

GILBERT & GEORGE. "BEARDTREE" (2016), MIXED MEDIA. 59.45 X 74.8 INCHES. COURTESY THE ARTISTS AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG.



*x Gilbert and George x*

# BEARDTREE

# GILBERT & GEORGE

*Walking, Talking, Selfie-Sticking, and  
Chewing Gum at the Same Time*

*Written by Emily Colucci Photographed by Zach Gross*

GILBERT & GEORGE ARE EASY TO SPOT FROM A DISTANCE. TWO dapper British gentlemen sporting green and burnt orange tweed suits stand out among the black-on-black uniform of Lower Manhattan. As the duo strolls around a Lower East Side street corner, they cause several passersby, including me, to look up from our smartphones for a second glance at the iconic London-based artists.

"It's very sweet," George tells me later, on their instant recognizability. "We like the now famous story of the lorry driver who slowed down on our main street and poked his head out of the window and said, 'Oi! Gilbert & George! My life's a fucking moment, but your art's an eternity!' I'm sure he never went to a gallery or museum."

Meeting in September 1967 at Saint Martin's School of Art, the Italian-born Gilbert Proesch and U.K.-born George Passmore have devoted a half-century to existing together as "living sculptures." Since the two first walked through London covered in glittering metallic powder in the late 1960s, Gilbert & George have fervently refused to see their art as separate from their lives. This collision course of art and life creates a surreal atmosphere when speaking to the duo inside Lehmann Maupin's Lower East Side space, which is holding one installment of their current two-venue exhibition *The Beard Pictures*.

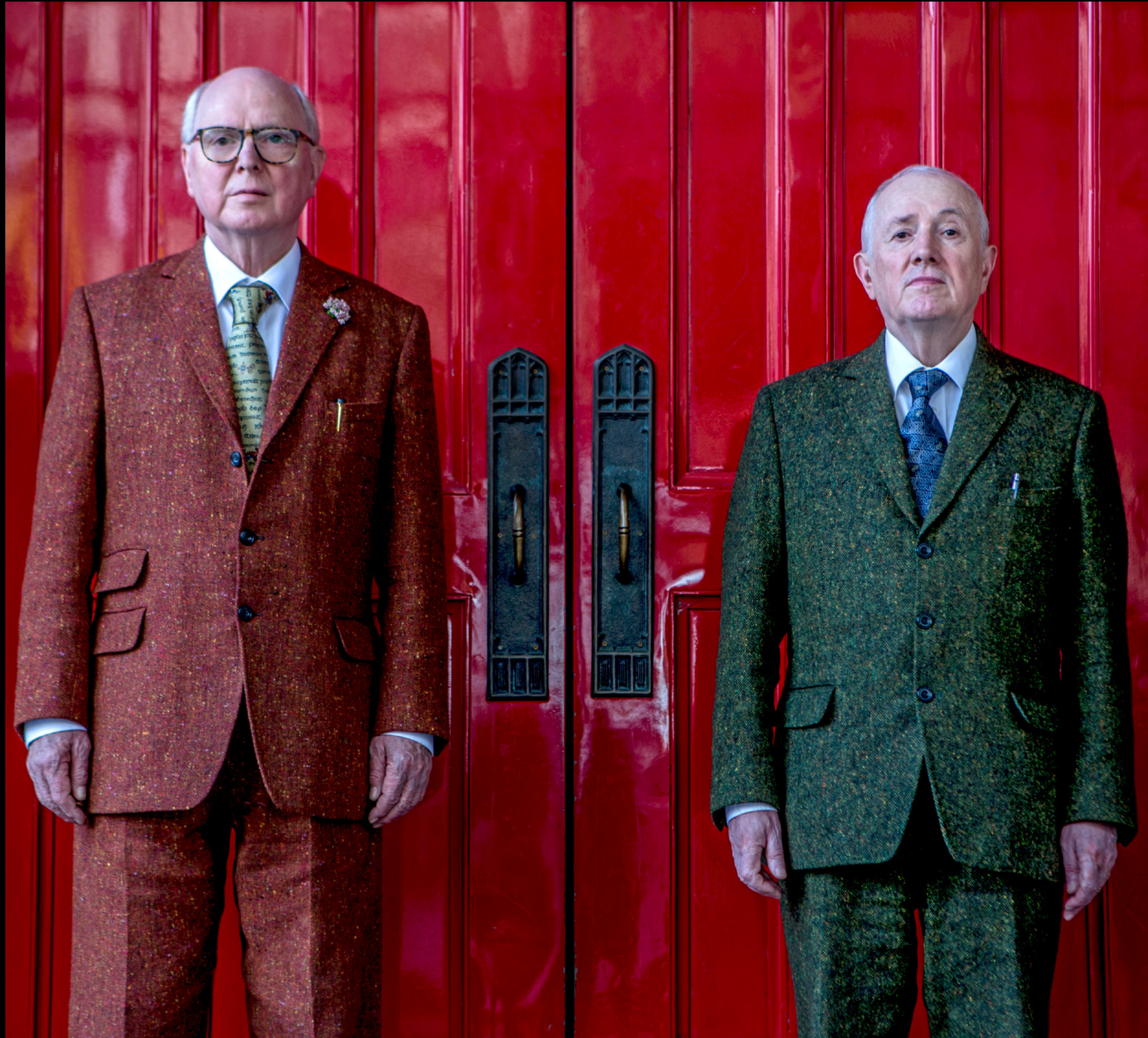
Sitting in a circle of chairs in the cavernous ground floor gallery, we were dwarfed by numerous representations of the artists in their new monumental gridded photographic works. The sometimes red and always bearded figures in *The Beard Pictures* loomed above us like, as Gilbert describes, "scarecrows." One piece features the artists with beards of snakes, looking like macho Medusas, while another presents the duo peeking out from green leafy beards. The juxtaposition between the mythical beings overhead and the polite, clean-shaven artists in front of me is startling.

