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Gilbert & George

December 4, 2015



GILBERT & GEORGE: THE ART EXHIBITION Gentlemen of the gutter: Gilbert & George. Photo: Jay Brooks/Camera Press/AustralS



In the Victorian era the English were masters of the world, known for imperial glory and the strength of their civil institutions. But what are the English known for today? According to English doctor, Theodore Dalrymple: “for their militant vulgarity, their lack of restraint, their arrogant loudness, their ferocious and determined drunkenness, their antisocial egotism, their aggression and quick resort to violence, the grossness of their appetites, the prideful ugliness of their appearance and their total lack of finesse in any department of human existence whatsoever.”

This came to mind when I read a statement by [Gilbert & George](#), emblazoned on the wall at David Walsh’s [Museum of Old and New Art](#), in Hobart:

“We are unhealthy, middle-aged, dirty-minded, depressed, cynical, empty, tired-brained, seedy, rotten, dreaming, badly-behaved, ill-mannered, arrogant, intellectual, self-pitying, honest, successful, hard-working, thoughtful, artistic, religious, fascistic, blood-thirsty, teasing, destructive, ambitious, colourful, damned, stubborn, perverted and good. We are artists.”

There are a few positives in Gilbert & George’s self-assessment, but taken together the good and the bad tend to cancel each other out. This penchant for contradiction and ambiguity is utterly characteristic of the famous duo.

Ever since they met as students at St. Martin’s School of Art in London in 1967, and decided to work collaboratively, Gilbert & George have stood out from the art crowd through their paradoxical mock-conformism. They dressed in suits and ties when everyone else was trying to look freakish and unkempt. They were a two-man counter-counter-culture who could stroll through a Rolling Stones concert in Hyde Park looking as if they had just left their desks at the bank.

Over the years Gilbert & George have been reviled as crypto-fascists and perverts, hailed as humanists and libertarians. They have charmed and scandalised their audiences, being

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unflinchingly polite and courteous while breaking every taboo.

Last week they were at it again in Hobart, chatting merrily with press and public in the midst of a monumental survey that contains more than a hundred multi-panelled works, most of them sourced from a single private collection in Monaco. Even their most dedicated enemy would have to admit it was an impressive display. Vast, overwhelming, almost hallucinogenic, it would be a crowd-puller in any Australian art museum, although it is MONA that has, once again, stolen a march on the public galleries.

This is the first time Gilbert & George have shown in this country since the Kaldor Public art project of 1973. In the guise of *The Singing Sculptures*, they stood on a plinth and sang *Underneath the Arches*, over and over, at the state galleries in Sydney and Melbourne.



Gilbert & George present *The Singing Sculpture* at The Art Gallery of New South Wales with their 'charcoal-on-paper sculpture' displayed across the gallery wall behind. Photo: Macrae/Fairfaxphotos

During the past four decades the duo has become one of the premier acts in the world of contemporary art. They are pop stars, perfectionists and control fiends who like to select and hang exhibitions themselves, with minimal input from curators. The MONA exhibition, which spans a period of 45 years, was planned on a scale model in Gilbert & George's studio in London. They also edited and designed the catalogue, one of the few MONA publications to be ready when the show opens. It contains a collection of 11 texts by their favourite essayist, Michael Bracewell, which are well-written but rather too repetitive.

One can see why the artists are so fond of Bracewell, who compares them to the great figures of 19th and 20th century literature in their engagement with the life of the people. It may sound a little pretentious to think of Gilbert & George in the same breath as Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Baudelaire and T.S.Eliot, but it chimes in neatly with the image the couple have cultivated for so many years.

They would like to be viewed as artists who reject the rarefied attitudes of the art scene and engage gleefully with the world around them. Their chosen field of study is the East End of London, which they see as a microcosm of all human experience.

"Art for all!" they declare, like secular prophets, come to liberate us from our prejudices. They claim to despise formalism in art, and look always for "the moral dimension".

