

SATURDAY
THE AGE
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Gentlemen of the gutter

Gilbert & George get Down Under and dirty. PAGE 8

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COVER STORY



Who's a naughty boy?

The weird and wicked Gilbert & George are about to shock us all over again. They explain themselves to **NICK MILLER**.

At the back end of Gilbert & George's spotless, white, laboratory-like art studio, a picture of Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron is attached to the wall. He is smiling. Below him on a bench is a collection of dried flowers, and beside them is a folder containing the artists' latest work in progress.

They have been making notes, says the serious, taller member of the besuited pair, George Passmore, the one with the Prince Charles-like diction and stiff bearing.

The notes, he explains, outline a new philosophy of wishes, desires, fears, hopes, "how we approach people, how we approach life, and death, and fear".

"Which we call a f---osophy."

Gilbert Proesch, George's shorter, Italian partner in art and life, giggles a little.

In sober, clipped tones, as though he's giving

the weather forecast, George reads from the f---osophy notes, which turn out to be brief, to-the-point variations on the theme "f---", including "f---eridge", "f---ing Sussex", "... really beautiful f---er, regimental f---ing, f---diary... It's endless," he concludes. "Can you imagine?"

It is the prototypical Gilbert & George moment: obscene, confronting, more than a little bit weird, simple and untranslatable, the art-world version of Monty Python's silly walk, the establishment unbuttoning its flies.

These most-recognisable of London artists are in their 70s and still they refuse to let up, count the money and retire to the seaside. They're still driven outsiders, respected but never trusted, happier to shock than to concur.

Now they're coming to Tasmania, where else, but to the Museum of Old and New Art, for the first (and, they insist, last) exhibition in Australia dedicated to their work - a five-decade retrospective.

Gilbert and George, two self-confessed "country bumpkins", met in 1967 at St Martin's School of Art and moved to east London at the end of the '60s, penniless and lost, regarded as eccentrics whose style didn't fit the art culture of the time.

"We weren't sure where we wanted to go," Gilbert says. "We were always outsiders and we started out to do an art that nobody did."

However, they knew they wanted to be famous. They put their phone number on all their art works for five years, just in case someone called.

East London was "the only place we could afford at the time", George says. It was full of tramps and murderers, but cheap, and landlords didn't care if you worked where you slept. They have lurked there ever since, literally in the same house, while the city changed around them, producing instantly recognisable art that exploits their environs and politics, but, most of all, themselves.

theage.com.au See a gallery of images from *The Art Exhibition*.

Sometimes they have been in vogue – they won the 1986 Turner Prize and were nominated in 1984, its first year. Mostly they have been viewed with mistrust by the art mainstream for their contempt of minimalism, their conservative politics and their lack of interest in socialising with other artists.

However, their position in British art is now unchallengeable, with a major retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2007, followed by the sale in 2008 of one of their works, *To Her Majesty*, for £1.9 million.

That work is a photo collage from their *Drinking Sculptures*, a series of photographs taken when the artists were getting drunk, or about to. It was executed in 1973, the year they first visited Australia, then came home drunk.

For eight years, they worked out of the house's tiny kitchen, until they could expand into the backyard studio. They didn't use the kitchen for cooking, as they couldn't bear the banality of shopping. Instead, they became regular sights in the neighbourhood, going for an early lunch after their morning work shift, then in the evening walking again for a few hours, exploring, en route to the same Turkish cafe up the road in Dalston.

It's a limited life, but, George says, he believes it keeps them artistically "pure".

"We never go to the cinema, the theatre, the ballet or the opera," he says. "We stopped 40 years ago. We just didn't want to become contaminated. We know what we're interested in. We know how we can reach people with a

“A lot of collectors don't want to offend the cleaning lady.”

"It was extraordinary," George recalls. "We were drunk every night," Gilbert says (they don't tend to finish each other's sentences so much as start them).

"It was a sensation," George says. "We were in all the papers all over the country. There was even a Gilbert & George competition, dressing up with umbrellas and bowler hats."

