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Photography: MONA/Rémi Chauvin
Gilbert & George: The Art Exhibition, on display at MONA until March 28, 2016.

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Gilbert and George: Life as a Living Sculpture

BY REBECCA O'MALLEY 30th November 2015

Gilbert and George will open up tonight at the NGV ahead of a 50-year retrospective at MONA.

Every day, Gilbert and George eat breakfast at the same cafe. They watch an hour of television at 6pm, and then, like clockwork, take an evening stroll to the same Kurdish restaurant in the East End of London. They can be seen walking from Spitalfields to Dalston: always impeccably dressed, sporting similar, but not identical, suits and ties.

Gilbert and George are creatures of habit. Daily life has followed the same formula for decades, and their routine is idiosyncratic and monotonous. Quite simply, they do not have time for superfluous thought. Decisions relating to nourishment or entertainment are considered needless and mundane. In their day-to-day existence, it is understood that the mind should be kept clean, nurtured as a deserted space in which creative ideas can thrive.

Gilbert Prousch (born September 1943 in Italy) and George Passmore (born January 1942 in the UK) are two men in their mid-'70s who function together as a

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single-minded art entity or as they refer to themselves: “two people, one artist”.

Tony Ellwood, director of the NGV, sheds some light on “the artist”, describing Gilbert and George as “living sculptures themselves”.

Gilbert and George met as students at St. Martin’s School of Art in 1967, and soon developed a distaste for traditional sculpture, noting its inability to communicate to people beyond elitist art circles.

In response to these perceived limits, they built a carefully crafted image where art and lifestyle are fused. To this day, Gilbert and George parade themselves as a portable sculpture, carrying their craft into the accessible world of everyday life. It’s a full realisation of the concept of the artist as art.

“They are hugely disciplined in the way that they behave, but their content is quite contradictory to the way they are perceived,” Ellwood observes. “They behave as a pair of straight-laced guys, and then come out with what is, at times, a confronting commentary on sexuality, social values and western life.”

Gilbert and George make art in the East End of London that’s as relevant to the everyday Australian as it is to the East London art critic. They tackle universal themes: race, sexuality, money, corruption, fear, addiction, violence and death. Their work speaks to both the local and global market, an idea that Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling, co-directors of exhibitions at MONA, explain further.

“Their work is made in the local community, but asks questions that are common across the world and relevant on an international scale,” Varenne says.

The art of Gilbert and George is striking. They first arrived in Australia in 1973 and presented their performance piece, *The Singing Sculpture*, in both Sydney and Melbourne. They covered their heads and hands with a bronze-coloured metallic powder and stood on a table, singing and moving along to a recording of Flanagan and Allen’s song, *Underneath the Arches*. Suitably, it was *The Singing Sculpture* that established their reputation as a living, portable sculpture.

Gilbert and George have since moved into large-scale photographic practice. Their expansive body of work features the repetition of recognisable motifs (the Union Jack, the British monarchy, their own bodily fluids, indecent news headlines) displayed among a brightly coloured kaleidoscope of images. These shocking subjects often feature alongside portraits of themselves, either suited or naked.

Their work is a life and times of the modern world and exists as a reflection of the human condition. “They live among the people, and have an uncanny ability to observe the minute details,” Durling says. “Their work is a reflection of their environment, but it is always current.”

“Gilbert and George are like sponges,” she adds. “They soak up what is around them. They generate work, not necessarily in response to their surroundings, but in reflection. Gilbert and George show the world for what it is at the time.”

“Their sense of design is incredibly rich and has continued to evolve in a challenging way,” Ellwood says. “Their design standards are incredibly high and have broad appeal. Their work offers an informed, interesting commentary that continues to be raw, bold and refreshingly candid.”

Gilbert and George discuss their 50-year career in conversation with NGV director, Tony Ellwood, on Monday November 30 in the Great Hall of NGV International at 6.30pm. Tickets have sold out, but the conversation will also be live-streamed on the [NGV YouTube channel](#) at 6.30pm.

Gilbert and George: The Art Exhibition opened at MONA on November 28. The retrospective features five decades of work, dating from 1970 to 2014. It will remain open until March 28, 2016.

