

SOLITARY, conservative, pro-monarchists on the one hand; artistically violent homosexuals on the other. What on earth are we to make of infamous London double act Gilbert and George?

The inseparable pair began their partnership in the late 1960s while studying sculpture at St Martin's School of Art.

Gilbert Proesch, 64 – the shorter one, who is actually Italian – arrived in London from art school in Munich. George Passmore, 65 – the Plymouth-born, bespectacled one – came from studying at Oxford Technical College. "It was love at first sight," George has said of their encounter.

Both were from poor, rural, religious backgrounds, and even though Gilbert spoke hardly any English at the time, the two took to each other immediately.

Their bond grew so strong that soon after leaving St Martin's they started to make their art as one.

They would no longer produce individual works, but would sign their pieces 'Gilbert and George' collectively.

This unity then progressed a step further. In an extraordinary feat of self-publicity and daring, the artists decided to turn their entire lives into a sculpture.

At first the 'living sculptures' posed with objects, in performances, photography and film. However, they soon decided to limit their sculpture to their bodies and the tailor-made suits for which they are famous today.

The concept was like no other, and by 1970 Gilbert and George were touring art schools and international galleries, exhibiting their sculptural performance *The Singing Sculpture – Underneath the Arches*. They would sing Flanagan and Allen's 1930s song (dedicating it to the homeless) for up to eight hours at a time; methodical movements and face-paint helping them appear more like sculptures.

Forty years later, and against all the odds, the sound of *Underneath the Arches* floats through the air again, only this time at the opening of what promises to be one of the most visited exhibitions in the history of Tate Modern. More than 200 examples from their body of work have been selected in the single biggest display the museum has ever dedicated to one (or should that be two?) artists. It may sound rather grand, but this kind of recognition certainly didn't come easy.

This is the artists' first major retrospective since the Hayward Gallery in 1987. Success in Britain has always been secondary to their recognition abroad – not helped by a long-standing dispute with the Tate, following a spat with its director in 1972.

Reminded of their old insults (in particular the accusation that the Tate was like "a sausage factory"), Gilbert replies: "It still is! They're churning it out! You come in, and you are shitted out the other side."

So how does their artistic integrity square with a show at the Tate? "We'll only be a part of it for three months," he says cheerily.

The controversy surrounding G&G has always been over the explicit content of their art. Traditional audiences complain about its graphic



A RARE GALLOP FOR THE GEE-GEES

INFAMOUS ARTISTIC PAIRING GILBERT AND GEORGE ARE THE SUBJECT OF A TATE MODERN RETROSPECTIVE, DESPITE ACCUSING THE GALLERY OF MERELY BEING A SAUSAGE FACTORY. CHRISTIAN McLAUGHLIN MET THE ODD COUPLE



nature and question whether the shock factor is necessary. Progressive audiences laud their bravery to push society's boundaries by forcing viewers to look at all aspects of life.

The artists themselves have said that their role is to make people see things differently, to get them to question convention, and to think about things they have never thought about before. The end result has been a career plagued by rejection and censorship.

It's hardly surprising when you look at the art and the context within which it was made. As early as 1969

the pair produced a series of photographs (bearing a title which included the C-word) featuring George – debonair, smiling, smoking a cigarette – and

Gilbert – giggling, reclining on the grass – obscene words pinned to their chests.

In the late 70s they made *The Dirty Word Pictures*. Hard-hitting slogans and obscenities loomed above images of social injustice.

In the 80s pictures such as *Naked Love* used nude male models in defiance of the ostrich-like attitude towards Aids at the time. The solids also hit the fan in the early 90s with a set of huge pictures in which the artists posed completely naked, surrounded by massive turds.

The examples of controversy are too numerous to recount, but they are there for all to see in the exhibition – naked bottoms, testicles, magnified sperm, blood, sweat, tears and all.

Nothing has been censored, and

despite the apparently distasteful nature of the subject matter, the artists insist their intention is not to repel.

George says: "We've always wanted to make beautiful works. We do not try to be repulsive. Our aim is not to make obscene pictures."

They admit their art is not for everyone, but aesthetics are not necessarily compromised by content, and many of their pictures are breathtakingly beautiful.

