

The Art of Gilbert & George 1967-2007

The journey through art and life that these two men have taken since meeting as students in 1967 and joining forces to become one artist, has been a voyage of self-understanding. For over forty years Gilbert & George have been addressing a broad spectrum of human existence in the modern world and their work has been consistently prescient, remarkable and influential. The striking originality of their pictures is a huge achievement and makes their work instantly recognisable. They set themselves apart from other artists of their generation by their desire to create art for themselves and incorporating themselves. Every aspect of their lives has contributed to their art which was reflected in the installation of *Gilbert & George: Major Exhibition* held at Tate Modern earlier this year. The Tate's show is no less than a homage to the godfathers of autobiographical Brit Art.¹ They place themselves, their thoughts and their feelings at the centre of their art and capture a cosmology of human experiences, encompassing an astonishing range of emotions and themes, including examinations of humanity stripped bare; from sex advertisements to religious fundamentalism. Their art is subversive, incisive and arresting with their main focus and inspiration of their art being firmly rooted in the fabric of western urban life.²

Gilbert & George's art has the potential to prompt a smile, feel awe, yearn for escape, enjoy moments of infantile silliness, to be horrified or disgusted, to laugh at ourselves, to think about the inevitability of death and speed that youth slips away.³ Their art frees us and allows us to enjoy life in its messy imperfect glory. They are fearless in mercilessly exposing themselves even to the extent of ridicule and self-humiliation which they did in their early "magazine sculpture" *George the Cunt and Gilbert the Shit* 1969. The artists recognised the potential magazines had to reach the broadest possible audience and expressed their extreme ideas through a democratic language available to all.

Between 1970 and 1974 Gilbert & George created some large scale impressive drawings *The General Jungle* and canvases *The Paintings (with us in Nature)* which open the Tate's show. They employed a depersonalised method to convey nineteenth century Romantic notions of the artist as a lonely, friendless and solitary person, isolated in the margins of society or losing himself in an oblivion of drink. The artists

¹ Gale, I. (2007), *Gilbert & George: 40 Years of Shock and Awe*, Art Review, March 11, 2007, Sunday, Page 10.

² Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 6.

³ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 13.

positioned themselves within the drawing gazing at the viewer resulting in each picture acting as a visual love letter. These drawings occupy the first few rooms of the exhibition and represent touching equivalents of actual experiences or moments in time. The grid system was employed since *Cherry Blossom* in 1974 as the artists preferred to see sequences of their pictures displayed together in a mutually supportive fashion, so that the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. They despair to see individual works displayed in permanent collections of museums where their power seems diminished by the isolation.⁴



The Nature of Looking
1970
348 x 236 cm
Charcoal on paper.

The *Cherry Blossom* pictures of 1974 and the *Bloody Life* pictures of 1975 convey the mood of hopelessness and atmosphere of aggression and violence that embodied the 1970's with the sudden infusions of blood red. The same negativity was also expressed independently with passion in the music and attitude of punk.

From the beginning of their career Gilbert & George wanted to communicate beyond the narrow confines of the art world adopting the slogan 'Art for All' in 1969 and so they chose a visual language that anyone can understand and identify with. They say 'we do not work for the in-crowd'. The formality of their appearance acts as a pledge to their independence and commitment to their work. Rarely have artists of our time been so productive in a variety of forms and built such an impressive and complex oeuvre as Gilbert & George. They have produced 938 pictures 1971 - 2003, 13

⁴ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 16.

charcoal on paper sculptures 1970 - 1974, 440 postcard sculptures and pieces 1972 - 1989, 11 postal sculptures, 6 magazine sculptures, 12 edition works, 4 video sculptures and 5 films.⁵

Cultural commentator Michael Bracewell said 'It is difficult to think of another artist, even internationally, who could do a retrospective while they were still alive consisting of 200 pictures. You get the feeling this is a mid career retrospective for Gilbert and George. They're still endlessly defining and updating what they do.'⁶

Gilbert & George have worked with photography primarily, but not exclusively, since 1971 as photography acted as a problematic solution to producing large scale pictures with maximum impact. The pictures convey the impression that they have created images effortlessly and remove any obvious sign of the handmade which unites both artists' work.

Drinking Pieces 1972 - 1973, *Falling* and *Smashed* 1972 are good examples of their early photography pieces presented under the title *New Decorative Works*. They consist of separately famed fragmentary images scattered on the wall suggestive of the dizzying effects of excessive consumption of alcohol. The artist's iconicised the symbols associated with their excess, in particular the Gordon's gin bottle crest which conformed nicely with their apparent traditionalism.⁷ In many cases the negatives have been distorted in the dark room to enhance the state of intoxicification and blurred vision appropriate to the subject that the artists uncharacteristically acted out as they came to terms with the expectations placed upon them as newly successful artists. Rather than returning to the studio the morning after to engage with an activity totally disconnected from the night before, they made the honest decision to convey the reality of their existence as they spiraled out of control.⁸

⁵ Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 9.

