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If you believe in freedom of expression, support Abode of Chaos

This French art museum has attracted protests for its chaotic topical imagery. But does that mean it should be closed?



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theguardian.com, Monday 17 November 2014 13.30 GMT



'It is a place in which all references to the seemingly ordered and structured world outside are obliterated. And that is why some people would like to see it shut down.' Photograph: Abode of Chaos

The first thing you see when you walk through the blackened wrought-iron gates are the stony faces of Osama bin Laden, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other historical figures staring out from a graffiti-covered wall at a scene of utter devastation. Welcome to the Abode of Chaos, a sprawling outdoor contemporary art museum near Lyon in France. It is a place in which all references to the seemingly ordered and structured world outside are obliterated. And that is precisely the reason why some people would like to see it shut down.

Burnt-out cars, oil barrels, silver painted truck engines and mannequins that look like dead bodies are strewn around the ground. Look left, and you'll see a damaged military helicopter tilted on its side, a yellow tank that pokes its menacing gun barrel out from a

tall hedge, and an aircraft with no landing gear lies on top of a mound of earth and black gravel with the words “Let’s be cruel” daubed crudely on the side of the fuselage. Chains hang from gantries, twisted cables are everywhere, grotesquely bent steel girders and strange metallic structures abound.

The Abode of Chaos is the brainchild of Thierry Ehrmann, a freemason, artist and businessman. It is situated in the sleepy village of Saint-Romain-au-Mont-d’Or, near Lyon. Ehrmann himself lives on the site in a large house, the walls of which are covered in slogans, graffiti, images of historical figures and mysterious logos. “I’m trying to ‘de-legendise’ the world,” he says, when I ask him how he sees his work. “Janus said that chaos preceded the divine. He was right, and the world is constantly renewing itself, constructing and deconstructing itself.” He goes on to explain that his project, which began to take shape in the 1980s, “began as research into alchemy and the regeneration of matter and has evolved ever since”.



The abode’s three or four in-house artists can often be seen working on new ideas, the most recent of which is a reconstruction of Yasser Arafat’s funeral. A 10 metre-wide by 3 metre-high structure, it consists of upright, bent and rusting metal girders with piping attached to the top of each one that snakes haphazardly overhead and into the epicentre of the piece, where Arafat is represented by brightly coloured girders. The back garden is dominated by a haunting reconstruction of the remains of the World Trade Centre, and a massive metal bunker stands next to a truck with a cutting mechanism attached to the front that contains the charred remains of mannequins mixed with black tar. A burnt-out oil truck marked “Halliburton” stands as a silent witness to what feeds conflict.

The constant bombardment of images of chaos and disorder explains why some visitors

consider the museum to be a disturbing or even unhealthy place. Children and young people are generally fascinated by the exhibits, however, and they arrive in large numbers (and for free) when the museum – which was visited by 120,000 people last year – is open.

Needless to say, the Abode has not gone unnoticed by the inhabitants of the village – and the mayor and others have been trying in vain to get it shut down for years. Ehrmann knows this, and shrugs his shoulders resignedly. “They will never stop trying,” he sighs, before going on to remind me of the excavated area in the grounds which contains the remains of a temple in which a massacre of Protestants is said to have been carried out in 1630. “That drives the mayor nuts!” he says.



The constant attempts to have the museum shut down seem designed to muzzle artistic expression, a trend that appears to have gathered pace over the last few years, in France as elsewhere. The recent attack on Paul McCarthy’s “butt plug” statue in Paris comes to mind, as do the 2012 defacing of a Mark Rothko mural and the attempts earlier this year to get the Exhibit B show at the Barbican withdrawn.

Freedom of expression means allowing everyone to express their views within the limits of the law, and is to be fiercely protected from attack. Those who seek to stifle or defile the work of others should be condemned, as their actions are no more than an attempt to censor others.

The Abode of Chaos is a challenging environment which asks fundamental questions about the nature of change and chaos in our world, a world of flux and a constant cycle of upheaval and regeneration. We need places like this, and if ever you are near Lyon it would be well worth taking the time to visit it. Oh, and don’t forget to bring the kids.



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