

## Circus Fantasies



Chris Orr's show *Many Mansions: A Travelling Circus* at the Royal Festival Hall on the South Bank until March 1 is a triumphant celebration of the survival of an individual imagination in the face of fashion, the teaching treadmill and bureaucratic banality. It is also hugely enjoyable and very funny.

In spite of a well-established reputation - his work is in many public collections and he teaches at the Royal College of Art - Chris Orr found that he was unable to interest any official organisation in mounting a retrospective of the last 10 years of his work - etchings, lithographs, drawings and paintings. Nothing daunted, he set up a touring show of his own that will be on the road until 1992.

Chris Orr's work is the antithesis of the 'something to go with the sofa' school of printmaking that dominates the commercial art market. Yet his insistently figurative, narrative

and distinctively low-life approach does not conform to the tastes of high-art.

Technically, some of these prints are revolutionary, but the immense skills learned from 30 years of drawing, etching, inking, rolling and printing are always at the service of the idea. Every picture tells a story, and Orr has long exploited the close link between the medium of the printed image and of the printed word. The accumulative narrative is the artist's own story, as a teacher, as a father, as an observer of the contemporary world, and as the victim of his own fantasies and desires. His worldview is highly individual, yet it is an entirely recognisable picture of the tacky, sensuous and chaotic society in which we live. Picturing our dreams, and revelling in the surrealism of social reality, Chris Orr makes genuinely popular art.

*Robert Hewison*