

Common Culture

Cornerhouse, Manchester

By Robert Clark

Tuesday 16 March 1999 02.04 GMT

Chucking-out-time will never be the same again. The kebab-shop menus, the laminated fish-chips-and-peas adverts, the cabinet of pop and pickled eggs, even the aftermath landscape of puke-stained pavements. Common Culture will make you do a second take. It's art.

Paul Rooney, David Campbell and Mark Durden, collectively Common Culture, are artistic sophisticates. They're not daft, but sometimes, like the rest of us, they like to act it. They create pop art that is decidedly late 20th-century British. It's grubby, provincial, anti-heroic, a mess of creative self-parody and multicultural pastiche. Though it shamelessly wallows in bad taste, it can be rather tasty when taken with a pinch of sardonic humour and a pint or 10 of lager. It occupies a different cultural planet from the sixties-America pop art of Warhol and Lichtenstein, those so-cool, flash and glamorous superstars. No wonder Common Culture's last show, in New York, was greeted with bemused scepticism.

With this, their first solo show in Britain, they have arrived on home ground, and I reckon we'll be hearing a lot more from them. For those four or five of us in the know, Rooney is already a cult figure for his recent CD, *Time On Their Hands*, which sets stream-of-consciousness banalities against some delightful low-tech techno; when he gets together with his mates, the deliberate cultural confusions are more knowingly complex. The take-away menus listing varieties of kebabs, curries and barmes - chip, sausage - are presented as banal as they come. But on the culturally hallowed walls of the Cornerhouse, the pieces take on allusions to the fluorescent light installations of Dan Flavin. Elsewhere a chip-shop counter is upturned to slyly resemble a Donald Judd abstract aluminium sculpture.

The exhibition title, *Counter Culture*, is itself a deadpan pun. The fact that Common Culture know their conceptualism and minimalism as well as they do their Liverpool post-pub haunts is further stressed by a pile of illuminated signs strewn across the gallery floor. On closer inspection, these are seen to include texts elucidating key discourses of postmodernist theory. One expresses a desire to take 'refuge in a relatively unregulated social space where contrary social definitions can survive, and occasionally flourish'.

It is this span of association, ranging all the way from what used to be denigrated or indulged in as common or crap through to what used to be savoured as high art, that takes the show beyond yet another Britart exercise in ironic one-liners. What you see is what you get with this lot. But you can take it as you please. Some will see aesthetic displacement and sculptural charm. Some might recognise a radical, mock-pedestrian poetry. Others might sympathise with what they think is anti-art subversion. Others still, no doubt, will be outraged, suspecting pseudo-artists of having us all on. The exhibition catalogue insists that

'serious engagement' and 'a playful, pleasurable, disruptive or vulgar approach' are not mutually exclusive. They can say that again.

Common Culture: Counter Culture is at the Cornerhouse, Manchester (0161-200 1500), till April 25.