Combining influences from Caravaggio's 'chiaroscuro' lighting effects; the impact of Warhol-style imagery; the textures of Rembrandt's skins; the simplicity of Mondrian's patterns; the suffering of Van Gogh; and their unique self-documenting and urban disquiet gives pieces such as *Bloody Life No 7* and *Bad Thoughts* (both 1974) a phenomenal intensity.

Unfortunately, being able to appreciate this subtlety becomes increasingly difficult due to the jam-packed layout of the exhibition. The second half of the chronological retrospective is especially bad.

The pictures reach gigantic proportions thanks to computer technology, and trying to do it all justice is exhausting. Ideally, two visits are needed, but at £10 a ticket, the 'Art

for all' motto (aiming to keep art accessible to the poor) which Gilbert and George have always espoused may have been lost in translation.

The only way to glimpse any of the show pieces for free is to pop into the gallery's fourth-floor café/bookshop.

Contradictions run deep throughout the life and art of Gilbert and George. George says: "Of course I'm going to vote for David Cameron, I'm a loyal person," and Gilbert immediately chips in: "He's very good looking!" Raving homosexuals, yet conservatives; champions of the social underdogs, yet Thatcherites; progressive liberals, yet monarchists – how can this all coexist within one ethos?

Gilbert's answer to the sceptics? "We try to explain it is more complicated than that," he says. "We don't have ready-made phrases with which to enlighten them about our art. The meaning goes deeper than that. We've never thought to promote good and give up treating evil. We believe in the complete cycle; the flower and the shit."

Facing that 'complete cycle' means addressing all the issues, no matter how sensitive the subject.

The 2006 series *Six Bomb Pictures* reflects their most recent concern by documenting headlines from *Evening Standard* billboards over the past two years. The word 'bomber' is present 13 times, 'bomb' 14 times, 'bombers' 19 times and 'terror' 29 times. The series makes us question the role of the media in the polarisation of Christian and Muslim societies.

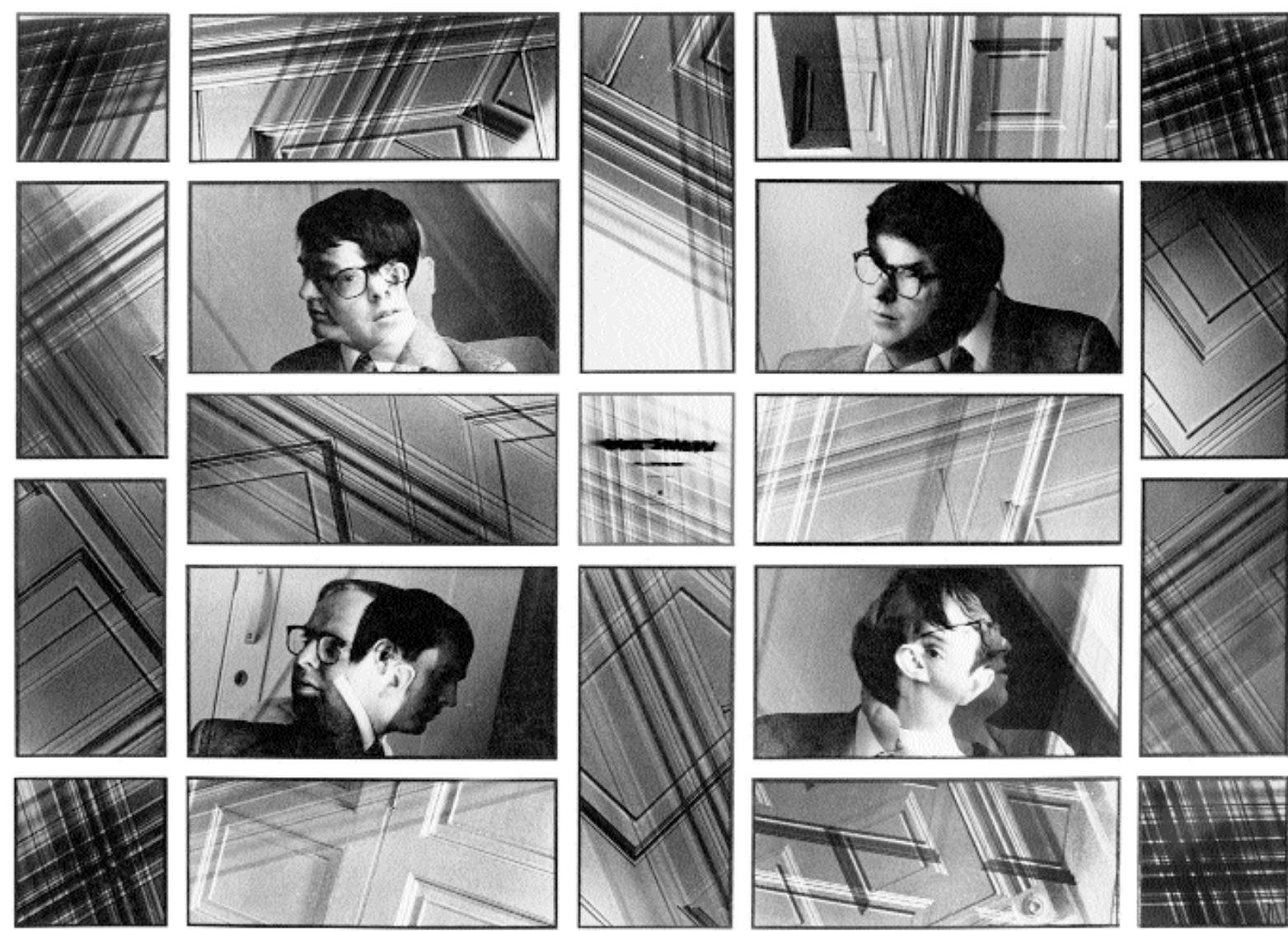
However, the computer-generated techniques that are used to create the massive images fail to live up to the crisp, subtle beauty of their similarly messaged works from the 70s. The scale has been increased, the billboards scream their messages, but the words feel hollow. Perhaps our over-exposure to these fear-mongering messages means the pictures fail to have the impact of previous eras, and only in retrospect will they become as relevant. Gilbert says: "Strong taboos still exist in religion, between east and west." George then adds: "Sex and religion, they are hot issues." Then back to Gilbert. "The hottest issues today. We live together between the east and west. We saw it coming."

