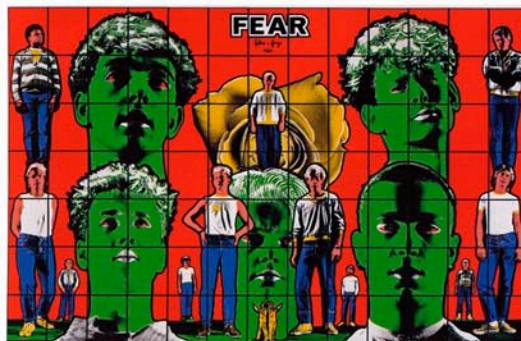


The Human Theater of Gilbert & George



BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

Combining photoconceptualist strategies and mannered self-disclosure, Gilbert & George have made increasingly monumental work—with no concession to decorum.

The British artist duo Gilbert & George has long enjoyed a unique position in contemporary art. Since defining themselves in 1969 as a single entity of “living sculpture,” they have created over 2,000 works, mostly composite photographs that include posed self-portraits. At the vanguard of technological advances in photo manipulation in the late '70s, they developed a signature style of photomontage featuring lurid colors and punchy graphics, the component images arranged in grids. A distinctive performative element animates all of their art, interviews and public appearances, fueled by their well-mannered and well-groomed, deadpan public personae.

In interviews and statements, Gilbert & George have repeatedly disassociated themselves from the subterfuges and distancing of modernism and postmodernism, emphasizing their art's roots in the life in and around their working-class neighborhood in East London. Yet while their large-scale photographic works have for the past 30-plus years reflected the tenor of the times—achieving both a larger scope and more pointed contents than that of most art-world endeavors—their enterprise is at the same time particularized and peculiar, queer in all ways.

To understand the broad span of their work demands seeing it in the aggregate. The duo has thus given much attention to catalogues and museum exhibitions, whose designs and floor plans they oversee.¹ Their most recent traveling survey, including around 50 works from nearly four decades, organized by Jan Debbaut and Ben Borthwick for Tate Modern and opening this month at the Brooklyn Museum, immerses the viewer in the Gilbert & George worldview, reflecting on a grand scale the artists' feelings and experiences.

Just as their work has grown in size from early clusters of 8-by-10-inch, black-and-white photographs to the recent, almost billboard-size photomurals, Gilbert & George have gradually transcended the confines of their renovated flat on Fournier Street, tackling in recent bodies of work such hot topics as AIDS, immigration reform, Christian fundamentalism and Islamic terrorism. The works of the 1970s were introspective mood pieces, often set in local bars, parks

or the artists' flat during the messy process of renovation. Beginning in the 1980s, technological advances facilitated larger-scale work, and the artists rose to the occasion with themes that addressed broader philosophical and social issues.

In the big special exhibitions galleries at San Francisco's de Young Museum, this development was charted in chronologically arranged hangings designed to generate complementary or contrasting ideas or emotions. This dialectical approach—juxtaposing, for example, a tranquil bucolic work with a melancholic urban one, a violent work with a tender one—is integral to their vision, stemming from the artists' desire to express the full range of their experience.

Above the last gallery doorway at the de Young, a 1969 text proposed a straightforward, neo-Victorian approach to art-making, aiming for the emotive power of classic literature—of, say, Dickens or Tolstoy:²

We met in London last year. We began to dream of a world of beauty and happiness, of great riches and pleasures new, of joy and laughter, of children and sweets, of the music of colour and the sweetness of shape, a world of feeling and meaning, a newer better world, a world of delicious disasters, of heart wrenching sorrow, of loathing and dread, a world complete, all the world an art gallery.

