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Entertainment

Gilbert & George bring their shock tactics to Mona in Hobart

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Nick Miller

Europe Correspondent

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Gilbert Prousch and George Passmore, aka Gilbert & George, met in 1967 at St Martin's School of Art and have been shocking the establishment ever since. Photo: Jay Brooks/Camera Press/AustralS

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 Shot Them! 2014, Photo: ARNDT and Gilbert & George

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, George 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 & George: The Art Exhibition

Gentlemen of the gutter: Gilbert & George! Photo: Jay Brooks/Camera Press/AustralS 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" and "f---ing Sussex".

"... really beautiful f---er, regimental f---ing, f--- diary ... It's endless," George 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, unsure veterans, potty-mouthed gentlemen, conservative radicals.

And 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 in the gallery previously best known for its poo machine (*Cloaca Professional* by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye).

"Not before our shit pictures," Gilbert points out.



Indeed. The pair certainly pointed the way when it comes to turd-featuring art. It's just another unpalatable Gilbert & George fact.

Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore, 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, 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."



Forward, 2008. Photo: Gilbert & George and White Cube



One World, 1988. Photo: Gilbert & George

Bombers, 2006. Photo: Gilbert & George and White Cube

But 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 – full of tramps and murderers, cheap, where 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, pumping out instantly recognisable art exploiting their environs, their politics, but most of all themselves.

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 perhaps most of all their disinterest in socialising with other artists.

But 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.

"It was extraordinary," George remembers of that visit.

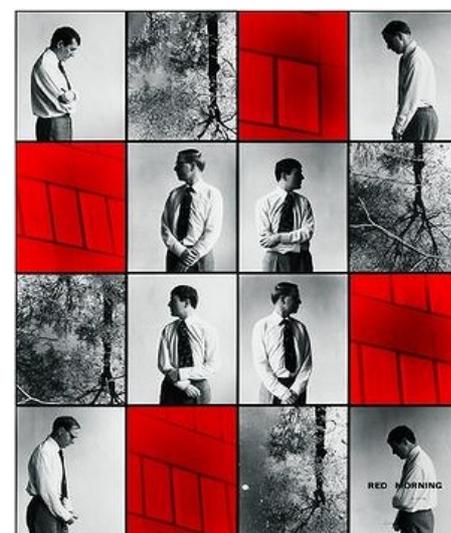
"We were drunk every night," adds Gilbert (they don't tend to finish each others sentences so much as start them).

"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."



Black Jesus, 1980. Photo: Gilbert & George

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.



Red Morning Death, 1977. Photo: Gilbert & George

GTK - George & Gilbert (1973)



It may seem hackneyed now, but then it was a revelation.

But 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.

Says George: "That was all pre-'86. That was when the term permissive society was a positive and where the idea of sex tourism, the term didn't even exist. We never looked back."

So what went on in Bangkok?

"A lot of stories," Gilbert says.

They arrived back in London spent, unclear on how to deal with success in Europe, New York and Australia. In New York they had been part of a spontaneous movement downtown. "We were introduced to all the artists, famous artists, we had dinner with them ... it was fantastic," Gilbert says.

But 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 Huguenot house that they renovated even as they constructed their career.

Their art became the experience of making art in one place: Fournier Street, Spitalfields.

At one end of the street is Brick Lane, the artery of London's Bangladeshi community, recently morphing into a trendy row of nightclubs and art galleries. At the other is the baroque Christ Church Spitalfields, a local landmark built when the area was dominated by Huguenots, now restored into a combination church/events venue (recently it hosted the World's 50 Best Bars awards). And just opposite is the Ten Bells pub, where rumour has it one of Jack the Ripper's victims got drunk and another sold her services.

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 inward, shedding their suits to feature full-frontal in their photos, putting under the microscope and up on the wall their own excretions of every kind. 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 said.

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

"If we go to a [gallery] opening [people say], 'Oh, you have to support this, oh, you have to support that or you have to be against it'. We don't want to be against them. They have their vision, they do their art, there are so many different art works. We don't want to be against or pro.

"But we only want to do our view – that's it."

They never feel like 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. But looking back 40 years, they aren't embarrassed by any old naivety: they are proud of everything they have made.

"What comes out of us we trust," George says.

They believe they have been validated again and again by history.

For example, they pioneered the selfie. Says George: "For 20 years 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."

Their suits are now considered "dapper" by the local hipsters. The West End is dead and the East End is crammed with creatives. When they started their careers, minimalism was trendy, now it's "what every lady in the council flat would like", says George, quoting Serpentine Gallery curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, "minimalism is the new kitsch" (the quote has also recently been attributed to London artist Grayson Perry).

"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 arrival of gay marriage, the departure of obscenity laws. Books, art and films lead culture, and culture leads politics.

"The pictures are the same but the world changes around them," George says.

Which brings them to Tasmania, and new surroundings.

As with all of 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, George says. "We're great collectors of literature on the psychic world. We always believed in automatic writing and we think that that exists in everyone in some measure. So even hanging the pictures is some form of automatic, because of what we think and what we believe, what happened last year and 10 years ago, that forms how you will do something."

Mona founder David Walsh, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, wrote: "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 the Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, from November 28-March 28.