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The Genius of Gilbert and George's Pictures at MONA Tasmania

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | DECEMBER 07, 2015



Gilbert & George
 (Image by Nicholas Forrest)

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“I didn’t really know much about Gilbert & George before tonight. I hadn’t really taken much notice of the work. But I am going to have to now,” a lady said to me at the opening of British art duo Gilbert & George’s “The Art Exhibition” at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart (MONA), Tasmania. Hers was a seemingly innocent comment, yet one that perfectly illustrates the unignorable power and impact of the infamous British art duo’s provocative and pioneering work. “The Art Exhibition (http://www.mona.net.au/gilbert-and-george/)” at MONA, on show until March 2016, is the duo’s first Australasian retrospective, bringing together 97 works spanning five decades from 1970 to 2014.

Over a period of five decades, Gilbert & George have forged a singular path through the art world, beginning in the 1960s when they turned themselves into art, creating and inhabiting the role of “living sculptures.” In the 1970s they created the first of their signature billboard-sized, graphic style, gridded photomontages which challenge conventions and taboos. Their unique visual language encompasses imagery, iconography, and text, and at its most divisive depicts bombs, shits, sexual acts, and burqa-clad Muslim women, and/or features divisive and confronting slogans supplemented with obscene and dirty words, and in many cases images of the

artists themselves.

At the center of their practice is an “Art for All” philosophy executed within a framework of morality. “We believe that we are all part of a great big Western triumph, but we want to take things forward.” the duo explains. “We realized that people were using taste and preferences in art as a weapon against people they believed to be socially or educationally inferior to them.” Drawing influence and inspiration from the cultural and social framework of their natural habitat of London’s East End, where they have lived and worked together in the same house for 40 years, Gilbert & George aim to fight prejudices by providing the opportunity for change within the viewer.

Although expansive, “The Art Exhibition” is not their largest – that was their 2007 Tate retrospective, which included more than 200 pictures. But the artists identify their MONA show as their best to date, which is not hard to justify. There are several factors that have contributed to the overwhelming success of “The Art Exhibition,” including the curatorial framework and structure, which is entirely controlled and devised by the artists using scale models of the exhibition space, as well as the size of the show and of course its contents. I did not see the Tate retrospective, but having experienced their MONA show, which seems to be the perfect size, I can only imagine that it was perhaps too big.

The starting point for “The Art Exhibition” was an extraordinary group of more than 40 pictures spanning the years 1971 to recent years from the collection of the late Massimo Martino, whose widow continues to add to the collection. Presented across three different spaces, the exhibition begins with a selection of the artist’s “Scapegoating” bomb pictures, and continues with examples of their “Jack Freak Pictures,” “London Pictures,” “Thirteen Hooligan Pictures,” “Perversive Pictures,” “Rudimentary Pictures,” “Nine Dark Pictures,” “Gingko Pictures,” finishing with a selection of the duo’s largest works in the taller galleries of the fourth gallery space.

The effectiveness and impact of “The Art Exhibition” lies not in individual works, each of which is a highlight in its own right, but in the overall presentation, which is itself a work of art that reveals the genius of Gilbert & George’s practice in a concise, cohesive, and engaging manner. As the exhibition unfolds, the enormity of their dedication and commitment is unveiled and the timelessness of their work is brought to light. One of the most important questions answered by the exhibition is “how have they continued to get away with creating such provocative and challenging work for almost 50 years?” The answer, as “The Art Exhibition” reveals, is twofold: aesthetic and procedural.

Aesthetically, Gilbert & George’s pictures adhere to a strict formula that includes a range of clever artistic devices. To begin with, their use of negative imagery serves to partially defuse the tension of their most confronting motifs and iconography, while at the same time it enables them to work with a visual language that is relevant and up-to-date. Secondly, they have never actually been vulgar or coarse, as they state, because they only work with standard, two dimensional images like those in every national gallery, many of which feature the same sort of imagery and iconography employed by Gilbert & George, albeit executed in paint.

Procedurally, the lives of Gilbert & George mimic the strictly methodized and systemized nature of their artistic practice: they adhere to a regimented daily routine that not only governs their everyday activities, but also the process that they use to create their pictures. By synthesizing their lives and their practice into a coherent whole, which is also partially achieved by operating as “living sculptures,” they establish the art as the main protagonist and make it almost impossible to separate them from their practice. And if you cannot define or contextualize the actions of the artists within a preexisting framework, then you can’t execute judgement on them or their work. Genius!

When Gilbert & George began their artistic journey in the late 60s, they established a precedent that remains intact and incredibly effective to this day. By reframing and restaging the imagery and language of the issues that they deal with in an atypical context, they establish a counter-attack that reanimates and reinvigorates the issues that they address. As they continue to prod and probe the human psyche and interrogate the human condition in their typically compassionate and compelling manner, Gilbert & George build on the incredible legacy that has enabled them to stage life changing exhibitions such as MONA’s “The Art Exhibition.”

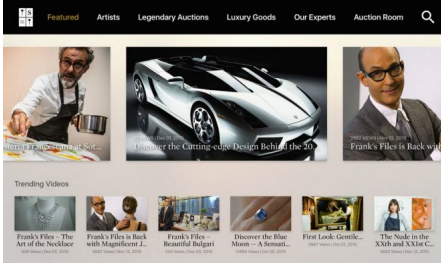
“Gilbert & George: The Art Exhibition” is curated by Nicole Durling and Olivier Varenne, Mona’s Co-Directors of Exhibitions, in conjunction with Gilbert & George. For more information visit the MONA website here. (<http://www.mona.net.au/gilbert-and-george/>)

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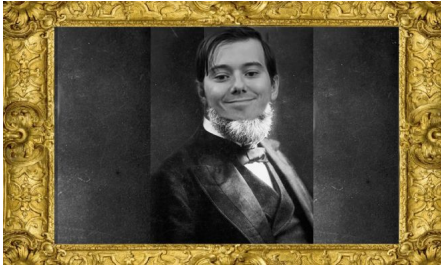
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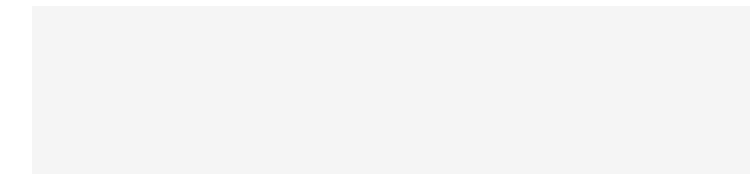
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