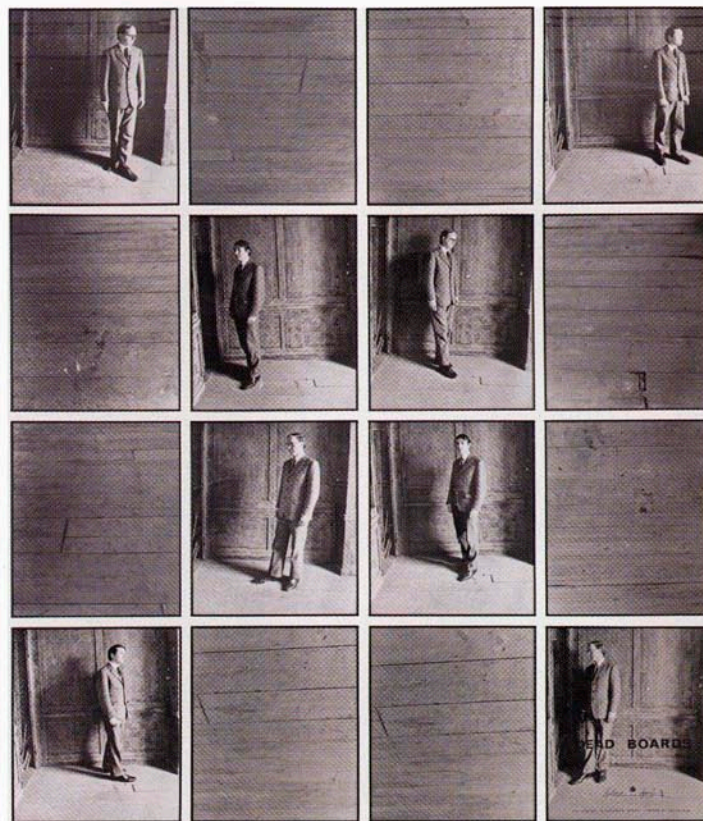
Oddly, Gilbert & George have expressed their highly charged, omnivorous ambitions through mannered theatricality, clearly manifest in their role as self-conscious narrators. Employing their own images to comment on the commercial image world around them, Gilbert & George have served as Dantean guides through the chaos, degradation, joys and beauties of contemporary life. As close-at-hand escorts, they have presented bold-faced images of sex, excrement, poverty, youth, nature, revolution, disease, prostitution and religion in tones varying from the lyrical to the grotesque. The works present themselves as stark allegories, though often their meaning is elusive.

Gilbert & George: Death Hope Life Fear, 1984, two panels 13 7/8 by 8 1/4 feet, two panels 13 7/8 by 21 1/2 feet. Tate, London. Photo courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London. All works this article mixed mediums.

Graffiti—often the anarchic assertion of disaffected outsiders—seems a natural interest for artists who thrive on making public their private lives.



Bad Thoughts No. 7, 1975, 8¼ by 6⅞ feet. Private collection. Photo courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube.



Dead Boards No. 7, 1976, 8¼ by 6⅞ feet. Collection Francesca and Massimo Valsecchi.

The series of “Dirty Words Pictures” (1977), featuring found photographs of East London graffiti, marked the opening of their work to social realities. Examples from the series in the Tate exhibition, *Are You Angry or Are You Boring?*, *Lick* and *The Penis*, mix close-up images of taunting graffiti, photographs of street life and posed images of a contemplative Gilbert & George. Trumpeting the messages of the alienated and aggressive scrawls, the artists align themselves with the disaffected, outcast and abject.

In interviews, they have frequently stated their allegiance to the sensibility of “hooligans and tramps.” Their well-known, often re-created performance, *Underneath the Arches* (first performed 1969), features the artists in metallic body paint repeatedly miming a 1931 music hall song that celebrates the freewheeling lifestyle of homeless vagrants. Graffiti—often inspired by the shameless belligerence and anarchic self-assertion of outsiders—seems a natural interest for artists who thrive on making public their private lives. In a way, Gilbert & George might themselves be thought of as graffiti artists, using their self-portraits as a kind of tag to mark and claim images of the everyday.

