

Gilbert & George: 'The rightwing press may be unpleasant but they're polite'

As a mammoth retrospective of the London duo's 45-year career opens at Mona in Tasmania, the partners in art and life reflect on mullahs, vicars, homophobic journalists and the sure-fire way to spot a leftie

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My meeting with Gilbert & George kicks off with a confession. I had a very strong reaction to their art.

“It was noticeable,” George says, with a wry smile. “You went up in smoke.”

“So, art works,” Gilbert says.

“It works on you,” adds George.

And this is how our entire hour-long conversation operates, with the pair constantly cutting in on each other. Not rudely, mind you. The impression they give is of two tap dancers elegantly in sync, politely stepping aside for one another with an “after you” and a doff of their silk top hats.

We're at the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in Tasmania for a mammoth retrospective of the London-based artists' work, curated from 45 years of art-making. It feels petulant to tell them just how irritated I was by the artworks in the first few rooms. Petulant because the pair are so damn refined and polite, with their matching tweed suits and genteel airs. It's like shouting at two dainty teacups.

The works that got to me feature women in their niqabs, posters announcing “the coming Islamic State for Britain”, bottles of laughing gas (that look like bombs), British flags and tabloid headlines like “Terror recruits in our schools”. Enough fearmongering to make a Reclaim Australia Facebook page look sober and restrained.

But “very good” is all George will say to my reaction.

A day earlier, the artists accompanied some journalists on a media preview. Even as we moved through the gallery, to rooms and works that dealt with other subjects, I was so burdened by my initial feelings of irritation that my eyes started to mist up. I was blinded by rage.

“Your feelings got in your way,” George says today, with the evenness of a nodding psychologist.

When I read one of their quotes emblazoned on a white wall, I felt even more irritated.

We want our art to: bring out the bigot from inside the liberal and conversely to bring out the liberal from inside the bigot.

I'm liberal with a small l, unabashed and unashamed. I'm not a bigot, and none of their works had seduced me to the dark side, thank you very much.

“You're a good leftie,” Gilbert says with flat irony. They can always spot a liberal, George says. “They're all dressed in black shirts, the uniform of fascists. If you mention Mussolini to them they all go mad. But they're wearing the same thing.”

I observe that Mona's marketing team seem to have a predilection for black. “Yes, we know that,” George says. “I don't know why. Even all the waitresses.”

But here's the thing, I tell them. I couldn't maintain my rage. Their works are so funny (think a Christian cross made of poop logs), so sex-obsessed, blazing with the life and vivacity of the east London neighbourhood where they have lived for 50 years, and so gently and often absurdly human, I simply could not resist. My anger ebbed away and I saw that sentence - “bring out the bigot from inside the liberal” - in a new light. How quickly I had branded them “not of my tribe”. How counterproductive - how very bigoted - to write someone off for something as banal as politics.

“So you ended up loving the picture of the ladies with the niqabs!” George says, triumphantly.

(I don't *love* them, I reply).

London's East End is now as famous for its artists as its cultural diversity, but it wasn't always this way. Gilbert & George met in 1967 studying sculpture at Saint Martin's School of Art, and say they were the first artists to move into the area. The language of the streets was once Yiddish, but as the Jewish population moved to other pastures, the Bangladeshi community came in their place.

The perceived east-west cultural clash of our times is more than academic to Gilbert & George, both now in their 70s. It has been the fabric of their lives. The pair talk of being the first white customers at certain Bangladeshi restaurants, recall the first generation of immigrants who were happy to escape religious dogma in their own countries, and remember when the mullahs arrived and what a profound difference this made. They have seen stones thrown at a female cyclist for wearing red lipstick (“a ceremonial stoning,” George says, “which was fine, we don't mind that”) and mothers walking with their young daughters dressed in burqas.

With such dramatic changes sweeping their urban environment, George says it is only natural they would respond in their work. “When we walk on to the street and a young

person says 'Get the hell out of here you fucker, this is a holy land', why wouldn't we react as an artist?" Their response is not abstract but specific, soaked in the sweat of London street life.

George says they once came back from dinner and found their door had been kicked in. "Everyone was sympathetic. [But] I said: 'No way!' Thank god we're not living in the country reading about this. We're actually here in the 21st century." They are very privileged, he says. "It's fantastic. We want to know."

The pair's most recent works, Banners, feature provocations including "burn that book", "fuck the planet" and "ban religion". The last phrase strikes me as particularly counterintuitive.

"We're being philosophical," George says, recounting the story of a vicar who once knocked on their door unannounced. "He loved the 'ban religion' one, and said: 'I would love to put it up in my church. I have a congregation, a big congregation who are very nice people and they're all very religious but I don't want them to be religious. I want them to be good.'"

