

# THERE'S SOMETHING FUNNY GOING ON IN THE GALLERY

There's no obvious connection between Count Dracula, Keith Chegwin, the Daleks and The Smiths but they're all featured in the drawings, paintings, video and performance of 35-year-old artist John Strutton. While most of us forget childhood influences once we grow up, Strutton's work is underpinned by the collision of those two perspectives. When that combines adult artistic concerns about life, death and belief with horror films, music, pop culture and Strutton's own enthusiasm, it can lead to equally charged results.

One project that has found momentum is The Band Of Nod. Planned as a performance about groups who get out on the streets and express their beliefs in song, Strutton set out to create and front a group of his own. Surprisingly he found no trouble persuading friends, family and acquaintances to join him – kitted out in Groucho Marx accessories and a dog collar – on guitar and kazoo for a medley of rosy but recognisable rock songs.

Although intended as a one-off, the band continues to expand. Members now number 40-plus, and the repertoire takes in Tom Jones and TV themes. Having to wear makeshift costumes including orange-faced Oompa Loompas from Willy Wonka and spotty dogs from 101 Dalmatians seems no deterrent. "What's important to this kind of group is belonging to it rather than what it stands for," Strutton explains. "The ideology behind this group is that there isn't one."

Another ongoing project is Father, Son And Scary Ghost, featuring a video of Strutton's dad pretending to be Dracula and the host of other scary characters he used to



Untitled by Tony Hancock fan John Strutton

become to thrill and terrify Strutton as a child. A related solo show last year installed Strutton's childhood train-set with the addition of miniature paintings of carriages bearing the titles of personally significant songs, books and TV programmes.

"There's obviously nostalgia in the work, but what it's really about is reinvesting those early experiences with the rational and cultural view of the adult," Strutton explains. "You don't want to go back to the raw view of the world you had as a child, but in a way that's exactly what most artists are trying to get back to."

Strutton's next project for a group show called Counter at East London's AVCO Gallery again resurrects a childhood hero – but this time it's not Dracula but Tony Hancock. In a space surrounded by drawings and paintings, on the show's opening night, Strutton will use the structure of Hancock's sketch The Radio Ham to orchestrate a performance that not only proposes actor Bert Kwouk and Hancock in conversation, but sees Kwouk singing post-punk anthem Love Will Tear Us Apart – a surreal stunt that's not to be missed.

*John Strutton's performance can be seen at 7.30pm on Jan 23 at the opening of Counter at AVCO, 13 Gibraltar Walk, London E2 (020-7613 0089). Continues from Jan 26-Feb 25, Fri-Sun 12-6pm. Free.*

HELEN SUMPTER