Generally nonjudgmental, Gilbert & George espouse an open-minded, free-form approach to society and the human body, with a special emphasis on sexual activity as a positive force. Their messages are alternately blunt and enigmatic, and sometimes surprising, often seeming like emotional outbursts. For example, *Was Jesus Heterosexual?* (2005, not shown in San Francisco) prominently features a text presumably taken from graffiti—“Jesus says forgive yourself. God loves fucking! Enjoy”—that seems a rebuttal to puritanical homophobes.

Gilbert & George have declined, in interviews, to be labeled gay artists, stressing the universality of their work and sensibility. Avoiding explicit political allegiances, they have functioned nonetheless as ipso facto gay activists, proposing the ordinariness of their lives and relationship as everyday truths. Their works, in what seems a determined survey of their daily existence, have variously featured the couple drunk, happy, depressed, aroused, nauseated, agitated and serene. The duality of Gilbert & George—the concept of two-as-one—provides the subject matter of many works. The ups and downs of a longtime relationship

are everywhere evident in the exhibition, from the pouts and tensions of *Bad Thoughts No. 7* (1975) and *Dead Boards No. 7* (1976) to the playful romance of *Winter Flowers* (1982).

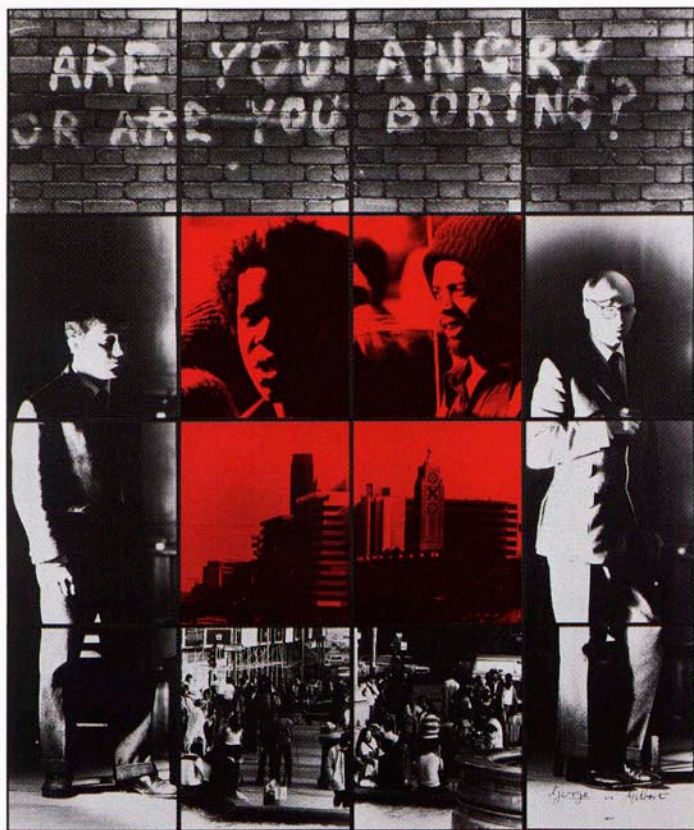
In recent works, Gilbert & George have used as a symbolic decorative motif the leaf of the ginkgo tree, which has a symmetrical structure and is reputed to be an aphrodisiac. Goethe's poem "Gingo Biloba" (1815) celebrates the leaf of this long-surviving species as a symbol of the "single yet twofold" nature of love. Its top edge bordered with ginkgo leaves, Gilbert & George's *Fates* (2005) is a symmetrical composition in which the artists are shown seated on nearly identical, imperious thrones, flanking a central arch that protects a tightly woven, talismanic arrangement of ginkgo leaves. Part of their "SonofaGod" series dealing with religiosity, this mysterious work positions the duo as godlike arbiters of their world.

