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Gilbert & George at Sonnabend and Lehmann Maupin
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Against the stiff competition provided by the likes of Damien Hirst and the Chapman brothers, Gilbert & George are intent on reclaiming their positions as the biggest bad boys of contemporary British art. This massive two-gallery exhibition was composed of huge photo-based paintings whose titles are liberally sprinkled with scatological terms more commonly found on the walls of lavatories. Inscribed in large capital letters on the canvases, these words offer keys to the otherwise largely abstract photographic imagery which unfurls monumentally behind them.

Spread over two galleries, the litany of nasty words—most popular among them are "spunk," "piss" "shit" as well as the more simply descriptive "blood," "spit" and "tears"—becomes mind-numbing after a while. The imagery, except for the recurring representations of enormous cigar-shaped turds, is less overtly offensive. In fact (and this is clearly part of the point), some of the abstract patterns that result from the enlargement of microscopic images of semen, urine, blood and spittle are quite beautiful. The cellular structure of blood, for instance, makes for intricately interlocked mosaics in red and black or red and white. Piss, rendered in black and white against a bright yellow ground, presents kaleidoscopic patterns that bring to mind frost spreading in tiny fingers across a windowpane. Spunk resembles a volcanic landscape.

For some time there have been religious references in the duo's work. Previously, these have centered on beautiful, working-class boys enshrined as objects of desire in cathedral-like spaces. Here, in the boys' stead, we have the artists themselves. Frequently naked, they float before backdrops composed of cosmic arrangements of the fluid motifs. Generally the poses reinforce the artists' deadpan inversion of respectability. Gilbert & George take turns mooning viewers or standing stiffly at attention in their birthday suits. However in several works, the pair explicitly assume the personas of Adam and Eve, as in one work where they re-create the poses in Mantegna's Expulsion from Paradise.

The combination of such overt religious references with references to body fluids, the latter admittedly an important motif in Christian theology, suggests that the artists have more profound aspirations than their cheeky titles suggest. However, any genuine sublimity is undercut by the adolescent nature of their scatological fixations. While the

works' crisp graphic style and simplified colors are often said to invoke stained glass windows, a prolonged stay in either gallery produced not so much reverential awe as a desire to escape the relentless confrontation with elementary body processes.

As a result, the artists' intentions remain ambiguous. Their preoccupation with body effluents may refer to the great Christian mysteries and the miraculous transfiguration of base matter into spirit. However, one is left with a stronger impression of schoolboys whispering dirty jokes in the last row of the church during Sunday services.