

Provocative pictures: Gilbert & George discuss their new exhibition at The MAC

Iconic British artists Gilbert & George have regularly courted controversy with their pointedly provocative Pictures series. David Roy spoke to the mischievous London pair about bringing their 2013 collection *Scapegoat Pictures* to The MAC in Belfast



Gilbert (right) & George bring *Scapegoating Pictures* to The MAC this week Picture: Mal McCann

YOU'VE probably heard about the planned protest by Free Presbyterians against the new Gilbert & George exhibition, *Scapegoating Pictures*, at The MAC in Belfast.

Opening to the public tomorrow, their first major exhibition in the north for 19 years features a series of large scale photo-based images from 2013 which were inspired by the sights, people and tensions of London's Spitalfields, George Passmore and Gilbert Prousch's home and artistic base for the past 50 years.

Scapegoating Pictures comprises fragmented, nightmarish creations dominated by aggressive black and red colouring and peppered with bomb-like objects, which are actually nitrous oxide cannisters discarded in the east London streets by 'hippy crack'-taking revellers.

Men and women in traditional Muslim dress feature heavily, as do the artists themselves, their features often obscured by masks and/or their bodies warped into skeletal figures.

Scapegoating Pictures also features graffiti-esque slogans such as 'S*** in The Pulpit', 'Defecate at The Altar', 'Punch a Preacher', 'F*** The Vicar' and 'Castrate The Clergy', all of which are likely to have got prospective placard wavers hot under their collars.

To be fair, it's not just the Christians Gilbert & George are poking at here: other phrases deployed in *Scapegoating Pictures* include 'Rape a Rabbi' and 'Molest a Mullah', along with earthy pro-homosexuality slogans guaranteed to annoy all flavours of the religiously devout.

The 'swear-y' element is very much in keeping with the iconic Brit-art pair's landmark 1970s piece *Dirty Words Pictures* and their more recent, tellingly titled work, *F***osophy*.



The duo's their first major exhibition in the north for 19 years features large scale images inspired by their home in London's Spitalfields Picture: Mal McCann

The MAC's senior curator Hugh Mulholland points out that Gilbert & George have always been proudly secular and anti-religion.

"They have always been the subject of scrutiny in terms of the way religions have a view on how you should live your life and who you should live your life with," he tells me. "So, in a way the 'provocation' is coming from having been the subject of other people's prejudices."

Ironically, last year Gilbert & George actually took selections from *Scapegoating Pictures* to Berlin's St Matthew's Church as part of a Martin Luther-themed project, *Luther und Die Avant Garde*.

"It was an active, working church," recalls George of the exhibition. "Imagine the wedding photos! But the vicar was so thrilled, he thought it changed his congregation forever."

Of the rather less warm welcome extended to them by some elements of our own religious community in the north (their 1999 exhibition at Ormeau Baths Gallery was also picketed) George takes it all in his stride.

“I’m sure a lot of people are very ‘pro’ us here as well,” he reasons. “We always have fans and opposition. Opposition and criticism is very character-building.”

“We have always had confrontational views of the world,” offers Gilbert. “It’s because we have subjects – a lot of artists only do abstract. But we deal in reality.”

At this point, the pair ream off their favourite ‘provocative’ subjects: “Death, hope, life, fear, sex, money, race and religion.”

Gilbert adds: “We just open our door in Fournier Street and there it is. What’s going on with religious tensions, it’s all there. We have the mosque at the end of our street and the Anglican Church at the other.

“Our motto is ‘ban religion’, because we realise the hatred that religion brings about is just extraordinary. Religious wars are going on non-stop, but we know by now that there is no god – it’s a man-made god; it’s made up. So we believe that we are alone here, that we as humans have to sort out how to love your brother.”

“We had a very gentle life in the ‘Muslim quarter’ for many many years,” explains George of how they’ve witnessed Spitalfields become increasingly segregated along religious lines.

“Then the mullahs arrived from Bangladesh and the Muslim community changed. Then the twin towers happened and they started to attack us as well. All the doors in our street were kicked in apart from one Hindu lady’s.”



Picture by Mal McCann

Such anxieties become palpable when viewing *Scapegoating Pictures*, the duo's latest attempt to combat hate via culture.

"Generally speaking, there are very few parts of the planet that are privileged," says George. "We are very privileged and very lucky [in this part of the world] and that's not because of god or politicians – that's because of culture.

"If you go to a country where there's no library, no opera house, no museum, you will need a bodyguard there. Culture keeps us safe."

Next up for Gilbert & George is a follow-up to *F***osophy*, which featured over 4,000 variations on everyone's favourite curse word.

"It's called *Godology* – a list of more than 5,000 simple things about god," George informs me, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "It's going to be very beautiful."

:: *Scapegoating Pictures* runs at The MAC from January 26 to April 22. Full details at The-maclive.com. Gilbert & George will be signing catalogues and posters at The MAC between 12pm and 3pm tomorrow.



Picture by Mal McCann