As in all their recent works, the self-portraits in "Fates" are digitally manipulated to appear as mirrored forms, giving them weirdly artificial, nearly robotic appearances (since the human face is not naturally bilaterally identical). The playful possibilities of the software they have

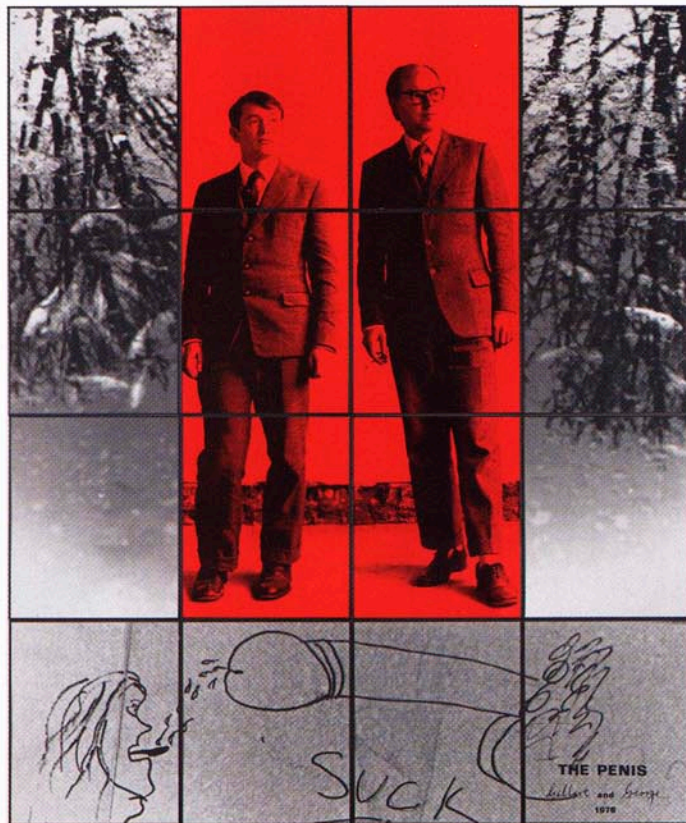
adopted, which the artists regularly use to morph and double images, have allowed them to move further away from the documentary aspects of photography, heightening its emblematic quality. Gilbert & George's interest in the distorted, "too perfect" appearance of symmetrical human faces seems indicative of their interest in hyper-esthetics and the melding of the real and the artificial. Like Baudelaire or Wilde, they have positioned themselves as street esthetes, flâneurs who present and transform observations of modern life for our edification.

The world of Gilbert & George is decidedly all male, regularly featuring handsome youths who variously represent innocence, aspiration, temptation and lust. In their work, homosexuality seems to reflect the duality that they assert is basic to mankind. Good and evil, ugliness and beauty, hope and despair are equally omnipresent, seen in the artists' own temperaments and relationship, the interior realm of their home and the larger world of their neighborhood.

