

Reviews: New York

Gilbert & George  
Sonnabend and Lehmann Maupin

By, Robert Ayers

The self-styled English "white bastards" Gilbert & George established their basic technique and format by the second half of the 1970s: multiple large-scale photographic panels with narrow black frames, hung in regular, wall-sized rectangles. The artists have treated their spectators to themes and imagery that touch on just about every visceral, sexual, racial, social and religious raw nerve, had their run-ins with opinion across the entire political spectrum, maintained a remarkably high-profile international-exhibition record, and still somehow retained their vaguely unpleasant East End London grittiness.

In this regard their latest two-gallery show of almost 40 recent pieces, all dated 2004, did not disappoint visitors in the least; and though the works were a significant technical departure, in that they were Gilbert & George's first exhibited pieces involving digital manipulation of imagery, this in no way diminished the artists' signature cheerful offensiveness. The central subject matter of this group, collectively titled "Perverse Pictures," was once again the multiracial unease of Gilbert & George's Spitalfields home turf. The artists injected the pictures with a panicky urgency by repeatedly mutating their own images and those of their neighbors. They sometimes split and unite their mismatched halves for maximum ugliness, surrounding them with distorted, fragmented, and repetitive images of scrawled graffiti, signatures, and tags; topping off the whole cocktail with a liberal helping of angry obscenity.

A picture like GOLD (2004) is charged with the genuinely unsettling strangeness that characterizes Gilbert & George's work. Almost ten feet high, and no doubt destined for some museum or corporate collection, it still exhorts, "Abolish commodity; create community." What a delicious audacity.