John Kaldor, a collector and patron of contemporary art, had invited the pair to Australia to perform their *Singing Sculpture* – the piece that took them from obscurity to the art world's doorstep. In metallic bodypaint, suits and ties, they sang along to the old music-hall song *Underneath the Arches*, turning in a circle and making robotic, choreographed gestures, for hours at a time, for six days at the Art Gallery of NSW, then five days at the National Gallery of Victoria.

It may seem hackneyed now, but then it was a revelation. However, it was the trip back from Australia that changed the artists' lives.

"We always say that we were not so naive after going to Australia in 1973," George says. "John Kaldor was so pleased and so proud with how the project went and he gave us some tickets which explained that we didn't go straight back to London, but we had a one-week stopover in Bangkok."

He raises his eyebrows suggestively. "We were not so innocent after that," Gilbert chuckles.

They arrived back in London spent, unclear on how to deal with success in Europe, New York and Australia.

They then had to find their way past the *Singing Sculpture*, on what George called a "drunken safari to explore new territory". They created the *Drinking Sculptures*, an honest combination of their art and themselves, which was to become the model for their future work: self-referential, self-sculptural, two men in a crumbling Huguénot house that they renovated even as they constructed their career. Their art became the experience of making art in one place: Fournier Street, Spitalfields.

Gilbert & George plundered their surroundings, taking photos of local "tramps" and skinheads, incorporating obscene graffiti into their collages, exciting and inciting controversy.

"The centre of the world is here," Gilbert says. "They're all marching in some way, acting. Everyone feels like they're inspired."

The artists turned ever inwards, shedding their suits to feature full frontal in their photos, putting under the microscope and up on the wall their own excretions. Blood, sweat, urine, faeces and tears became material that, in Gilbert's words "we wanted to make so beautiful that once they realise what it is, it's too late".

They stopped going to the movies, becoming (in Gilbert's words for a BBC documentary) "the imprisoned monks in Fournier Street".

"We like to be here, alone and weird," George says.

picture. We have a feeling, what we put in that picture, that will mean something to somebody."

They never feel as if they're lacking inspiration. "We're always bursting with more pictures than we're ever actually physically [going] to make," George says. "There are always more inside ourselves."

Their work has evolved, as the MONA retrospective shows, in both form and content. They believe they have been validated again and again by history.

For example, they pioneered the selfie. "For 20 years," George says, "the journalists always said, 'Why are you always in your pictures?' Then one day they stopped asking that and they've never asked it since, because it's normal now."

"Everything is moving, that's what we believe," Gilbert says.

They are conservatives who love change. They perceive no contradiction.

"If we don't have a completely ordered, tidy, clean, organised studio, we would never be able to make unpleasant pictures," George says.

They are still able to shock. It still affects their market price, Gilbert says. "A lot of collectors don't want to offend the cleaning lady or, I don't know, whoever comes in the house. So they all want abstract art that doesn't say anything, and a G&G 'shit picture' would be quite difficult to put up."

But they want to believe that their art has, in some way, changed the world. "The world is a different place than when we were baby artists," George says. "The pictures are the same but the world changes around them."

Which brings them to Tasmania. As with all their exhibitions, they have curated it themselves, building a scale model of the space, dobbing on tiny versions of their pictures with Blu-Tack until it felt right.

