

# FT Weekend

## 'It's G&G! We're a brand!'

Artists | At their London

home, Gilbert & George

talk to *Rachel Spence* about

gentrification, jihadism and

their belief in making money

What to think about Gilbert & George? Are their swears, shiny, super-graphic photo-works, which feature skinheads, hoodie-cowled black men, burka-clad women and Islamist fighters, the expressions of art's most calculating and xenophobic *magi*? Or are they genuine cries for freedom from art-establishment orthodoxy?

Undoubtedly their art sells. When I visit their studio, they walk me through a warren of architectural models of the eight galleries, in London, New York, Paris, Brussels, Athens and Naples, due to open shows of their work over the coming months.

In person the duo are far less hermetic than their images. Although both are eager to converse, George is more watchful, his schooled English tones underscoring an aura of command. Gilbert, who was born in Italy and still has an accent, is more down-to-earth. Both flare into hyperbolic outbursts yet never relinquish control. Works on paper must be referred to as "sculptures" not drawings. Any discussion of aesthetics is problematic. "We're really not that interested in beauty in that way," says George when I refer to certain works as "visually gorgeous".

They ask me not to use their surnames. "It's friendlier," says George, while Gilbert exclaims blithely: "[It's]





'We used to walk the streets of London. And we realised that we could be living, speaking sculptures'

G&G: We're a brand!" in the only moment when they are not in synergy.

Born in 1943 and 1942 respectively, the men are still swift in movement and mind. Spectacularly dapper in their bespoke suits and matching silk ties, only their white hair and papery complexions betray their age.

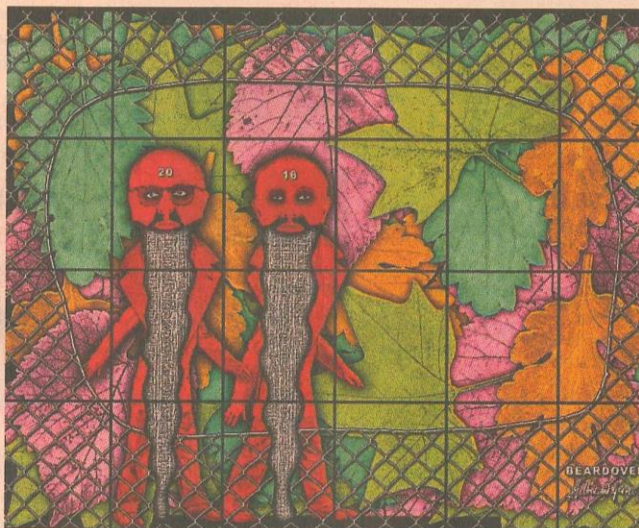
Most of the shows, starting with Lehmann Maupin, New York, in October, will focus on their recent cycle entitled "The Beard Pictures". But this month London's Lévy Gorvy will host "The General Jungle or Carrying on Sculpting", a display of charcoal "sculptures" on paper originally exhibited in 1971 at New York's Sonnabend Gallery.

Assembled in panels, they show the artists, in their trademark suits, a little bewildered, walking through leafy London parks. According to George, the work emerged out of their sense of themselves as "country bumpkins" – he comes from "darkest Devon", Gilbert from the Dolomites – dazzled by the big city.

On meeting at St Martin's School of Art in 1967, they recognised their shared desire "to do something that wasn't being done", says George. To them, the conceptualism then in vogue was encouraging work that was obscure and inaccessible. In contrast, they wanted to "seduce the public". An early show took place in a sandwich bar, born from the need to take art "out into the wild".

Their decades-long rapport with London stamps their work with its indelible menace. They have lived in an 18th-century townhouse on Fournier Street, Spitalfields, for more than 50 years. Restored to its original decor but furnished with stunning Arts and Crafts furniture, it's a true period piece.

Save for shelves of books, a few calendars of bronzed, semi-naked young men and a poster of David Cameron – they



From top: Gilbert & George photographed for the FT by Leo Goddard; 'We step into the Responsibility Suits of our Art' (1971); 'Beardover' (2016); 'The Singing Sculpture' at Sonnabend Gallery, New York (1991)

Gilbert & George, Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

are committed Conservatives – the office is a technological nirvana. A hefty server furnishes the computers where they compose their multi-panel works from contact sheets of photographs taken as they walk the streets.

Over the decades, their neighbourhood has shifted from being a melting-pot that embraced Jewish, Cockney and Bengali communities to its current incarnation as the crucible of hipster London. The pair love the transformation. "[Most journalists] ask: 'How do you feel about your area being gentrified?' It's such a racist, classist thing to say!" he complains. "They never said: 'it's blackified, it's jewified, it's bangladeshified, it's trampified, it's dopefiendified.' Only when a couple of white people move in did they say it!"

