

ART:

GILBERT AND GEORGE, DUO WHO WORK AS SOLO

GILBERT AND GEORGE are two influential, internationally-known London-based artists who work as one. Collectively, they conceived, composed and executed every one of the photomurals in their retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. To their advocates, Gilbert and George are complex, compelling and sometimes comic artists in the forefront of artistic attempts to forge a new future. To detractors, their work is too contrived and contradictory to be in the forefront of anything except the exploration of new materials.

The artists call the 67 works in this show “photo-pieces.” In each one a selection was made from the thousands of photographs the artists took themselves. Then they composed a screen of images built with rows of square panels (there are 1,500 panels in this show). The artists are guests and hosts in their works. They are almost always present. Their expressions are often deadpan. They usually wear the same nondescript suits that they hope will make visitors see them as Everyman.

Some works touch upon the bleak side of London life. There are ravaged faces, and graffiti. There is a constant sense of claustrophobia and walls. Many of the artists’ more scatological works have unfortunately not been included in the show. There are also many signs of hope and growth, notably flowers and young men. Everything, good and bad, religion and sex, is presented in the same polite, detached tone. In none of the photo-pieces are there any images of women.

The artists have become increasingly sophisticated in the use of color. The earliest and some of the best pieces in the show are black and white, or black and red. Then they brought in more and brighter color. Now the artists are able to spread color over several panels, rather than having to confine it to individual prints. Brenda Richardson of the Baltimore Museum of Art, who organized the show and wrote the informative and jargon-free catalogue, describes their color as symbolic. Through colors like red and yellow, the artists try to communicate the emotions that inspired them.

Gilbert was born in Italy in 1943, George in England in 1942. They began working together at St. Martin’s School of Art in London in 1967 when the formalist sculptor Anthony Caro was its most influential teacher. Early in their career, they made themselves into living sculptures, covering themselves with bronze powder and remaining immobile for hours. They have written poetry and worked in many visual media, including film and video. In 1971, they began making the photo-pieces that are the subject of this show. For each of the five stops on the exhibition’s tour, the artists designed the installation.

One reason Gilbert and George have aroused such interest is that their work is almost a compendium of radical artistic thinking during the last 30 years. The flatness, popular subject matter and detachment in their work are all familiar from Pop Art, although Gilbert and George’s detachment seems more reportorial than ironic. Their attempt to deny the traditional romantic split between an artist’s private life and public persona comes out of the 1960’s: at the same time that their photo-pieces are filled with direct evidence of their private lives, the artists have invented public personalities that they want to be as composed, consistent and animated as their work.

But the artists also belong to the 70's. Their involvement with the self, and their interest in photography, film and narrative bring to mind Conceptual Art. The Guggenheim enables the works to be seen in a filmlike progression along and around the ramps. The work of Gilbert and George also belongs to the 70's in its fierce refusal to be categorized, a point the artists stress in their debatable decision to install this show in an entirely unchronological manner.

Nothing is more important to the work than its utopianism. With it, we have moved into the 80's. In the 60's, artistic utopianism was tied to radical politics. The utopianism of Gilbert and George is disabused. The work seems to resist political systems, ideologies and anything that smacks of bondage, from Communism and religion to sexual obsession and alcohol. The artists want their art to be a guide and a model.

Although there are occasional references to past art, Gilbert and George do everything in their power to root their work in the present and direct it toward the future. They have made strategic decisions not to read books and look at other art. They make a strenuous effort to avoid traditional esthetics. They are involved with contemporary materials that they believe can speak a common language. The rejection of background and any sensation of space is always, in effect, an attempt to obliterate the past and focus the visitor into the here and now. Beyond all this, their work is intensely committed to flowering and youth. And despite the absence of women, the artists have indicated that their goal is a world beyond gender. They want their work to be both sensual and sexually neutral.

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Nothing is more striking in this show than Rothenberg's attempts to take the disembodied heads, arms and hands that were almost a signature of her painting and attach them to the whole figure or another totality. In "Golden Moment," an earlier head that had no clear identity or gender is now the head of a mother who is embracing her child. In the "Biker," the head and arms of the figure on the bike, as well as the bike itself, are based on previous heads and arms. The "Biker" is one of several works in the show that recall Giacometti - in this case, "The Chariot."

The power of Rothenberg's painting still depends on her ability to infuse life into independent parts. In "Golden Moment," perhaps the most monochromatic painting in the show, the mother and child seem mesmerized by each other. The way the artist captures the consuming intimacy is not by glowing colors and descriptive detail, but by isolating the head of the mother and body of the baby in a charcoal black triangle that seems to detach itself from the rest of the painting. However Rothenberg's work changes, this kind of irony and feeling for the human fragment is likely to remain. (Through May 18.)

Joan Mitchell - "The Sixties" (Xavier Fourcade, 36 East 75th Street): During this Expressionist moment, the impressive abstract and Expressionist paintings of Joan Mitchell are particularly welcome. There are 12 paintings in this show, all of them from the 1960's, when they were exhibited in Europe. None had been shown in New York. These solid, firmly structured works will bring to mind several artists, including Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning and Adolph Gottlieb. The content, however, is Mitchell's alone.

Many of the paintings, some of them based on landscape, tend to be keyed by a zone of conflict. There are usually two large areas of color that seem to lean on and support each other. But they also seem to push and bristle. And sooner or later we have the sense that paint is flying from the canvas like fur from two raging cats. This combination of tenderness and conflict can be felt in other ways as well. If these paintings can make us think of soft winds, they can also suggest Leonardo's "Deluge." Even when the colors are light and lyrical, there is an underlying sense of ferocity. (Through May 4.)