⁶ Leris, Sophie. <http://news.independent.co.uk/people/profiles>

⁷ Gale, I. (2007), *Gilbert & George: 40 Years of Shock and Awe*, *Art Review*, March 11, 2007, Sunday, Page 10.

⁸ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 17, 18.



Gin and Tonic
1973
71 x 42 cm
Photograph Piece.

Gilbert & George have often been described as the quintessential London artists as their subject matter is directly linked their immediate environment of the border between The City and The East End. East London is often defined on sociological maps as a place no decent person, let alone a fashionable member of the art world, would desire to live. They found that the streets were encoded with centuries of human activity. The spicy and colourful area around Fournier Street provided a boiling pot of multicultural elements with its Huguenot and Jewish roots and Bangladeshi markets. The fusions and tensions of the area between local and global, privilege and exclusion, migrant populations and cultural traditions are at the heart of their art. George has said ‘Nothing happens in the world that doesn’t happen in the East End’. By representing the condition of the capital and its local textures their work has an international quality.⁹

In *Red Morning* pictures they turn their attention towards the urban landscape on their doorstep. They represent the faceless, anonymous, alienating office blocks and residential high rises and communicate an almost authoritarian disregard for the individual, with an attendant bleakness. In this series Gilbert & George, like Charles Dickens, explore the vastness of London through its smallest details, lonely outcasts and covert, secret worlds. Through their pictures they transform their experience of the city

⁹ Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 7.

into a vision filled with romanticism and an intense poetic strangeness based upon realism. These pictures demonstrate how our external surroundings and internal feelings relate and affect our lives.¹⁰



Red Morning: Hate
1977
242 x 202 cm
Photograph Piece.

Through *The Dirty Words* pictures Gilbert & George take the experience of despair, disengagement and isolation further using vulgar sexual terms. They identify themselves with angry aimless youths whom they walk on the city's grimy streets in *Underneath the Arches* 1969 and for the first time have a sense of direct political engagement. In photographs from *Underneath The Arches* the viewer is made aware of how extreme, isolated, determined and committed they are to their art. The picture is closer in spirit to Sex Pistols *Anarchy in the UK* rallying the call to the disaffected youth, rather than to the Tory party policy. There is a sense of empathy for those who are poor, unemployed or struggling on the margins of society. Gilbert & George act for those driven to assert themselves through graffiti on streets. They take notice of words of provocation which tarnish and desecrate the environment and give voice to the unnamed people who made them.¹¹

¹⁰ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 19.

¹¹ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 20.



Fuck,
1977,
242 x 202 cm,
Photography Piece.

In their youth Gilbert & George created art with a lightness of touch, satirical wit and sense of their own sexual vulnerability. Each new group of pictures is a consistent body built around one theme and represents an unpredictable shift in tone, mood and pictorial structure. The actual making of the pictures is like an eruption that comes about without too much thinking as they switch to a subconscious mode. Researching, conceiving, designing, exhibiting, publishing, discussing, documenting and archiving are integrated and consistent. This process is an “existence”, since their art so much equals their lives and vice versa.¹²

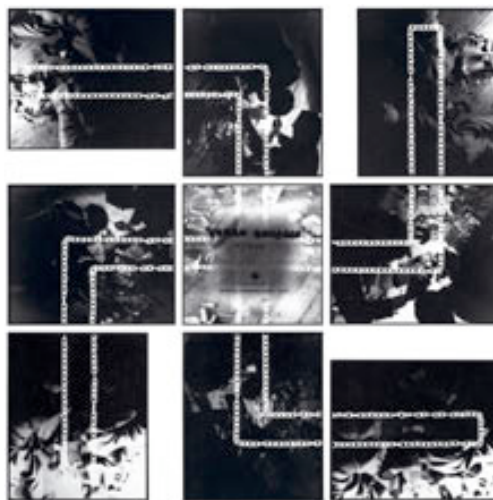
Gilbert & George can often come under heavy media attack mainly because of subject matter. It makes them feel fundamentally misunderstood and has taken their work repeatedly into an unwanted sensationalist perspective. To believe that they deliberately aim to provoke is to misunderstand them, they have been quoted saying ‘shocking is a media idea, it is not an artist’s idea. Our pictures are not attacking or confronting but exploring’. Gilbert & George have explored the human condition in all its aspects and broken taboos with rebellious gusto. Their artistic integrity claims the freedom of speech so they tell a story without compromise which can make some people uncomfortable while viewing their pictures.¹³

In the *Human Bondage* 1974 series there is a shift to a stricter format made up of a grid

¹² Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 10.

