BRUTAL BEAUTY: A Q&A WITH GILBERT & GEORGE

Curator: Andrew M. Goldstein

About The Collection

The artists Gilbert & George have been making art together since the late 1960s, when the two met at art school in London and decided to become "living sculptures," dressing in the formal suits of a bygone England and dissolving their identities into a single creative force that persists to this day. Winning the Turner Prize in 1986 and going on to represent their country in the 2005 Venice Biennale, the duo are among the most influential—and controversial—figures in British contemporary art, known for provocative work that opened the door for artists like Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin. Now Gilbert & George have opened a show of new work, the *London Pictures*, that spills across Lehmann Maupin's two New York galleries and Sonnabend Gallery.

To mark the occasion, Artspace is offering its members a piece from the show, which is inspired by the often grisly crime headlines from London's newspapers. To learn more about the new body of work, and to discuss Gilbert & George's unique approach to art, Artspace editor-in-chief Andrew M. Goldstein spoke to the artists for the following video. (For a full transcript of the wide-ranging conversation, see below.)

You have used more than 3,000 British newspaper posters to create these new pictures. Where did these posters come from? Are they from the London tabloids?

George: It is very important to say that they are not from the tabloid newspapers. The lower class popular mass media do not issue posters. They're from mainly the *London Evening Standard*, which is an extremely respected and historical 120-year-old London newspaper, and the two local newspapers the North London and the East London, both of which are very non-tabloid.

Gilbert: Most of the time we took them from the Liverpool Street Station, because that's where they sell the *Evening Standard* every day, and sometimes the poster can change three times a day—it depends what's going on, if someone important has been killed, assassinated, or stabbed they changed posters. And in the evening we are walking for dinner every single night and we are able to get some of the other posters. So for the last six years we had to steal nearly three posters a day.

It's interesting that you acquired these sensational crime headlines by being criminals yourselves.

George: It's very important that we stole them one by one ourselves with all the danger and social embarrassment and difficulty that entails, because that way they lived through us. We were walking the streets and we were taking the poster and the subject came through our shoes and into the soles of our feet and all through us, our souls, our sex, and into our brain. We feel it's very easy for an artist to buy a newspaper every day, and we didn't do that. We did something much much different

Gilbert: And in the beginning we thought we could just ask them for the poster the day after, and we realized people didn't like that at all—they were quite critical of that. So that's why we started to steal them, and it was quite a big process.

George: We knew there was something important about the posters because of the aggression of the news agents when we simply asked them to keep last week's poster. "Why would you want the post of a murderer?," they would say. "What sort of person are you?" And we realized it was something deep inside someone that they were afraid that they would become complicit in something dangerous. It was rather like when we used to photograph bird shit on the street, or spit on the street. The moment you take a camera to something like that the general public becomes a bit aggressive, and that's because there is something important about that.

Did you ever get caught stealing these posters?

George: Only once. An over-enthusiastic young policeman, rather good-looking, came chasing up behind us: "What is are you doing, gentlemen? Do you have permission?" We lied and said, "Yes." And he wanted to know what we were and we had to think very fast and we said, "At our school"— so, immediately we established that we were somehow connected with education —"we have monthly debates on how we can all discourage antisocial behavior, so we put these posters up to show the children the dangers there are in life,

and we all came to the conclusion that we should be doing more and not just leave it to the police." And he said, very sweetly, "Oh sir, if only more people were like you!" And off we went with our poster.

The phrases you literally ripped from the headlines are very lurid, including keywords like "death," "strangled," "sex attacker," "race hate," and "knife murder." What is it that appeals to you about these graphic subjects?

Gilbert: We don't believe they are lurid—we believe very much that they are how they are, because we didn't change anything. We didn't change the font, so they are exactly how we found them. It's exactly the original poster, and what's there is exactly what life is all about. We are not lying. That is modern life, it seems to us, because we know that nobody wants to know about happiness. We're only interested in being unhappy or stabbing or horror or murder or money or all this stuff. We don't have posters of how happy we are.

George: And we believe that they are very matter of fact—they're not an exaggeration. When it says "Bomb Scare Across London," that is a fact. It is not lurid when a policeman and a policewoman ring the doorbell of a flat and say your husband's been killed on the tube by three muggers. She will have to find some way of explaining to the children, she will have to find some way of telephoning relatives, she will have to find a way of telling neighbors. She will never say, "Something lurid happened to my husband"—never. It's a plain matter of fact, there's nothing sensational in being killed. It's a horrible reality, and how lucky we all are that those things haven't happened in our lives so far! And it extends through generations and people go to prison. You cannot even propose marriage to someone without explaining that your uncle was in prison for 30 years for such and such a crime.