In contrast to the silent figures in *The Beard Pictures*, Gilbert & George seem comfortable chatting about almost anything, from beards in Victorian England ("If you didn't have a beard, you were sort of a lounge lizard") to smuggling ginkgo leaves out of New York ("We had them pressed between adult magazines...") to their horror at the Metropolitan Museum's overcrowding ("It's an enormous consumption—every poor little vase is all used up"). Mostly, though, Gilbert & George are fascinated by the, as they often say, "extraordinary" changes that have occurred in their fifty years together, witnessing the evolution of their art, their neighborhood, the art world and the world at large.

As the title suggests, *The Beard Pictures* takes the beard as its central focus, but to the artists, the series represents more than just an experiment in facial hair. With images of chain-linked fences, barbed wire, security systems and burglar alarms, the works speak to an increasingly insular and paranoid world. "This is a new world of trying to keep people out or keep ourselves in," explains Gilbert. "We're hiding ourselves through the beard and protecting ourselves."

Beards also trigger a wide range of associations, from religions like Islam or Sikhism to even, hipsters, a reflection of Gilbert & George's gentrifying neighborhood of Spitalfields in London's East End, where they have lived since 1968. "We often see girls with a boy on her arm that doesn't have a beard, but she's a little bit disconsolate—she really would prefer to have one of those bearded ones who is also wearing shorts," says George.

Even though one work sports the aggro title "Fuck Off Hipsters," Gilbert & George don't buy into the anti-hipster hate. Gentrification, they feel, is just part of the history of an ever-changing neighborhood. "People



in London ask, 'What's it like now that it's gentrified?' Why gentrified? When black people moved in in 1973, nobody said it was 'black-ified,'" George muses. "When Jewish people moved in, nobody said, 'It's Jew-ified.' They only like to beat up on the white middle classes."

Despite subtle references to the various meanings of beards and their lives in Spitalfields, *The Beard Pictures* continues Gilbert & George's career-long devotion to making art accessible and attractive to the general public. It's not the rigorous, hard-lined abstraction that makes some viewers flee from a gallery—or too intimidated to enter. "We are trying to make art that the human person is in the center of, in all their complexity. Human art," asserts Gilbert.

They even design their own exhibition catalogues with an everyday viewer in mind rather than the studious enjoyment of a nerdy museum curator. As George quips, "If you leave it behind in the taxi, the driver will take it home."