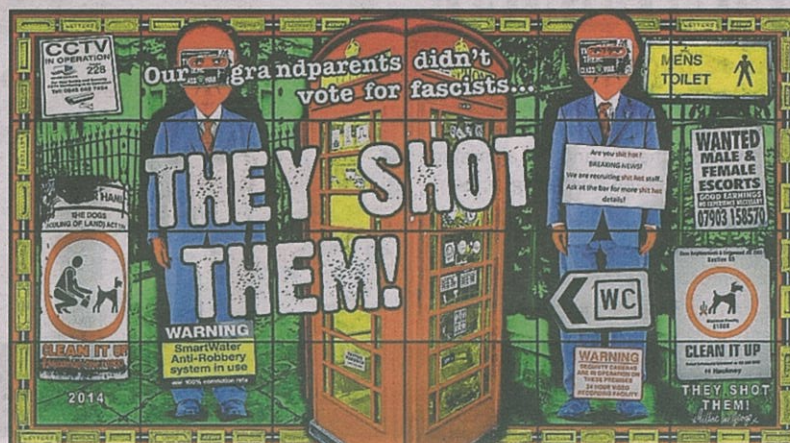
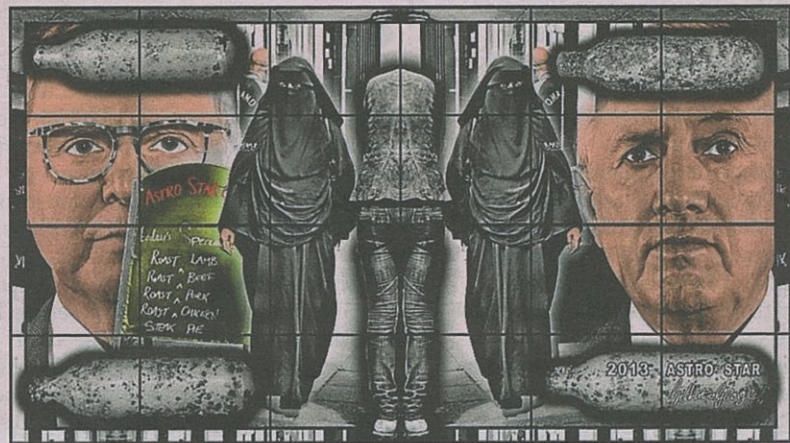
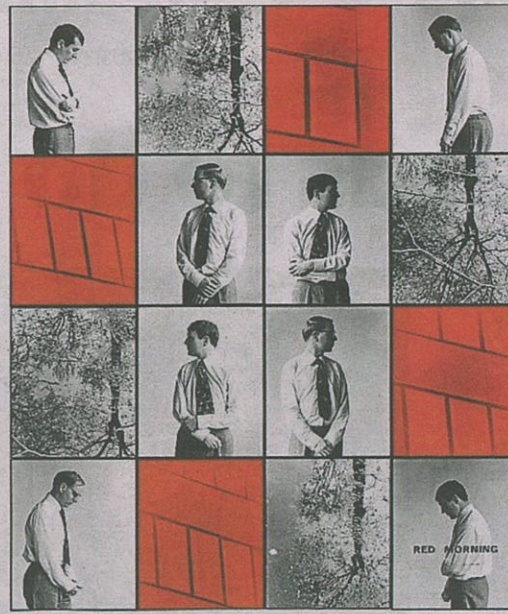
There is some method. "Every time you turn a corner, you are confronted," George says. They have taken away the explanatory cards ("We don't want explanations") and they have added seating, but mostly it was done by instinct, he says.

In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, MONA founder David Walsh writes: "I love Gilbert & George and hate Gilbert & George... [They] don't exactly make art. And their lives aren't exactly art. But there is art there... and it's there because of their brutal simplicity."

"They'll be every bit as dazzling and every bit as confusing as they were back in 1973."

As tributes go, it's par for the course for Gilbert & George. They have their own favourite, as George explains: "On the main street here, a huge truck was going to the docks. It just slowed down slightly as it passed us and [the driver] said, 'Oi, Gilbert and George. My life's a f---ing moment, your art's an eternity!' And he drove on."

Gilbert & George's *The Art Exhibition* is at MONA from November 28-March 28.



(Clockwise from main) Gilbert & George; *Red Morning Death*, 1977, mixed media, private collection; *Black Jesus*, 1980, mixed media, private collection; *Astro Star*, 2013, courtesy of the artists and MONA; *Blood city*, 1988, mixed media, courtesy of the artists; *They Shot Them!*, 2014, mixed media, courtesy of ARNDT and Gilbert & George. MAIN PHOTO: JAY BROOKS, CAMERA PRESS, AUSTRALSCOPE