Gilbert: We are very interested in freedom of the press because in a lot of places where they control the freedom of the press you wouldn't even be allowed to have these posters. They represent the modern way of thinking, and at least it is the truth.

You clearly enjoy the freedom of the press, since you stole them.

George: Yes [laughs]. It's very important

Gilbert: Another kind of freedom [laughs].

George: I think it's wonderful that we can celebrate this great western privileged world that we live in, where we can eat food from any country and listen to music and travel anywhere in the world. We can have poetry, we can have music, newspaper posters, exhibitions, and the like. But no doubt there is a price to pay for that. And maybe these pictures talk a little bit about the price we have to pay for all of us to be free, and that maybe we have to accept that if you have a perfect world where nobody rapes and nobody robs then we would all be constrained in a way we wouldn't accept.

It's a dark typology of the city, in a way. And then the two of you can be seen standing—or sometimes hovering, disembodied, as eyes—in the background of every picture. At the bottom right there is a cameo of Queen Elizabeth with the line "it's written all over them," i.e. you. What does that mean?

Gilbert: We very much like the spirit of London with "E" behind it. We like these ghost images with us behind it, because we believe that evening as the darkness comes down the spirit is there—the ghost of London, the ghost of us.

George: It's like a story

Gilbert: We're telling a story, and the queen is there to to make it more important

George: She's there to preside over everything. For a moment we thought we should have had a policeman with a helmet in profile, which would be very good and very authoritative and something we all need. But the queen is the hereditary head of state, so she is even better. Her portraits are all based on coins that we all carry in our pockets. They say that money is one of the main democracies, and when we buy a bunch of flowers in the afternoon or go to a prostitute in both cases you have to pay with money. It's an ultimate fact of our modern living wonderful world.

Your presence in the pictures is very enigmatic. In some pictures you seem concerned, in some you seem indifferent, and in others you seem almost exultant. Who are you in this context?

George: We think that everything is multi-layered and very complicated, and we think that modern life is more complex—in a good way—than it's ever been. People waking up a hundred years ago were completely different as individuals from people waking up today, and we believe in that, in the aberration of the individuals.

A critic once wrote of your "Sickertian love of the City," a somewhat chilling reference to the painter Walter Sickert, who has long been suspected of being Jack the Ripper. There is something ghoulish about Gilbert & George, isn't there?

Gilbert: I mean, we're not going to be Jack the Ripper [laughs]. But in fact Jack the Ripper was walking the street exactly where we live because we live in the East End of London. There is even a Jack the Ripper pub at the end of our street.

George: We believe in ghosts. Not in the way of ghost stories, which of course are beautiful literature. We believe in the real ghosts, which includes inherited memory, inherited traits, family traits, and we also believe in letters from people who are long gone that we keep for some reason—a birthday card from somebody long gone, or photographs of family. Or the thoughts and feelings that we had this morning working on First and Second avenues seeing the names of people above shops from countries that no longer exist—that person is no longer with us. They're all real, actual ghosts, and we believe in that and we can celebrate them partly in these pictures.

How do you hope the viewer will react to these pictures?

Gilbert: We already had a very good reaction, and it was quite extraordinary because we thought mainly that we should do some posters of this piece, so we did six different posters and in four weeks we saw nearly 4,000 posters. So the reaction was quite extraordinary because I think the young people want to go home and terrorize their parents with our posters. It's a kind of a freedom for the young people to have stabbing or death on their walls.

George: It's strange but young people want the most challenging subjects, the most challenging concepts. They don't look for the best one in the most obvious way, they want the most difficult one, and it's very exciting

Gilbert: After all, these are not the most sellable pictures

George: So even the young person who comes and says, "What the fuck am I supposed to think about?"—that is already a compliment, a great, great compliment.

Considering your interest in newspaper headlines, I have to ask: what newspaper do you read?

George: We buy the *Telegraph* every morning not only because it's to our tastes but because it's the most-read educated paper in Britain—it's the most normal of the non-tabloids. And first we read the obituaries, of course, and then we try to find out what is happening in different countries because that is less reported than home news generally.

Gilbert: That's why we listen to Al-Jazeera! Because they take us away from England every night.

Your art, however, has always been essentially tied to the city of London, from your references to your manner of dress to your post-imperial preoccupations, in a way that you more often find in a novelist these days than in artists, who rarely pledge allegiance to geographic places anymore. What does London mean to you?

Gilbert: We like the idea of the universal city—not only London but all the big cities, because that's where life is going on. So for us London is the center of the universe where everything is happening, and not only London but East

London. We don't feel we have to go anywhere else to be inspired, everything is in front of our eyes.