They saw the conflict coming not least because they live in Fournier Street, Spitalfields, sandwiched between a mosque and a church, on the symbolic fault line between the City and the Asian-dominated East End.

The artists have drawn inspiration from the surrounding culture clash since 1973. Surrounded by religious differences, Gilbert and George have both renounced the faiths under which they were born. When asked why, Gilbert (born a Catholic) says: "I don't like to be fed lies anymore." George, raised as a Methodist, adds: "All the religions would be fine if they came under the same legal umbrella as everyone else, if they had to apply the Trade Descriptions Act and respect a secular government." Is there anything they believe in then? George says: "Nature," to which Gilbert adds: "It's another form of sex. That's why we use flowers [in the paintings], it's all sex, sex, sex. Look what human beings are, they're nothing else."

This can be seen in the picture *All* (1989), in which a man kneels before two massive roses on top of what looks to be an even bigger sunflower. We all must answer to nature, whether we believe in it or not, and the only way to carry on our race past our inevitable death as individuals is through reproduction, hence the flower, the sex organ of the plant, and perhaps also the justification for all of the penises in their art.

But for all of the gravity and furrowed brows that surrounds their art, you will never catch the two of them



without their sense of humour. Confronting them over an old complaint of George's that "half the time journalists imagine that we are sleeping with little prostitutes while spraying champagne on our balls..." he replies: "Only on a Friday, and never more than once a week."

