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# art. guide

AUSTRALIA





# GILBERT & GEORGE

The inimitable and decidedly odd art duo – “two people, but one artist” – stages its first Australasian retrospective.  
By **Steve Dow**.

**They met as students at St Martin's School of Art in London in the 1960s and would become famous for large, vibrant pictures skewering themselves and society, all while devoting their lives to playing themselves deadpan as living art, virtually conjoined at the hips.**

Gilbert & George first came to Australia in 1973, feted by art collector John Kaldor. Their faces and hands were painted in bronze metallic powder and Vaseline as they stood and struck poses on a plinth five hours a day for six days at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, then five hours a day for five days at the National Gallery of Victoria.

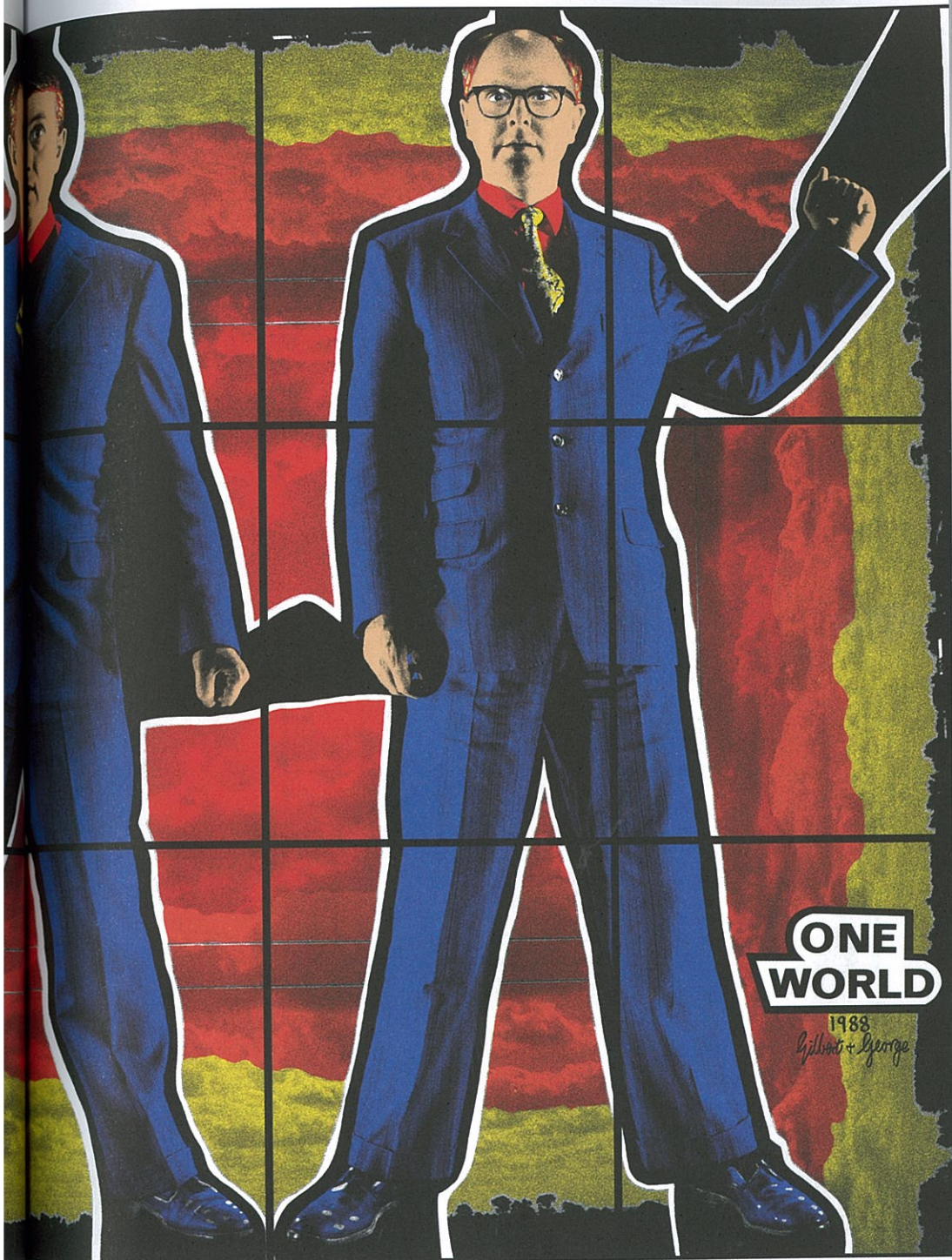
They passed a cane and gloves back and forth, immaculately – then and still today – buttoned in conservative suits, ties and shiny shoes. They sang along to a cassette recording of the popular 1930s British song *Underneath the Arches*, 112 times a day. Each time the song ended, one or the other would step off the platform to replay the recording.