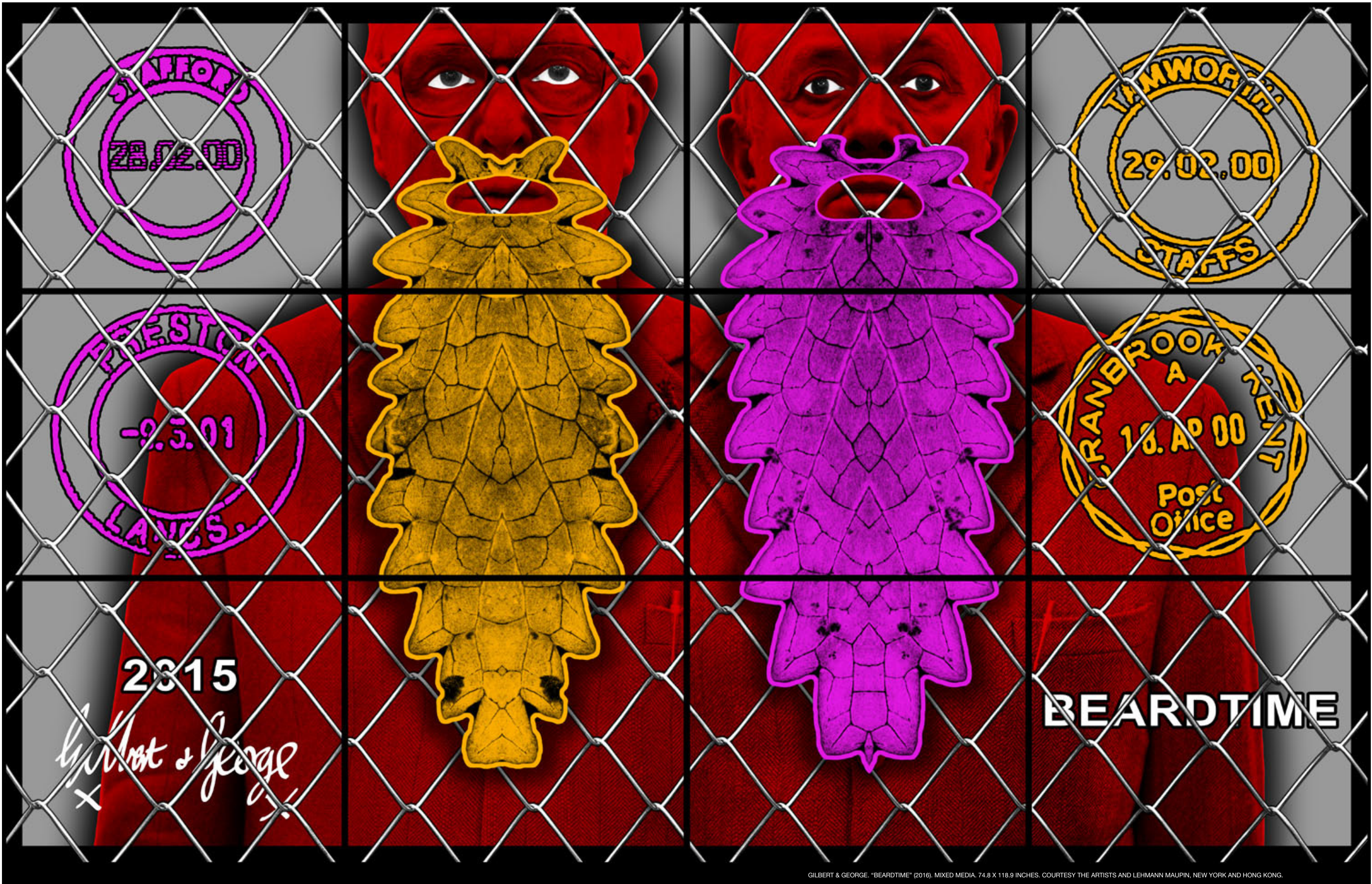
This concern for the layperson derives from their longtime philosophy "Art for All," a tenant of their artistic practice since they began their career with absurd public performances like 1969's *The Singing Sculpture*, in which the duo sang the vaudevillian standard "Underneath the Arches." Reflecting on "Art For All"'s inspiration, George notes, "We didn't like the idea that our contemporaries in the art world felt superior to the vast general public. We didn't want art to appeal only to people in special galleries in London, Paris and New York."

Instead, as Gilbert responds, they "wanted to be outsiders." Breaking seemingly every taboo and orthodoxy possible over the course of their career, the duo also shock the progressive art world with their politics—they are proud conservatives. "If the art world, like the music industry, is based on originality—you can't be a pop star unless you're very original—then, how come they all have the same points of view? It's quite mysterious for us," wonders George.

I asked if they think the art world's exclusivity has changed. Gilbert & George quickly respond yes, but George has a caveat: "A lot of people still feel like art is looking down its nose at them." However, he continues, "The days we live in now are totally different from when we were baby artists. They've changed enormously. We'd like to think we play some part in that change."

And he's right. Gilbert & George's "Art for All" has gone global with Instagram, Snapchat and other social media platforms constructing a universal, accessible and entirely visual culture. The division between art and life, now, appears impossible. "As we predicted in 1969, all the world is an art gallery," observes George. It's Gilbert & George's world—we're just living in it.

Despite the realization of their enduring message after fifty years, Gilbert & George aren't slowing down their prolific artistic production any time soon. With ongoing and upcoming exhibitions in Paris, Brussels, London, Naples and Athens, as well as New York, Gilbert points out, laughing, "We never felt satisfied. We never felt loved enough to stop and that's why we have to do it again and again and again."



2015

*Gilbert & George*

BEARDTIME

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