¹³ Campbell- Johnston, R. (2007), *In the Cathedral of the High Priests of Profanity*, The Times (London), February 12, 2007, Monday, Page 25.

with equal sized elements. As the elegance, simplicity and austerity of their formal solutions increased, so the content became correspondingly darker. The swastika and inverted swastika that appears in some of the *Human Bondage* pictures, interpreted by some as flirtation with Fascism, is relayed like evidence of the torments we inflict upon ourselves and each other, and for the imprisonment we experience through acting on our desires.¹⁴



Human Bondage No. 5,
1974,
175 x 175 cm,
Photography Piece.

Gilbert and George have subjected themselves to an unremitting self-exploration and self-exposure, not out of vanity but as an example to the viewers of the necessity for a full examined life. Their work explores minority groups and challenges the viewer to react for equality rather than discrimination. In their later pictures Gilbert & George brought controversially discussions of bodily functions to the surface which they view as just the facts of life. It is these bodily function pieces that have earned them notoriety.¹⁵ Escapism and presenting everything in an optimistic light with a rosy glow through art, however well intentioned, is not part of Gilbert & George's lifelong project. They won the Turner Prize in 1986 amidst criticism from left-wing commentators of their "glamorizing" of the skinhead culture and racism.¹⁶

Formal strategies by which Gilbert & George have constructed their images have remained essentially the same since the late 1970's but have incorporated a much wider spectrum of colour since the late 1980's. Until 1977 images were individually framed

¹⁴ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 18.

¹⁵ Gale, I. (2007), *Gilbert & George: 40 Years of Shock and Awe*, *Art Review*, March 11, 2007, Sunday, Page 10.

¹⁶ Leris, Sophie. <http://news.independent.co.uk/people/profiles>

like a grid of film stills that captured an accumulation of related moments. They developed their compositions in later work to let individual elements bleed across numerous frames as though the strands of a narrative are being brought together and simultaneously projected within a single picture. The now unchanging format is one of the most impressive aspects of their art. If you imagine a piece without the sophisticated frame divisions that create a minimalist grid the pictures would look mad or naïve and the stained glass window quality would be lost. *Modern Fears* pictures from 1980 - 1981 have poetic, tender, life-affirming, graceful and beautiful qualities set against a strong erotic theme. The close ups of opening flowers are as blatantly sexual as images of attractive young men displaying themselves in *Far Feelings* 1980. This piece led to the artists being labeled “homoerotic”, a term they have completely rejected, asserting that the simpler ‘erotic’ suits their work better believing that their work also appeals to women. *Far Feelings* is a wistful, powerful and moving picture that represents a moment in life where perfection has been reached before the inevitable, bittersweet decay, decline to death.¹⁷

In the 1980’s they started using a far greater variety of images and clashes of colour with an aim of presenting concentrated emotion and visual signs with maximum intensity as in *Death Knocko* 1982. This piece portrays contradictory sensations and moods. In *Life Without End* 1982 they introduce a panoramic scale, not to impress or overwhelm the spectator but to invite them into a world that they have created. Then in 1984 in *Death Hope Life Fear* they address themselves to the primal emotions and facts of existence and re-enact the same cycle of life and death to which we all experience. These pieces may be among the most powerful as the profusion of extravagantly coloured images and totemic qualities confront the viewer as the artists repeatedly give birth to themselves through their imagination and their art. Gilbert & George have combined mundane objects and current issues like fragments of broken glass in a kaleidoscope with constantly fresh results. Michael Bracewell states ‘There’s a constancy and fluency in their ideas and intentions that go right through to the present. Even their early work still looks like it could have been made in five years time. Gilbert and George have an extraordinary vision which remains absolutely modern.’¹⁸

¹⁷ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 21

¹⁸ Teodorczuk, T. (2006), *Shock of the Old in the New Gilbert and George Show*, The Evening Standard (London), September 4, 2006 Monday, Page 22.



Death from Death Hope Life Fear,
1984,
423 x 252 cm,
Photography Piece.

