

## At home with Gilbert & George: ‘It has to be immaculate in order for us to make all these unpleasant pictures’

No 8 Fournier Street in London’s East End has been home and studio to the artist duo since 1968, meticulously restored to its 18th-century origins. What’s it like inside?



Gilbert and George have never cooked in the house – not even boiled an egg. All photographs: Christian Sinibaldi for the Guardian

I am flanked on both sides from the first step inside. With George leading and Gilbert behind, I’m channelled into the large workspace at the back of the house that is the career-long workspace of the artistic duo. Attached to rails running down the centre of the studio is the projector they once used to enlarge images on to the wall at the opposite end. On display ... the vases of great 19th-century designers. Photograph: Christian Sinibaldi for the Guardian

Empty, monstrous washbasins – previously used to process large-scale photographs and the panels that form the grid sculptures – sit unused since the artists went digital 15 years ago. The large drum scanners they used to grind information out of the negative photographs were last to be axed five years ago, but all the obsolete technology still has a place within their studio, even if it is, as George puts it, to be “romantic”. Throughout, artefacts haunt the rooms and shelves of Gilbert & George’s Fournier Street home in east London. Of course, the benefit of working digitally has freed up their practice. No longer do the pair need to work with chemicals. As George concedes to various advancements, he confesses: “The only things we miss are the rubber gloves.”



On display ... the vases of great 19th-century designers.

The studio came with the Spitalfields house when they bought it in 1968. Since they needed to expand, they acquired space on next-door's land. There lay a desolate house and they got that free. An "extraordinary" outcome, says George, the word he repeatedly uses to refer to amusing, baffling and banal observations. He and George share a universal curiosity punctuated by the hyperbole of caricatured English gents. No 8 Fournier St has been fully restored to its 18th-century decor. They even restored the kitchen, though Gilbert says they have never cooked in the house – not even boiled an egg. The only amenity they use is the kettle, for instant coffee. "It took 300 years to go downhill," explained George. "We've prepared it for the next 300 years, see? We've used the same paint as they used originally, the same plaster, everything is as it would've been originally." Everything apart from the furniture, Gilbert adds.

Their 19th-century furniture, vases and books are immaculately framed by the setting. The rationale George gives is that "it has to be immaculate in order for us to make all these unpleasant pictures". The kitchen table was the 19th-century architect and designer Augustus

Pugin's own. It previously belonged to a monastery and when their dealer friend told them that, in order to purchase it, they would have to have lunch with the monks, the artists were concerned their secular world view would clash. "We said, hold on, we don't know what sort of conversation to have with a monk," explains George. "You don't have to worry, said our friend, they're a silent order."



'We are very interested in what is discarded or discredited.'

Twin cast-iron tables by George Bullock, the designer who created furniture for Napoleon in exile, symmetrically stand beside two windows facing the street. Gilbert & George even have an identical hatstand to that of Napoleon. Their penchant for the great designers of the 19th century is evident. The vases of Christopher Dresser, Phillip Webb, designer of the Red House, and Edwin Godwin, who designed for Oscar Wilde, all feature. The collection prominently features objects and designers relegated to the forgotten chambers of the past, from former library books to coin collections with no monetary value. "In our art and in our life, I think we are very interested in that that is discarded or disguised or discredited."

In 1969, Gilbert & George were excluded from a group show entitled *When Attitude Becomes Form*. Instead of acting as passive onlookers, they turned up uninvited at the private view with multicoloured, metallised heads, as living sculptures. Exclusion has always inspired them. "We always felt we were against the grain. We were outside but we wanted to win with our vision of the world, with our way of making art," says Gilbert, in English still accented from his Dolomites upbringing in Italy. The shutters to the second-floor room are usually closed to prevent light damage to the vases, furniture and the restored paint scheme, as if the exposed room itself were a fading photograph. "Don't lick the paint," says George. The lead paint, the same formula used to decorate the original walls, still has a faint, deathly scent.



'Don't lick the paint' ... it's lead, the same as they used in the 18th century.

They have always loved the East End. “We still think it is a more actual place, compared to other places we visited,” says George. “It is typical planet Earth, today. Most places that we’ve been to are typical 1957 or typical 2001. This is so actual here. From Liverpool Street in the City, to here, to Bethnal Green, to Whitechapel.” The range of life is concentrated. Within 20 yards, George points out, you’ll find sex, money, race, religion, hope, fear. “The life force is the same.”

History combined with the present – “the ghosts of time”, as Gilbert calls it – is what makes London modern for them. The discarded objects they gather from the street – homemade stickers, protest signs, religious propaganda, drug paraphernalia – are given a new life in Gilbert & George’s images. “It’s always nature versus the city,” says George. “We love it. Just this morning we saw matchsticks and some amazing blood-red vomit down the end of the road. Extraordinary! Great explosions!”

Reclaiming objects is also to do with the conventions of class. In a side room is a Pugin chair from the palace of Westminster. They had it re-gilded and sourced silk velvet from the same period. The drawings of the design, on show at the V&A, show a crest in the middle. “But we didn’t want to reproduce that, so we made up our own coat of arms,” says George. “Do you recognise the nice creature in the middle?” A large embroidered pubic louse, as seen in their London E1 pictures, sits between G initials.

Back in the studio, next to the large grey filing cabinets that archive their oeuvre, they’re working on the expressions of humanity. Laid out next to an A-Z map of London are a series of scribbled phrases. In the thousands of lines, “fuck” appears in every idiom.

- Gilbert & George will be in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Charlotte Higgins at Kings Place on 20 May.



A Pugin chair with Gilbert and George-designed coat of arms, featuring a large pubic louse.