloodbath of limitless vulgarity and barbarism in an apocalyptic setting. The original "Hell" was destroyed in a warehouse fire in 2004, but undeterred, the brothers went on to make a successor to continue their artistic message, with emphasis added to the title.

The artists, known for making shocking statements — both verbal and artistic — have

confirmed their scandalous reputation with the exhibit. Fields of naked and dismembered bodies, orgies between rat, corpse, pig and skeleton, and bloody limbs being hacked off in torture chambers reflect the heights of violent excess and perversity, and disturb as much as they captivate. The devil is in the details, however, and the carnage is lightened by numerous interjections of humor throughout the work, such as a crucified snowman, award-winning British physicist Stephen Hawking amid his own private marijuana island, and frequent appearances by Ronald McDonald.

"This is an outstanding exhibit that is both scary and funny," said Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the State Hermitage Museum, at the official opening of the exhibit Friday, which was also attended by British supermodel Kate Moss, a friend of the artists.

"The End of Fun" is one of the first exhibits to be held in the newly renovated eastern wing of the General Staff Building, located across the square from the Winter Palace. Renovation work is still going on in the rest of the building, which is not scheduled to open officially until 2014, the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Hermitage Museum.

The exhibit therefore represents a chance to inspect the new interiors that are to house the museum's collection of modern art from the 19th to 21st centuries, as well as an opportunity to enter the grotesque world of the Chapmans.

The museum could not have chosen a more resonant exhibit with which to attract attention to its current projects, or reassert its relevance to the city's art community in a clean break from its traditionally stuffy and academic image.

"Modern art is always provocative, but this provocation can either take the form of high art or it can be outside the realm of art," Piotrovsky said.

"With this work we are dealing with the first case, and an exceptional example of it at that. We are showing how artistic language can make a statement about terror," he said.

In spite of the frequent critical and public attention the brothers attract, Jake Chapman, the younger of the two (born in 1966), claims that he doesn't strive for any particular role or impact in the modern art world.

"I'm just an artist focusing on my own work, and the meaning that I put into it. I don't position myself tactically or politically in relation to the art world," he told The St. Petersburg Times at the exhibit's opening Friday.

The second part of the exhibit features the Chapmans' infamous reworkings of a series of Francisco Goya etchings originally entitled "The Horrors of War." Several years ago, the Chapman brothers bought the series of etchings, added comical elements such as clown and dog heads to the victims and renamed the altered etchings "Insult to Injury." These "enhanced" etchings, at the time a subject of public outrage, are now on show at the Hermitage alongside a collection of 40 Goya etchings from the Hermitage collection — unaltered, naturally — titled "There is No One to Help Them." Coupled with a grim range of torture instruments on loan from the city's Artillery Museum and displayed in the same hall, the works contextualize and accentuate the cruelty and horror of humanity in previous centuries.

"These works show that the humorous but chilling horror that we see in the work of the Chapman brothers has always existed in art and history," Piotrovsky said.

"The End of Fun" is part of the bold Hermitage 20/21 program that seeks to promote modern art and rejuvenate the public's interest in the museum through a series of exhibits highlighting tendencies in modern art from both Russia and abroad. The program drew praise earlier this fall for an interactive show devoted to Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava.

The Chapman brothers exhibit has, however, already attracted inevitable criticism. An organization that calls itself the Cossacks of St. Petersburg has issued a written request to Piotrovsky to close the exhibit for its alleged promotion of Nazi symbolism.

For the Hermitage, this may very well be the beginning of fun.

"Jake and Dinos Chapman. The End of Fun" runs through Jan. 13 at the General Staff Building of the State Hermitage Museum, 6/8 Palace Square. St. Petersburg. Tel. (812) 710-9079.
www.hermitagemuseum.org.

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