A more pointed social and cultural reckoning was prompted in the

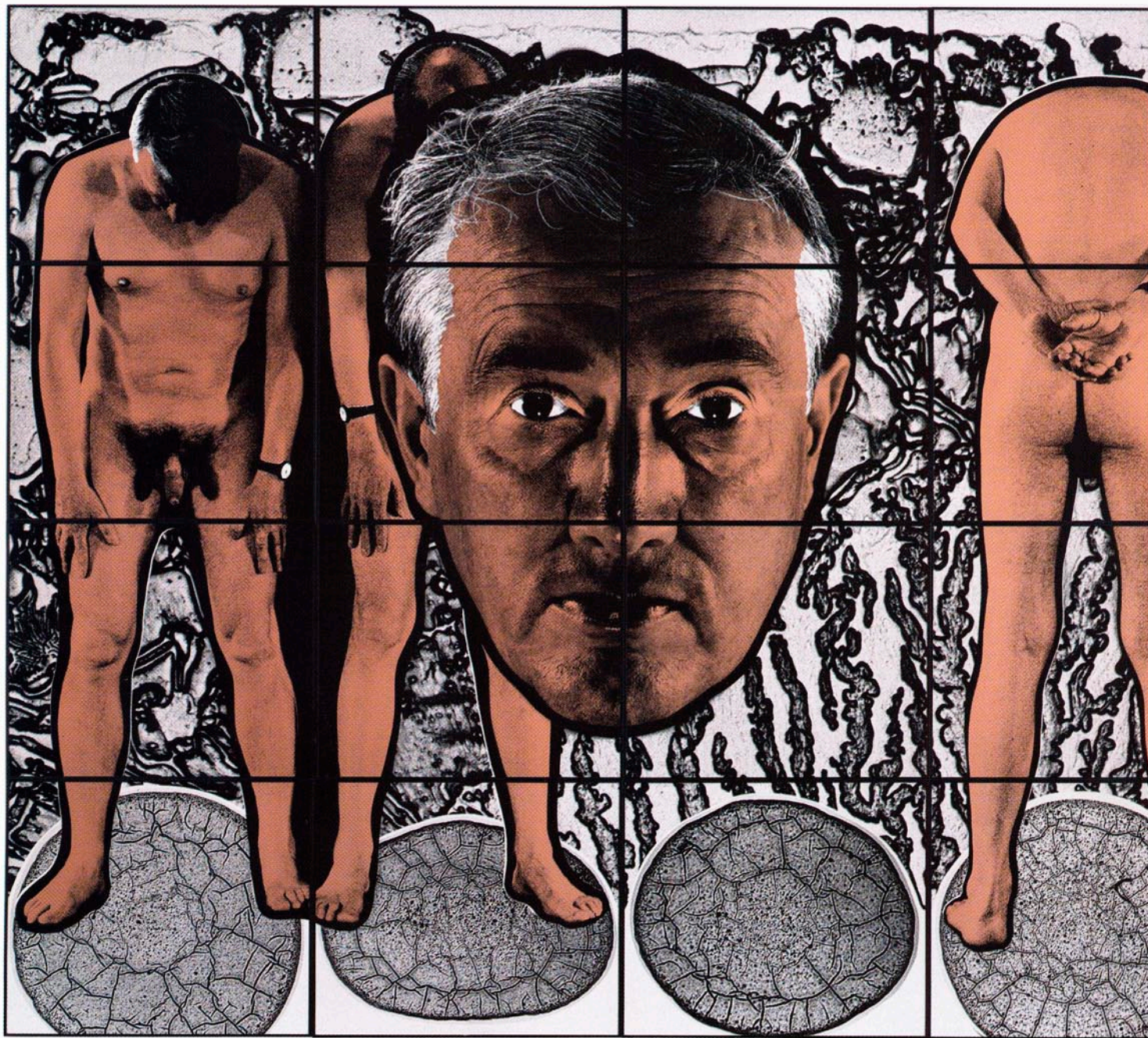


Are You Angry or Are You Boring?, 1977, 7 7/8 by 6 1/2 feet. Van Abbemuseum Collection, Eindhoven.

