

Review: Gilbert & George in the Early Days, Sending Up a Religion Called Art



An installation view of the survey "Gilbert & George: The Early Years," at the Museum of Modern Art. Credit Credit Jonathan Muzikar

'GILBERT & GEORGE'

'The Early Years'

Museum of Modern Art

Through Sept. 27

If you were frequenting New York galleries in the early 1970s, you might have witnessed one of that period's most memorable works of performance art, at Sonnabend Gallery: the British duo Gilbert & George's "Singing Sculpture." Wearing suits and ties, and with their skin covered in metallic paint, they stood on a table and robotically lip-synced to an old recording of the Depression-era song "Underneath the Arches." A video of them, reprising their performance at Sonnabend in 1991, is included in "Gilbert & George: The Early Years," an engaging Museum of Modern Art survey of their doings from 1969 to 1975.

Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore met as students at St. Martin's School of Art in London in 1967, soon after which they determined that everything they made or did in art and life would be sculpture, and that their partnership itself would be a living sculpture. Their

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anti-elitist slogan was “Art for All,” but if their art was populist, it was in a peculiarly ambiguous way: While their work could be broadly comically entertaining, it was a highly sophisticated and knowing response to the avant-garde art of its time.

Since the 1980s, Gilbert & George have been known for aggressively overbearing large-scale photomontages resembling modern stained-glass windows, in which they are depicted amid sometimes politically provocative allegorical images. This show, organized by David Platzker, a MoMA drawings and prints curator, reveals them starting out in their 20s in a disarmingly playful spirit of self-invention.

The show features many small-scale printed works, including exhibition announcements, mail art and booklets. Like just about everything in this exhibition, the material mocks the sentimental grandiosity that tends to accrue around celebrated art and artists: “It is our intention to bring everyone to a realization of the beauty and necessity of our sculpture,” reads an oration by the artists in a publication called “The Ten Speeches.”

One art-life activity to which they devoted themselves was drinking. Along with a sketchy mural-scale charcoal drawing of themselves in a bar, and a video of them drinking gin, are two funny sculptural objects: a wineglass with its stem bent, so that it appears dizzily inebriated, and a green gin bottle, partly flattened as if it had passed out, called “Reclining Drunk.”

The show’s most compelling piece hinges on the association of art with religion. A triptych on artificially aged paper, measuring more than nine feet high and 25 feet wide, is titled “To Be With Art Is All We Ask.” Nearly life-size charcoal drawings of the artists, relaxing in their customary suits and ties in bucolic settings, flank a long hand-printed text. A kind of prayer to Art, it begins: “Oh Art, what are you? You are so strong and powerful, so beautiful and moving. You make us walk around and around, pacing the city at all hours, in and out of our Art for All room.”

It’s worth reading to the end, for despite its gently satirical tone, it truly expresses the joys, frustrations, anxieties and despairs that a life devoted to art necessarily entails.