

Lifeworks

Ruined vistas

Piranesi–Goya: *Roma fantastica and the Sleep of Reason*

Three hundred masterpieces from the Antonio Mazzotta Foundation, Milan
Curated by Hilliard T. Goldfarb

Francisco Goya and Jake and Dinos Chapman: *Disasters of War*

Prints from the Bruce Bailey Collection, Toronto
Curated by Stéphane Aquin

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
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A dazzling group of 18th-century copper printing plates provides the introduction to this display of masterful engravings at Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts. One can't help falling into an amazed stupor in the face of such dexterous accomplishment. Although trained in Venice as an engineer and architect, Giovanni Battista Piranesi made his name by publishing meticulous and fantastic studies of Roman ruins, and in the process provided the seeds for a new aesthetic consciousness. Francisco Goya's etchings comprise the second part of the exhibit, tracing, with Piranesi, what is referred to as "the apogee and final disillusionment of the Enlightenment." Finally, juxtaposed against a second set of Goya prints

(an earlier, crisper edition), a suite of contemporary prints based on Goya's *Disasters of War* by young British art stars Jake and Dinos Chapman provide the third part in what is really two separate but related shows: Piranesi–Goya and Goya–Chapmans. As a bonus, the confluence of these two shows provides a rare opportunity to compare two editions of the same suite of prints.

Both the Piranesi and the first Goya prints hearken from the Antonio Mazzotta Foundation in Milan, which helps explain the tenuous, if quixotic, pairing. Nevertheless, a stimulating dialogue ensues between the two masters, as romantic invention and human insight supersede technical virtuosity. Beyond the



Collection: Fondazione Antonio Mazzotta, Milan

Francisco Goya, *The sleep of reason produces monsters*. Plate 43 from the series *Los Caprichos*, 1799. Etching and aquatint, 21.5 cm × 15.0 cm

enduring art-historical conundrums such as the Romantic character of Classicism (or vice versa) and the subjective origins of documentary, the juxtaposition of these two near-contemporaries reveals the limits of enlightened reason and the birth of psychology.

Although Piranesi's catalogue of architectural forms is breathtaking in scope, the sheer quantity of detail soon becomes overwhelming. You have to stand back, rub your eyes and return with a painter's attitude: distilling the focal points, noting pregnant details and gleaning the rest. The *Vedute di Roma*, 135 scenes of ancient and modern Rome, provided research material and souvenirs for many a Grand Tour among artists and cognoscenti after it was first published circa 1748. It contributed to the emergence of modern archaeology, made a seductive case for the superiority of Rome over Greece as the proper model for modern republican states (in the end, the debate seems to have been won by Piranesi's great foe, J.J. Winkelmann, in favour of Greece), and provided a visual encyclopedia for what was perhaps the strongest and most enduring Classical revival in history.

Take a look at the figures in Piranesi's scenes. As you might expect, they are very small — and apparently inconsequential. But a marked distinction emerges as you look more closely. First, there are the pastoral types, including shepherds, loiterers and peasants, who blend into the scene like the animals and plants that have overtaken these once-great buildings. They are docile, ragged and essentially oblivious to the picturesque beauty and grandeur of the ruins they inhabit. They are part of nature. They stand as counterpoints to the remains of imperial greatness, unconscious agents of their ultimate demise. Then there are the men in hats, with outstretched arms, proclaiming, demonstrating and generally engaged in discourse that relates, one presumes, to the scene we behold. I say "we," since these men occupy the same psychological and social space as the public for these pictures. In a sense, they are outside the picture: foreigners, whose different frames of reference (education and class in this case) enable them to see this rub-



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Rear view of the mausoleum of Hadrian. Etching 44 cm × 56 cm. From the first volume of *Vedute di Roma*. First printing in Rome, 1748–1778. First Paris edition 1801–1836.

ble for what it is. These academics, artists, scientists and aristocrats clearly show an appreciation for the tragic beauty that lies before them, and it is these figures who represent Piranesi's clientele (ourselves included).

By contrast, Goya's purview eschews the material world, and grapples instead with human nature, social relations and their corruption. Far more intimate in scale, the 80 etchings entitled *Los Caprichos* (1799) and the *Disasters of War* suite (finally published in 1863, well after the artist's death) seem quite modest compared with Piranesi's grand vistas. Not only titled, but accompanied by editorial comments, these prints are significant precursors to today's political cartoons. Informal but sure-handed mark-making, strong graphic composition, polemical and contemporary subject matter blur the boundaries between art and journalism. These prints are in fact scathing attacks on social perversions under conservative political regimes and the dreadful human results of war.

Jake and Dinos Chapman secured their place as leaders of the YBA (Young British Artists) in the notorious *Sensation* exhibition (1997). There, they rendered one of Goya's blackest *Disasters* images as

life-size sculpture. *Great Deeds against the Dead* referred to the guerrilla war Spaniards fought against Napoleonic France, and presented corpses and body parts hanging from the leafless branches of a dead tree. In this exhibition, we see Goya's entire *Disasters of War* redone, less spectacularly, as watercoloured prints about the same size as the originals. Although there is no direct correspondence from panel to panel, the Chapmans' set maintains the moral outrage, journalistic contemporaneity and grotesque invention of its source. It is this last characteristic, typical of Piranesi, Goya and the Chapmans, that gives these two exhibitions their curatorial coherence. All of these artists re-directed their concentration away from order and the way things are supposed to be. Even a quick scan of the works presented here shows that their grotesque sensibilities in no way imply a flight from reality. On the contrary, the sometimes grim, sometimes fanciful use of deformation, exaggeration and hybridity can function not only by showing how things might be, but by showing how things actually are.

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