Do Gilbert, born in the Dolomites in Italy in 1943, and George, born in Devon, England, in 1942, ever allow dress standards to slip, a *Guardian* reader enquired in 2014. “Certainly not,” they replied. “They are the responsibilities suits [sic] of our art. We want to be normal and weird at the same time. Big kiss G&G.”

Gilbert & George, *ONE WORLD*, 1988, mixed media, 226 x 254 cm. Courtesy of the artists.







**ONE  
WORLD**

1988  
*Gilbert + George*





! Gilbert & George. *RED MORNING DEATH*, 1977, mixed media, 241 x 201 cm. Private collection.



In 2008, London's Tate Modern staged a Gilbert & George retrospective. This November, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart will host the pair for *The Art Exhibition*, a fresh retrospective of their work that includes 40 pictures from a private collector as well as videos of past appearances, supplemented by live question-and-answer talks.

Their 2014 series *Scapegoating Pictures* will be included. These are "opposed to bigotry of all forms", according to London's White Cube gallery, which has represented the pair since 2000.

The new pictures explore religious fundamentalism, paranoia and surveillance, with Gilbert & George depicted as skeletons and in red suits or hoodies, incorporating images of discarded metal canisters used for recreational nitrous inhaling, which the pair collected on morning walks near their East London home. The canisters resemble bombs.

Gilbert & George's home-studio at 8 Fournier Street has been meticulously restored to its 18th-century origins. They never cook there; they claim to eat at the same Turkish restaurant each night. MONA co-director of exhibitions Olivier Varenne smiles wryly when probed by Skype from London about the pair's fixed dining habits.

"I think they go to another one in Stoke Newington [now], because they've been spotted."

Varenne sought out Gilbert & George after encountering a private collector who owned 70 of their works. He arrived at 8 Fournier Street, suggesting MONA exhibit many of these works. What he encountered was a "nice dictatorship".

"They told me: 'Very well, let's go for lunch.' We went for lunch. 'Let's have a glass of champagne... very well, now you can go.'"

This scenario repeated twice. Varenne then suggested they compile a list of works for the retrospective.

"They said, 'Very well, very well, very well. Let's have some lunch, let's go shopping.' I felt I was losing the plot; it was never going to work. I spoke to another curator, who said, 'If you want to work with Gilbert & George, you need to let them do it.'"

Hence Gilbert & George designed most of the floor plan and walls for their exhibition at MONA and chose all the works. Their work comes across to Varenne as an "electric shock".

Fifteen years ago, they went digital with their large-scale printmaking, so their large washbasins for photo chemicals now lie dormant. Computers are now employed to make their art.



1 Gilbert & George, *BOMBERS*, 2006, mixed media, 336 x 493 cm. Courtesy of the artists and White Cube.





1 Gilbert & George, *FORWARD*, 2008, mixed media, 381 x 604 cm. Courtesy of the artists and White Cube.

"They live with the times," says Varenne. "That's why the work is so fresh, because they soak up what's around them."

Varenne says the pair "entertain a lot of beggars around the house", giving them food.

"They live with strange rituals. They never cook, they buy their toothpaste and other things a year in advance. Their life is a performance in itself. It's not a joke for them. They're really funny guys, but the performance is not a joke. They take their life very seriously."





In 1973, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the then Art Gallery of NSW director as "looking worried" while Gilbert & George performed. Does Varenne think Australians would have understood the pair four decades ago?

"In 1973, it was two guys, raising many questions. Artists working as a pair were kind of interesting. They are a couple, which can raise difficulties for some people. And they were doing performance. So it was a bit shocking in 1973. Now there's so much performance art around,

but Gilbert & George are always reinventing themselves."

Reportedly coming from less affluent backgrounds, are they caricaturing the class system? "What I like with Gilbert & George is you don't know where you are. They mock everything and everyone. But when I look at a Gilbert & George work, I don't feel mockery: I feel it's a fresco of contemporary society."

**“ They live with strange rituals. They never cook, they buy their toothpaste and other things a year in advance. ”**

In interviews, the pair has noted Sharia law on their East London "doorstep" and critiqued Islam as "self-segregating": "From our own experience, person-to-person, even moderate Muslims are apologists for Islam."

"In fact, they're not anti-Muslim at all," says Varenne. The *Scapegoating Pictures* works, for instance, are concerned with segregation, fear and racism pitted against Muslims.

Varenne says the pair's art is for everyone, so they price their art low. "It's really social art, what they're doing."

In private, says Varenne, the pair never let their guard down, and are inseparable. "They're Romeo and Juliet, no?"

The duo is planning to open an art foundation a few streets away from Fournier Street. One day, after they're gone, the house-studio itself may be opened as a work of art.

Gilbert & George say that whenever the German press interviews them, they're usually first asked, "Do you plan to die together?"

"People ask what happens if one of us fell under a London bus," says the pair. "Fear not. We always cross the road together."

*The Art Exhibition* is at the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, from 28 November 2015 to 28 March 2016.