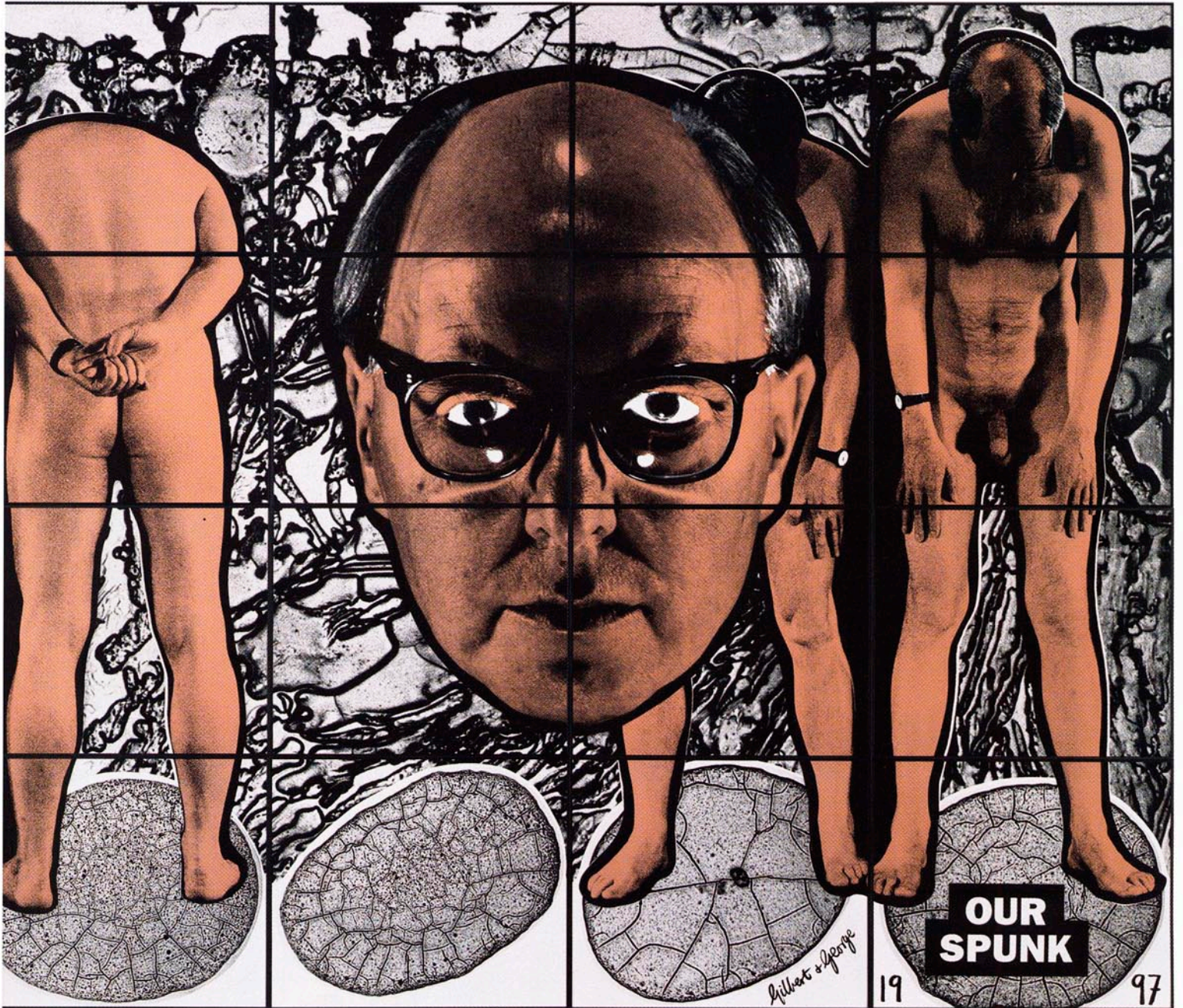


The Penis, 1978, 7 7/8 by 6 1/2 feet. Private collection, courtesy Marc Jancou Fine Arts, New York.

The duality of Gilbert & George—the concept of two-as-one—and the ups and downs of a longtime relationship are the subject matter of many works.



Our Spunk, 1997, 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ feet. Collection Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg. Photo courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube.



In the 84-foot-long *Shitty Naked Human World*, Gilbert & George use the taboo associated with excrement as an instrument of primal reckoning.

1980s by the AIDS pandemic. The nearly 60-foot-long, four-part photomural *Death Hope Life Fear* (1984) is an epic elegy in eye-popping contrasting colors. Organized like a Renaissance altarpiece, it consists of two vertical panels ("Death" and "Life") featuring columns of multiple images of Gilbert & George that flank two larger horizontal panels ("Hope" and "Fear"), which showcase a bevy of standing and kneeling male youths, shown in tight close-up. Symbolic details provide clues to the underlying content: Gilbert & George sport angelic leaf-wings in "Life"; huge funereal flowers are in the backgrounds of "Death" and "Fear."