To an extent, such frustration is understandable. As gay men from unprivileged backgrounds, they've had to fight battles on opposing fronts. Even as they challenged the intellectual elitism of St Martin's, they were also consigned to opportunity's margins by their sexuality. Thus when their fellow alumni were taking teaching jobs or winning scholarships, they knew, in George's words, that they had "no chance" because "whoever heard of two men applying [for a job or bursary]? It was only a year after decriminalisation [of homosexuality]."

Their much-mentioned love of Margaret Thatcher emerged from the need to create their own luck. "We believe in making money and industry," says Gilbert firmly. "I'm interested in being a normal person who wants to make money and [sell] our stuff."

On leaving art school, as Gilbert recalls, "with nothing", they devised an art that, ingeniously, at once defied and dovetailed with the zeitgeist. "We used to walk the streets . . . And we realised that we could be living, speaking sculptures who are human. [We could make] an art that is speaking, not a dead bronze or a dead [piece of] concrete."

The duo began to voyage about the city with their heads and hands painted with metallic pigments. In reality, only their decision to entitle themselves "living sculptures" distinguished them from the performance art that was enamouring a generation. Yet they say their art possesses "a moral dimension" that sets it apart from that of their peers.

A major shift came with their adoption of photography in the 1970s. "Suddenly we could freeze a head, a hand, a landscape," recalls Gilbert. On one hand, he says this felt "very modern"; on the other, it felt as if they were working in the tradition of "Renaissance artists" assembling compositions in their studios.

By the late 1970s, their work possessed a gritty lyricism. Their glorious "Red Morning" series (1977) juxtaposed monochrome photographs of urban landscapes – city offices, trees, rubble – with lonely self-portraits against a blood-red wash. In the 1980s, they adopted more luminescent colours and busier graphics. By 1986, when they won the Turner



Prize, their bittersweet motifs included young men, turds, penises, flowers, cars and buildings, with their own portraits often present. As the years passed, digitalisation has allowed them to repeat, morph and layer their images – whether crucifixes, barbed wire or burkas – with ever more technological sophistication.

Despite their self-styled rebelliousness, their mature oeuvre couldn't look more contemporary nor sell with more alacrity. They've had museum shows all over the world including, in 2007, at Tate Modern, and represented Britain at the 2005 Venice Biennale. Yet they still present themselves as art-world outsiders. George is scathing of the Tate Modern – where they have yet to have a permanent piece on the wall – saying: “They only believe in art that comes from

wine-growing countries and America.”

They have always claimed their art is “for all”. Gilbert insists they have a “vast, general following”, as proved by White Cube's sale of 5,000 posters, not to mention receiving 40,000 visitors, for a recent show. George tells me a story about a lorry driver who shouted to them from his window that their “art is for eternity!” Yet as the ubiquity of the Beard Pictures testifies, the metropolitan elite is also on side.

On this cycle, G&G say the idea is “to see the world through a beard”. A panoply of hairy faces, rendered slick through digitalisation, trigger simultaneous associations with rabbis, jihadis, biblical prophets, Victorian explorers and Shoreditch hipsters. “There are religious beards and non-religious beards,” muses Gilbert. “To cut or not to cut, that is the question?”

They loathe, they say, all “totalitarian religions”, but they are notably eloquent about the Islamist threat. They say they have witnessed the radicalisation of local Muslim communities. “It didn't used to be like that,” says George. “All the doors of the non-Muslim houses in this street were kicked in one night. They tell us to get out of here, that this is a ‘holy land.’” Their Chinese assistant, he adds, has been verbally insulted.

As someone who lives in the affable cultural potpourri of south London, their stories leave me astonished. Still, if there really an Islamist army lurking in Spitalfields, it hasn't stopped Gilbert & George from planning to construct their legacy there. Before I leave, they show me the architectural model of a 6,000 sq ft building nearby that used to be a brewery and will soon host their new foundation, which is due to

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open in approximately two years' time.

After bidding them goodbye, I pause in Old Spitalfields Market, where sub-Saharan prints are sold alongside harem pants and Indian shawls and the traders' roots stretch across every continent. That cordial reality never finds a home in G&G's imagery. I can't help wondering if the duo are struggling to maintain their outsider status in a city where, these days, everybody comes from somewhere else.

*‘The General Jungle or Carrying on Sculpting’, Lévy Gorvy, London, September 13-November 18, [levygorvy.com](http://levygorvy.com)*

*‘The Beard Pictures’, Lehmann Maupin, New York, October 12-December 22, [lehmannmaupin.com](http://lehmannmaupin.com)*

*‘The Beard Pictures and Their Fuckosophy’, White Cube Bermondsey, London, November 22-January 28 2018*