

PORTRAIT / UNTIL CHAN

DOUBLE-DEALING

The writing's most definitely on the wall at GILBERT & GEORGE's exhibition at White Cube, Hong Kong. PAYAL UTTAM reports

A FEW MINUTES into my interview with Gilbert & George, I get the strange feeling that I've stepped into a performance. Clad in matching tweed suits, the artists sit with their hands on their knees and backs erect like a pair of ventriloquists. They speak in short bursts, often in unison, and with solemn expressions and stiff body language.

Born Gilbert Proesch, 68, and George Passmore, 70, the couple have been staging performances since the late '60s. Shortly after meeting at St Martins School of Art (now Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design), they abandoned their surnames and began dressing alike, declaring themselves "living sculptures." Winners of the 1986 Turner Prize, they are perhaps most famous for painting their heads bronze and lip-synching to the song "Underneath the Arches" on the streets of London.

Today they are known for their photo-based works that appear in museums worldwide. Their latest project, London Pictures, is a set of provocative panels debuting at White Cube gallery, Hong Kong. The artists spent six years "collecting" (read "stealing") more than 3,700 newspaper billboards for the series. In each of the works, Gilbert & George hover in the background, peering out from behind stark and emotive headlines.

Gilbert, George, you met in 1967 at art school. What were your first impressions of each other?

Gilbert: I think we started very slowly. George was the only one who accepted me because I just arrived from Italy. So he took an interest.

George: Yes. Fate. We were doomed to meet each other [giggles]. I don't think we were conscious of that. We were the kind of art students that others weren't. We were different, that made us in some way superior.

Gilbert: They pushed us together. Becoming outsiders we had to speak with one voice.

George: The most common thing that was said about us was, "Oh, it won't last," because people didn't last at that time. But we did.

In all this time, have you ever been apart?

George: No [looking suddenly alarmed]. Certainly not.

Gilbert: In death?

George: No, we don't do that.

In the early days you found it so difficult to exhibit that you once staged a performance during someone else's show. What were you thinking?

George: We were concentrating on being "living sculptures." It's something very mental.

Gilbert: But we won!

George: We stole the show!

Gilbert: It was a great day for us. It was the beginning of being accepted in some ways, because the German gallery came up to us and asked us if we wanted to show in Düsseldorf.



GILBERT (RIGHT) & GEORGE



George: He was one of the most important dealers in the world at that moment.

So it was a turning point?

Gilbert: [pauses] We've got many others, but that was an important one.

George: One of the other ones was when we were doing the Singing Sculptures in a very poor pop-up gallery in Brussels in '69. A lady came up and said she was opening a gallery in New York and asked would we do the first exhibition? She was Ileana Sonnabend and that became the most famous downtown gallery district. We started the whole thing...
Gilbert: But now we believe the art centre has moved to London. It used to be New York.

And what do you think about Hong Kong?

Gilbert: Well, it's starting. They want it. Don't you think? They want it.

George: We feel it.

Gilbert: Art is becoming extraordinarily big. It's a kind of freedom.

You've been here before, what do you think of the city?

Gilbert: It's so clean.

George: And so tailored. Everything is manicured – even nature is manicured. In London whenever you see some nature,

you'll also see an empty beer tin. Here you don't see any beer tins.

Wait till Friday night in Central...

Gilbert: Really? So they do misbehave as well...

George: It's posh and badly behaved? That's a strange combination.

Gilbert: It's a bit like when we went to Korea. They are very badly behaved...

George: But in a nice way.

You are constantly travelling for shows but when you are in London, I heard that you generally avoid people, is that true?

George: We are always hiding away in the studio. We are not socially involved in the art world. We are very alone in London.

Gilbert: It is very important for us to be alone. We don't like to listen to gossiping artists and human beings in general. We prefer to be in front of the work alone. We have our friends, but we need time to make our work because we don't have assistants.

George: The secret is to remain normal and weird at the same time.

And how would one do that?

Gilbert: I think you're doing quite well [laughs].

George: In the very early days we realised we don't want to be weird and we don't want to be normal.

You wanted to have your foot in both doors?

Gilbert & George: Yes...

George: At the same time. It gives us a great freedom, enormous mental freedom.

It's almost like you are detached observers...

George: We are observers and we are living it, even when we are "detached perverts," as you say.

Are you performing now? Where is the divide between being "living sculptures" and real life?

Gilbert: No, we exist.

George: There is no line. Not performing...

Gilbert: But we are it.

You seem to enjoy acting, what inspired you to move away from performance works and start creating photo-based works such as The Pictures?

Gilbert: It's very simple. We made ourselves the centre of the art. From then onwards, it doesn't matter if we are walking in the streets of London or in a bus, we had to leave something behind. We started to do photo

pieces in 1972. We felt that this is the most modern form for us.

George: We didn't want to do what artists would normally do – buy canvas and oil paints or just do bronzes. We wanted to find our own way of speaking. Our own visual language.

Gilbert: People like our art because it doesn't smell of, what do you call it...

Turpentine?

George: Yes, very good. It doesn't smell of turpentine.

Gilbert: We don't like the artist hand. We prefer the projection from the brain.

You don't like the artistic hand but you do leave a trace, you always appear in your works...

Gilbert & George: Always.

Gilbert: Like shadows or ghosts, or like a dream world.

And you are always wearing your "responsibility suits." Can you tell us about them?

George: Yes. It's very good because they are always designed by us and they hardly ever change. I realised many years ago that the city boys near where we live can only wear

a suit for 18 months or two years. They have to throw it away because the style changes: The shoulders and the turn-ups. They would never be seen dead with a suit once it's out of fashion. Ours are just normal 20- to 21st-century average. It will never become fashionable or unfashionable.

You design them?

Gilbert: Roughly. We put all suits in the world into a computer and you press "Normal, average."

George: That's it!

Gilbert: It's extraordinary. People, they all love them.

George: We like it very much when these trendy young people with amazing haircuts and amazing trousers come up and say:

"Great suits, guys" [gestures with thumbs up].

You went from being outsiders to icons. Did you ever imagine this would happen?

George: It's even better than we hoped.

Gilbert: It was an amazing dream. We recently saw a photograph of all the English artists through 1975, there must be 60 to 70 artists. There were very few that survived.

George: From the earliest days there was a very big difference between us and the

others. We had a great respect for the viewer. All the other artists thought we were stupid.

Gilbert: Not only that, but we invented our own form. Nobody did this.

Tell us about the latest series, London Pictures. How did you find all of the newspaper posters?

George: It was a complicated thing. We had to steal them one by one.

Gilbert: It's extraordinary; if you go into the shop and ask them for the poster they would never give it to you. They are very suspicious. Even if the next day they are truly meaningless. But they wouldn't give it to us. So stealing is a good idea, no?

George: It also has the danger. It's like the material in the pictures in a way. It's not like picking flowers to make a picture. It's stealing posters.

Your older works often contained nudity, profanity and attacks on religion. Would you say this series is tame in comparison?

Gilbert: It depends. These are, for a lot of people, very violent. It depends who you are.

George: We always try to create pictures that are needed, not the ones that are wanted.

The ones that the world requires, we feel we are able to do. ■