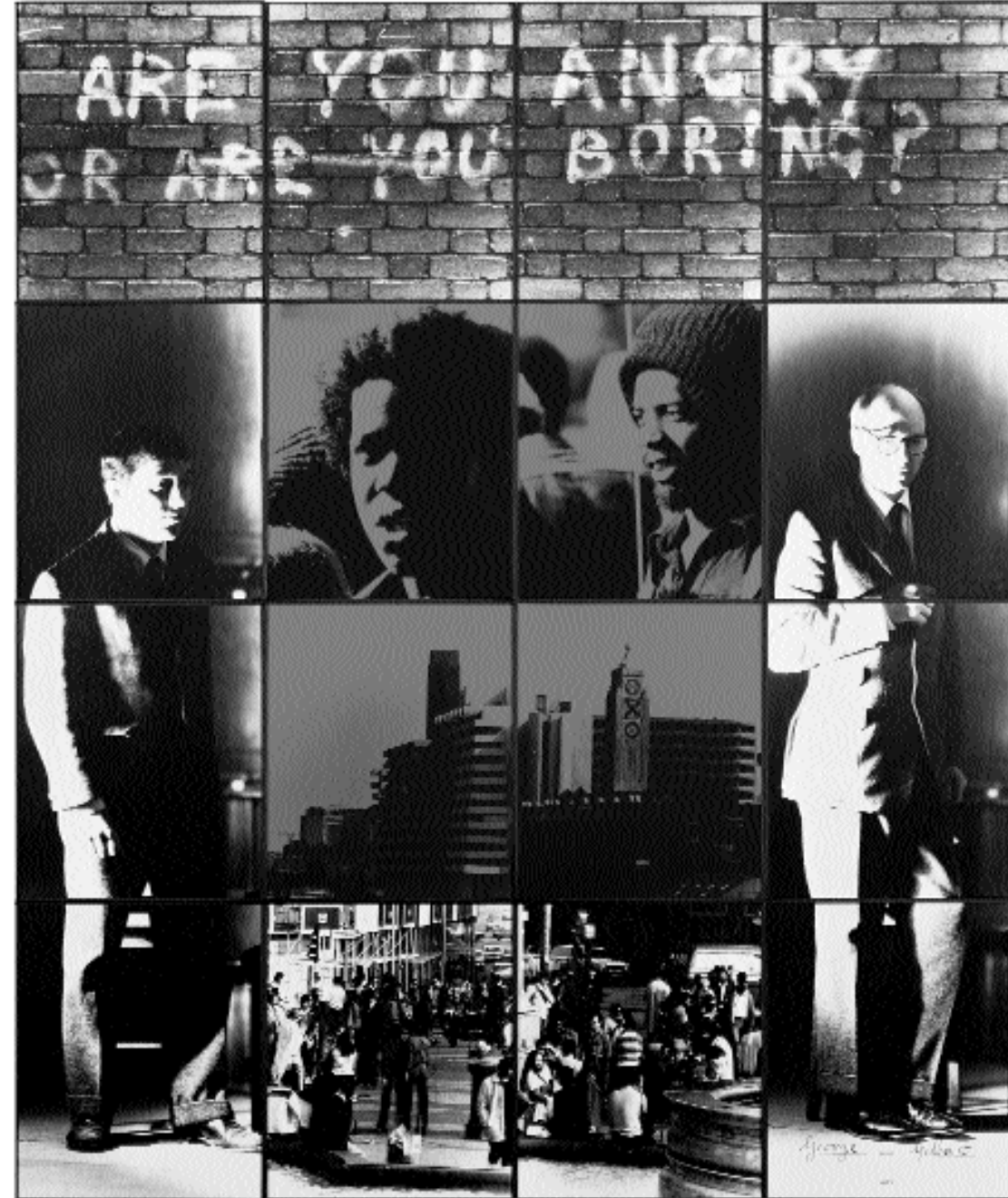
Their refusal to be pigeon-holed by the media has created an aura of impenetrable myth around them. Their dress is identical, bar the slight variation in the patterns of their suits and ties. They answer questions as one, bouncing phrases between them like Tweedledee and Tweedledum. They patiently take directions from the media mob and are almost disconcertingly kind when swamped by popstar-size crowds of fans. It is all very surreal, until you remember this is all a part of their art.

The two have never stopped being the 'living sculpture' they began as. George describes it as their "greatest invention". When asked by friend and journalist Francois Jonquet (in the brilliant book *Gilbert and George, intimate conversations with Francois Jonquet*) where this life-search has led, Gilbert says: "What our art has allowed us to find is a complex humanity, a humanity where people become more and more tolerant of each other."

This is the key to the tenderness that lives within their shocking and provocative art; it is an exploration of understanding. As they put it: "We must be as unhappy as the unhappiest person to understand him."

And so, through a daring body of work comprising 40 years of soul-searching, Gilbert and George have done much of the dirty work for us. To take advantage of their dark and wonderful discoveries, all you need to do is muster the courage to look.

● *Gilbert and George, Major Exhibition, is at Tate Modern until May 7. Sundays-Thursdays, 10am-6pm, Fridays and Saturdays, 10am-10pm. Entry is £10 (£8 concs). Call 020 7887 8888. More details: www.tate.org.uk*



ART ATTACK: Above, Are You Angry Or Are You Boring? 1977. Top: Dark Shadow No6, 1974