Your series reminds me that T.S. Eliot once wanted to name The Waste Land "He Do the Police in Different Voices," a reference to a Dickens character who read crime reports in the voice of police officers. Do you still see London as a wasteland?

George: We would rather see it as a sort of celebration. We think these pictures celebrate the lives and deaths of many dead people who would otherwise be forgotten. We're not critical of society or of London, we think London, Paris, and New York are the three great cities in the world at this moment in time, and we are totally non-critical of them. We just believe in their modernity and love it.

Gilbert: We want to accept it all—we like it as it is. It's an amazing evolvement of different ideas and behavior on different levels, and we want to accept it all. That's what life is all about. It cannot be a perfect life, it has to be a complex life, and we are part of it all the time and, whatever its faults, it's extraordinary.

George: We believe there's everything inside every person, that you are an interviewer today but you are also capable of being a lover or a mountaineer or a person keen on walking or even in the right circumstances maybe a criminal or a murderer. You are capable of being happy—and I'm happy—or of being hopeful, fearful, dreadful, loving, kind, unkind. Everyone has every possibility in the world within them.

Gilbert: Altogether they create this extraordinary world.

The newspapers of Fleet Street and contemporary art have a special relationship in London. In fact, one could argue that the incredible boom of the London art scene in the 1990s would never have happened if it wasn't for the gleeful headlines about the crazy things Damien Hirst and other artists were doing that splashed across the newspapers, giving a popular spotlight to art that you never see in the United States. Why is contemporary art such catnip for the papers in London?

George: I think that it is beginning to happen in New York, actually, and it happened in London because artists started to address issues that were within every person in the world, whether they lived in the desert or the jungle or the city. When we were baby artists everything that we believed in was taboo. Figuration was taboo, color was taboo, sex, thoughts, meaning, religion—you weren't supposed to deal with any of those things, you were only supposed to deal with circles or squares or lines or very restricted colors. And we believed in an art for all and we pursued that.

Gilbert: And I think we were some of the first ones who believed that to have an amazing subject in our art, and when we had a retrospective in 1987-88, we had the biggest public of a living artist at that time. It was just extraordinary, and for the first time there were articles that were so violent against us, and the moment created a besotted atmosphere. There were so many articles about us, and when we did the *Naked Shit Pictures* [1995-96] the whole world was full of articles for and against us, and in that moment art came alive in a big way. That's why I think art has changed enormously in England, at least, and I think the art is dealing with different subjects and the press have been taking it seriously. My god, now you can see pages and pages and pages of art reviews and articles on the art world, just on art in general. That's new, and everybody wants to be part of it—a taxi driver, ordinary people, young people, old people, tourists, they all want to be part of this extraordinary art world that is based on free thought.

George: So it became more normal and more part of the national diet. For instance, we've never been to a football match, but we know about football because of the media and the newspapers—even if you didn't deliberately turn to those pages you know that it's going on. Similarly there are people who live in London or even a far-flung village who will never go to a museum or gallery but are following art in the press without ever having to visit. People even stop us in London and ask us, "How's the exhibition going?" That's the magic thing about culture—thats why books are read and that's why people go to concerts. The power of culture is very, very underestimated in our free society. That's why the lorry driver poked his head out of the window a couple of weeks ago and said, "Oy! My life is a fucking moment. Your art is an eternity." He got it.

When your "living sculptures" won the Turner Prize in 1986—the first truly notorious edition of that award—it really opened up the field, bringing your approach to a wider audience and liberating a generation of artists.

Gilbert: And liberating ourselves from religion as well, liberating ourselves for what we call acceptance of sex, which is our big subject, of course.

George: That's why when people say, "Do you think that you're the godfathers of the YBAs?" we say, "We're not sure about that, but maybe the fairy godmothers." But it is true that those artists started to address subjects that were available to people whoever they were—that if if somebody came from Saudi Arabia they'd be able to read something in those works of art. We felt as baby artists that most artists were willfully obscure and congratulated themselves the more their work was impossible to understand, saying, "Nobody gets it, I'm great." And we thought, why should you eliminate 99 percent of the world's population? That's why we believe that an artist has a responsibility, because in the end he is providing a service just as the police station or the university or the medical department. They have a duty to perform, and we believe that the artist is there to fill that hole in all of us after everything practical has been dealt with and there still is that space for how we can think and feel as different creatures on this marvelous planet.

Gilbert: That's why we blame all of the Renaissance artists for painting the suffering Jesus, no? Can you imagine life without those paintings? Religion wouldn't like the way it is today. The artists did propaganda for the church.