The pair can speak extensively about the grave crimes against humanity committed by the Christian church: of the fingernail pulling and the cutting-of-hearts-from-chests of the Spanish Inquisition. "Gods are artificial, made by human beings to terrorise the humans beings," Gilbert says. "Like our favourite restaurateur said: 'I don't believe in all these manmade religions. I'm a Muslim'," George says, with a faint smile.

The artists insist they are "not against anything" - even religion or political correctness. "It's just, how can we form ourselves to hurt less?" George asks. "How can you stop someone being arrested today in Nairobi for having a different sexual orientation and never coming out of that bloody lockup? How can we stop that?"

Political correctness historically served an important role, particularly in elevating the rights of gay people. The liberal press, Gilbert says, used to be "closet homophobes". "The LIBERAL press," George repeats, for added emphasis. "I remember they used the term 'filthy queers' which they're not allowed to use, right? But by saying: 'Gilbert & George must be very unhappy having been called 'filthy queers' for all these years.'"

"The Times?" Gilbert asks.

"No, that was the Guardian. The rightwing press would never do that. They're too polite. They may be unpleasant but they're polite."

The Guardian seem to have given them nothing but blanket and ovating coverage these past few years, I note.

"That's recent," George says.

"And quite interesting because we always buy the Telegraph," Gilbert adds.

"Always," George echoes.

The powers of the PC police have gone too far, they say. Christmas decorations have been banned out of fear of offending non-Christians. No one dares utter the word “Islam” on television nor interview the victims of suicide bombers. England is “scared of religion”.

I point out that while I was offended by their depiction of Islamic extremism, I was not offended by their corrupted symbols of Christianity (and I subscribe to neither religion). But had these same images been made by a Muslim artist in a Muslim country, perhaps I would have been.

“That’s the confusion of modern life,” George says. “A male nude in the newspaper is regarded as homoerotic because they assume a man took the picture. If it’s taken by a woman, is it not homoerotic? Are pictures of naked ladies lesboerotic? ... there’s still a lot of questions to be answered.”

Gilbert, rather succinctly, calls it “turmoil”.

Yet while the world around Gilbert & George changes, many facets of their internal universe remain consistent. Famously, they have lived in the same house on Fournier Street in London’s Spitalfields for decades, worn the same tie-and-suit combo and frequent the same restaurant, Mangal II, each night.

They have never once looked at the menu, George says. “We have the same thing every night until we’re nearly vomiting from it. Then we change for the next three months.” What are they eating at the moment? “Lamb chops with salad,” he says.

Such unconventionally ascetic lives invite comparison to Franciscan monks. “You know what they say about monks?” says George, a twinkle in his eye.

“We have to be orderly and correct and regimented - then we can have crazy pictures. If we had a crazy life we’d end up doing abstract art like the other idiots - without being rude.” Do they wear matching pyjamas to bed? In unison: “We don’t wear pyjamas.” They sleep naked “of course”.

Theirs is one of the most enduring love stories the art world has ever seen - two hands on the same watch - and George says their relationship has become “stronger, more powerful” with time. They have few friends, Gilbert adds.

“We wanted them at the beginning but it didn’t work out. So no, we don’t want them. We don’t want anybody.” But there are acolytes. “We have a lady tramp and boy tramp that come at half past five every morning for coffee. Every single day of the year, including Christmas day,” George says.

Both visitors are alcoholics and Gilbert takes particular glee in pointing out the boy tramp is called George. George says the lady tramp is called Tara, “like the house in *Gone with the Wind*”. He describes them as “slightly agoraphobic” - they tend to sit on their doorstep rather than come inside. The pair are given £2 each day - “their pocket money”, as Gilbert puts it.

Tara and George will be waiting for Gilbert & George to return home, they say. “They’re more happy as humans beings than anybody else we know. They never complain. It can be pouring with rain and they don’t say it’s a horrible day or anything like that. Extraordinary optimists they are. They’re a lesson to us all.”

I riff on their motto “art is all” with a new one: “TV is all”. Do Gilbert & George watch television? “Of course,” laughs George. “What do you think, we’re weird or something? We need to be informed. Need to know if you go to the airport whether it’s going to be open tomorrow, right?”

Last time they travelled to Tasmania a “big lady at security” commended their excellent sartorial style. “She said: ‘We never get nice travellers today, everyone is so badly dressed. And you gentlemen are just wonderful. You really look exquisite. Can I just check you for explosives, please?’ All in one sentence! There’s the modern world for you.”

Gilbert is tickled by the idea that his partner could be carrying explosives to Hobart. “Jihadi George!”

● Gilbert & George: The Art Exhibition is at the Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, until 28 March 2016

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