The AIDS pandemic from 1984 gave a haunting new meaning to work completed in 1980-81 with a sense of life cut off in its prime and may have served as inspiration for later works based around inevitability of death. All the major themes tackled by Gilbert & George are recurring. They have tackled issues of religion and faith in *Believing World* from 1983 which resurface in a far more tormenting form two decades later in *SonofaGod Pictures* of 2005 which they played against a background of fundamentalism, superstition and terrorism. *Shitted* from the *Believing World* series represented suited Gilbert & George with human sized terds falling on them. This proved to be an inspiration and rehearsal for *The Naked Shit Pictures* 1994 which show the vulnerably naked aging artists baring all and risking total self-debasement as a form of humility. Gilbert & George's art of the 1990's saw an introduction of blood which consecutively led to the introduction of other bodily fluids to their art including semen, tears and urine which we can see examples of in *Fundamental Pictures* 1996, *New Testamental*

Pictures 1997 and *Rudimentary Pictures* 1998.¹⁹

Now over 60 years old Gilbert & George have retuned to confront ruthlessly and fearlessly the theme of their own daunting proximity to death with customary honesty since it cannot be avoided. They laugh in the face of death. *Nine Dark Pictures* from 2001 is one of the most intense and pivotal expressions of Fourniers World. These pieces are pervaded by an almost unbearable sadness as the images are filled with a sense of closure, farewell, sleep, abandonment and death.²⁰ The artists recede into darkened unsmiling poses. Their more recent works including *Thirteen Hooligan Pictures* and *Perverse Pictures* both from 2004 incorporates terrifying, distorted, mutated, grotesque representations of themselves as they turn their faces far older and more decrepit versions of the way they are know. Within their instantly recognisable grid framework these pieces convey the constancy of youth and the inevitability of old age and death that have a forceful sense of time passing by with increasing speed. The composition of these latest incarnations of themselves set against a backdrop of the city streets engulfed in fundamentalism are seen as their darkest and most poetic works.

The artists' most recent works displayed at the exit of the Tate's show, *Six Bomb Pictures* 2006, has real relevance to current racial and social tensions. Incorporating found images varying from Christian iconography to texts from radical Islamic groups the artists have created pictures that reach out to a wide audience. The pictures reflect on the London bombings in July 2005 using headline boards from the *Evening Standard* and hugely important icons of a society under siege. For the first time in 30 years Gilbert & George have restricted themselves to a palette of black and white.²¹ Displayed one above the other in long columns these pictures were designed to be reminiscent of a war memorial with a sense of quiet and remembrance. But in these later pieces are they merely trading on shock like the press, which they accuse of aggravating public fear in order to sell newspapers? It is impossible to tell as you can never quite pin down the intention of these artists.²²

¹⁹ Livingstone, M. *From the Heart* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 23.

²⁰ Bracewell, M. 'Fournier World' *The Art of Gilbert & George 1967 – 2007* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 37.

²¹ Gale, I. (2007), *Gilbert & George: 40 Years of Shock and Awe*, *Art Review*, March 11, 2007, Sunday, Page 10.

²² Cumming, L. (2007) *Better Than A Poke in The Eye*, *The Observer (England)*, February 18, 2007, Observer Review Arts Pages, Page 15.



Bombing,
2006,
336 x 493cm,
Photograph Piece.

For over 40 years Gilbert & George have produced over 1000 pictures from the heart. They invite the spectator to share the adventure of their lives together in art, their thoughts and emotions. Their residence in Fournier Street was fundamental to the development of their art. The district was their palette and their canvas, their subject and their marble.²³ They have transformed their observations of changes in society into visual metaphors of stunning and memorable concision. Walking through their mammoth retrospective at Tate Modern the viewer experiences a sensation of looking through a transparent place into an endlessly varying and surprising world of images. Due to the vast quantity, sheer scale and bold colours of Gilbert & George's monumental pieces the exhibition is overwhelming, numbing, even claustrophobic, which makes it definitely worth a second visit. Gilbert & George launched a terrorist attack on our attention. The exhibition was an opportunity for Gilbert & George to show us what they really meant by it all and for us, the viewer, to attempt to piece together the elements of their art. Tate Modern described the exhibition as a trace of the artists 'stylistic and emotional development'.²⁴ Anyone who has seen their work will recognise the frightening potential of individual pieces to shake us out of the

²³ Bracewell, M. 'Fournier World' *The Art of Gilbert & George 1967 – 2007* from Bracewell, M., Debbaut, J. and Livingston, M. (2007) *Gilbert and George: Major Exhibition : Tate Modern*, Page 30.

²⁴ Cumming, L. (2007) *Better Than A Poke in The Eye*, *The Observer (England)*, February 18, 2007, Observer Review Arts Pages, Page 15.

sleepwalking we often mistake for living.

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