That's one version of the story, perhaps the 'official' version. The other sees Gilbert & George as the crowning glory of a decadent, narcissistic art world – a long-running comedy routine; a vaudeville act that seems to be touring forever. Their work has been compared, more than once, with the *Carry On* movies, as a smutty farce on English life and values.

Gilbert & George have taken the utmost pleasure in striving to shock and jolt their audience. In 1994 those who saw them as a pair of besuited pseudo-tories with a penchant for rude words, were confronted with a series called *The Naked Shit Pictures*, which featured naked photos of the artists, cavorting in abstract spaces framed by enormous, sculptural turds. *Shitty Life*, reads one title; *Human Shits*, another.



Gilbert and George, *Naked (shitty world)*, 1994

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It was the acme of vulgarity, although the real-life Gilbert & George remained as neat and demure as ever. In a show as vast as the MONA survey, one sees the shit pictures as only a small chapter in their catalogue of would-be outrages. There are microscopic close-ups of their own sweat, blood, piss and sperm, presented as a form of decorative art. There are galleries of handsome young men, lined up like homoerotic altarpieces. There are works that excoriate religion – all forms of religion – and nationalism.

It would be an understatement to say these works sail close to the edge – they have plunged joyously over the precipice, beyond any conventions of good or bad taste. The “moral dimension” Gilbert & George seek is a systematic attempt to explode everything they see as false morality and hypocrisy. Homophobia is a constant target, as is racism and religious dogmatism. They are not the first to see organised religion as the root of all evil, but few artists or thinkers have been so consistently, so violently anti-religious.

The joke, of course, is that they look and act like conservative businessmen. Even their most confronting works are as bold and colourful as advertising billboards, or perhaps stained glass windows. They are iconoclastic non-entities making art that attracts and repels.

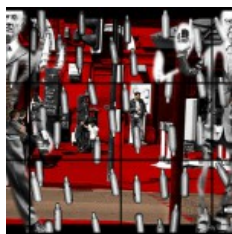
From behind a façade of consummate Englishness they set out to expose the grossness and depravity of the world around them. The *Jack Freak Pictures* (2008) use images of the Union Jack combined with grotesque morphings of their own figures that make them look like demons or mutants. The *London Pictures* (2011) use hundreds of daily newspaper banners, purloined from newsagents, to produce a chorus of sordidness and sensationalism.



'Forward' (2008)



'Killers Straight' (2011)



'Homothetic' (2013)

Everything in Gilbert & George's art has its opposite, its distorted reflection. Rather than *Underneath the Arches* – a song in which two tramps celebrate the perfect freedom of being homeless – their theme song should be the old Velvet Underground number, *I'll Be Your Mirror*. In one gigantic, lurid picture after another we encounter the impassive, blank faces of the artists. It doesn't feel right to call these works self-portraits because there is no insight into character or personality beyond the familiar pantomime.

We see two deadpan comedians enjoying the adolescent humour of exposing themselves to an audience, making wall-sized images of all those things not spoken of in 'polite' society. I could almost accept the idea of Gilbert & George as two overgrown children, intent on making mischief, but every so often they hit the mark with surprising force.

At MONA the impact occurs in the very first room, with the *Scapegoating Pictures* from 2013. These show women in burkas photographed in the streets of the East End, along with rows of small bombs, conjuring instant thoughts of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. The artists themselves appear in red-coloured fragments, as if blown to pieces.

The surprise is that the 'bombs' are really used canisters of nitrous oxide, a recreational drug. The women in burkas are locals going about their daily business. Nothing is quite what it seems, yet the sense of panic is palpable. The pictures contrast London's contemporary drug culture with the rigid traditions of the immigrant community. Rather than looking for faceless bombers in black robes, perhaps we should be more worried that we've bred a generation of young people who only want to get bombed off their faces.

Gilbert and George
 Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, TAS.
 Until 28 March 2016

Published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 5th December, 2015

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