The gigantic scale of the piece engulfs the viewer in the urgent ramifications of a disease that even now, nearly 25 years later, continues to ravage the human body and spirit. Gilbert & George straightforwardly present young men in the prime of life, much like so many who have fallen victim to the disease. But, with its daunting scale and sumptuous, highly saturated colors, this photomural functions less as a cautionary monument or memento mori than as a testament to the enduring nature of beauty, youth and sexuality.

Transcending the notion of an AIDS memorial, *Death Hope Life Fear* is a kind of uplifting, humanistic war cry.

Installed across from *Death Hope Life Fear* at the de Young was *Shitty Naked Human World* (1994), an 84-foot-long, four-panel work that is a more down-to-earth assessment of physicality. With each panel centered on huge images of feces flanked by the artists, it presents the human body in its rawest, most elemental form. In the panel "Human," the nude artists stand in the classic poses of Adam and Eve, while in "Shitty" and "World" they are juxtaposed with, respectively, crowds of men and two ominous high-rise buildings. The awesome sight in "Shitty" of an 11-foot-tall crucifix constructed of excrement takes the usual art-world expression of abjection and abnegation to a new level of strangeness.

In their depictions of monumental, richly chocolate-brown shit, Gilbert & George employ the universal taboo associated with excrement as an instrument of primal reckoning. Other works of the 1990s feature large blowups of droplets of the artists' blood, cum and piss, again inventorying the most basic elements of life. Works from the series "Naked Shit



Shitty Naked Human World, 1994, one of four panels, each 11 by 21 feet. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube.



Fates, 2005, 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ by 24 $\frac{7}{8}$ feet.
Tate, London.

Pictures" (1994) further confront the body as strange, unfamiliar terrain. Gigantic turds, blood platelets and globules of sperm dwarf other images, preempting any sense of comfort or stability.

Shit seems to be a commonplace in contemporary art, familiar in the naughty satire and institutional critique of Piero Manzoni, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, John Miller, Andres Serrano and others. The representations of feces in the works of Gilbert & George tap deep psychological insecurities, provoking a reflective, even religious sense of humility. In earlier series presenting images of themselves drunk and staggering, the artists explored altering the senses as a kind of escape from the harshness of reality. In the body-fluid and shit works, they bring us face-to-face with the universal realities of flesh, unacknowledged in everyday culture and society.

The current exhibition presents Gilbert & George as an irrepressible force that has intensified over the years. The most recent among the included works are up-to-the-minute, ominous assessments of Christian religiosity (*Heterodoxy*, 2005), Islamic extremism

(*Haram*, 2004) and terrorist bomb threats (*Bomb*, 2006). Baldly mixing fanatical religious texts, the bling of commercial crucifixes and charms, and newsstand headlines advertising violence, these works continue the artists' mission to create images that probe deeper than satire or politics. Their works inspire visceral emotion, exposing humanity's common denominators. □

1. Gilbert & George have designed a handsome two-volume catalogue of their works to date, *Gilbert & George: The Complete Pictures, 1971-2005*, London and New York, Tate Publishing/Aperture, 2007, which weighs in at a lap-crushing 20 pounds.

2. For a discussion of the literary aspect of their work, see Michael Bracewell, "Fournier World: The Art of Gilbert & George 1967-2007," in *Gilbert & George*, p. 28.

"Gilbert & George: Major Exhibition" opened at the Tate Modern, London [Feb. 15-May 7, 2007], and traveled to the Haus der Kunst, Munich [June 15-Sept. 7, 2007], the Castello di Rivoli, Turin [Oct. 8, 2007-Jan. 8, 2008], and the Milwaukee Art Museum [June 6-Sept. 1]. It is currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum [Oct. 16, 2008-Feb. 1, 2009].

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