George: We believe that religious paintings should be removed from the national galleries of the world or at least put in a different section of the building, because they are not fine art and they are mostly fakes. No artist was present at the crucifixion, after all. We call these artists collaborators—they were collaborating with the enemy, because the church and the state were against the individual.

What about your irreverent *Jack Freak* pictures from 2009 that are in the form of stained-glass church windows. Do you see those as counter-propaganda?

George: They work on more than on one level. We feel that it's very important that we deal with religion, but that doesn't mean to say that we're for it. We wouldn't like to be the artist who ignores religion, who says, "It's okay for the plumber or the cleaning lady to give it a chance, I'm a sophisticated atheist." That's too simple, so we want to deal with the subject. Of course, we're against it, but if we want to be against it we have to deal with it in some way.

Gilbert: And when we did the show *Was Jesus Heterosexual?* [2006] people were all up in arms. He had to be something!

George: It could have been very simple for Christians, because they could have just said yes. But they didn't, and they got all affected by that. And it was a wonderful moment when we promised to do a tour of the gallery with a small college group—because of where we live it was a small Islamic group—and one of the boys who was probably 15, with his first silky beard, saw the poster for the show and said, "But there wasn't homosexuality in the time of the Bible." But we said, "What about Sodom and Gomorrah?" And he said, "Oh yes." It was a wonderful, magic moment for us and we will always remember that, as we saw realization of information come across this young face.

Maybe you should start a seminary.

George: They wouldn't trust us with the students [laughs]. And they'd be right.

Gilbert: Though we do have a following among the clergy, strangely. They are not entirely against us—they see something there for them.

What are you working on now?

George: That's a secret [laughs]. We've never liked to say that. We don't say what we're working on because we never want to be conscious of what we're doing until we get to the studio, and even then we want to be blind and deaf and deadheaded and zonked, as we call it, so that we want to fall into something that we hadn't thought of. We don't want to plan and have ideas or we'll be doing pictures like we did before, and we don't want that.

Gilbert: At the moment, we are selling pictures. We are do things in different parts. First we have to have the idea, then we have to have what we call the subject, then we have to collect all the different subjects then we have to take the image, then we have to make the designs of the picture, then we have to make the labels of the picture, then we have to do the catalogue, the poster, and the installation, making small models of all the galleries and deciding how we want the pieces to be on the wall.

And you have one assistant, is that right?

Gilbert: Yes, everything to do with art, we are doing. Everything that is not art, we can't do.

George: We say the best part is when the pictures are finished on the gallery wall or the museum wall and it's the evening of the private view and we're standing there with a glass of wine in one hand and we're surrounded by teenagers licking us all over.

Gilbert: It still works

George: Art works on so many levels. Even a few months ago a very elderly sophisticated lady said, "Congratulations, gentlemen, on your exhibition. You were really asking all the difficult questions in our troubled times." A great sentence.

One notable feature of your art is that, as opposed to someone who paints commissioned portraits of patrons, you always portray yourselves, forcing collectors to bring you into their homes in striking way.

Gilbert: We would never do a commissioned artwork.

George: Of any kind.

Gilbert: We want to be free to do whatever we want, not to be told what to do.

George: We don't know exactly what is in our heads when we go into the studio, so to go with someone else's information in our heads would be disastrous.

George: It's quite strange because up until 1985 the first question of every journalist was, "Why are you always in your pictures?" And nobody asks that question so directly anymore because more artists are either in their pictures or it's sort of biographical or it's about their lives. It became more common for the artist to be there in the art.

Gilbert: Much more common. But we very much believe that when you go to a museum and you see a landscape—say a Van Gogh landscape or a Rembrandt landscape—you see the image of that person behind the picture. That's why it's so important—otherwise it would be just a landscape. So, it's the same in some way only that we are actually in it. But it is G&G speaking to you, G&G in a love letter to the public. That's what it is.

George: That's why we say that we believe in real ghosts, because in all of our pictures we're all slowly waving goodbye waiting for the great moment to come, and we think that, as with all of our letters, our visual love letters are signed by us, so we're there. It's like when we say, "my late aunt" or "my late uncle" or "my late grandmother." No one would say the "late Charles Dickens" or "the late Shakespeare" because we know those people are still there for us if we need them. You can open the book and Dickens or Shakespeare or Van Gogh can still be there to help us if we need—they're not completely dead.

Gilbert: All together our art is like a big novel, don't you think? In the beginning there was drunkenness and happiness, then we did what we called the *Shit Pictures*, then we did cosmological pictures, then we did political pictures, so it is an amazing story altogether and a very human story.

George: And one day there will be a last Gilbert & George picture, and the whole story will be complete.