

Gilbert & George

A Portrait of The Artists as Young Men

Who Are Gilbert & George?

Gilbert Proesch (born Dolomites, 1943) and George Passmore (born Devon, 1942), met in 1967 when they were both studying at St Martin's College of Art in London. As an artist-duo, they have collaborated together as Gilbert & George from the late sixties to the present day. They are based in East London, an area that has inspired and influenced much of their work; work which is considered to be 'both an ongoing portrait of a city and a reflection on the human condition'.¹ They consider themselves to be 'Living Sculptures' and believe in 'Art for All'.

Gilbert & George's work often appears to be inspired by pain and unhappiness. Referring to the trope of the tortured artist, they have said of themselves; 'We are unhappy artists'. Jonquet explains, however, that 'everything – not least their obvious happiness at being together – would seem to indicate otherwise'.² Their work encourages us to explore what is real in their persona, what is charade, what is artifice, what is fact – and whether the answers to these questions are ever attainable through an artwork.

What is 'A Portrait of The Artists as Young Men' about?

This work is one of Gilbert & George's early video works, made in 1972, and the piece has a deliberately dated, nostalgic feel. The almost painterly quality of the work, its stillness, its high contrast, and the lack of any kind of action, draws the viewer into observing very subtle changes in pose and gesture. This becomes increasingly compelling throughout the duration of the piece. Although video is not their primary medium, this work contains some of their trademark features, such as very pronounced references to authorship. The use of logos, signatures, and the way the piece is titled, means that we are not left in any doubt of the artists' hand at work, and that we are faced with a very strict and controlled presentation of their identity and persona.

The following excerpt is taken from an article by Jonathan Jones as part of his *Portrait of*

the Week feature for *The Guardian* in July 22, 2000:

‘This is a very funny work of art. The title suggests all the bursting passions associated with youth: anger, energy, ambition, libido. But we don't get any of that. Instead, this black-and-white video, which runs on a continuous loop, gives us a study in stasis. It begins with a title card bearing their royal-looking crest, as if this was the start of an old Gainsborough Studios film. The ‘action’ begins. Gilbert and George pose, weakly and lifelessly. They just stand there, in bespoke suits and tight collars, moving ever so slightly, their faces impassive, their hair flattened. George feebly smokes a cigarette.

....

Of all Gilbert and George's works, this is the one that most acutely raises the question of whether their works are ‘portraits’, in the sense of representations of a person that tell us who they are and what they are like. Does this artwork contain any personal information, or is the washed-out, superlit image a mask concealing nothing?

....

The title of this work seems to be a joke. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a study of the development of an artist, of the experiences that make a sensibility. Gilbert and George on the other hand deny they ever ‘developed’ at all. They simply became Gilbert and George one day in a convulsive change, instant and absolute. ‘We have never seen a young artist’, they said in an early manifesto.

....

A Portrait of The Artists as Young Men is about masquerade, play-acting, about becoming something other than what you were told you were. Gilbert and George assert the right not just to reinvent themselves but to resemble an alien life form. They are not hiding behind masks but assert that they are the mask, the ‘sculpture’.³

Why is this work being shown in the exhibition *A Portrait of the Artist As...?*

Gilbert & George’s work often involves portraiture, self-portraiture and a very self-conscious presentation of themselves as *artists*.

However, while critics refer to Gilbert & George’s practice as self-portraiture, the artists themselves actually resist this term:

‘Gilbert: So we discovered this art form that would put ourselves in the pictures, which

was limitless.

David Sylvester: Is it like artists obsessively doing self-portraits?

George: We never saw it in terms of self-portraiture really. Not at all. Anyway, for years and years the images we took were of each other, so it wouldn't be a self-portrait anyway.

DS: You always took the pictures of each other?

George: It took us years to work out. They were always separated and put together artificially.'⁴

This makes *A Portrait of the Artists as Young Men* especially significant because in it Gilbert & George physically record themselves together in a literal way – a self-conscious presentation which rarely occurs in their other work.

Gilbert & George cite Vincent Van Gogh and Francis Bacon as significant influences.

This exhibition unites two masterpieces by these contrasting modern masters, and highlights Bacon's admiration and emulation of Van Gogh. Gilbert & George have also expressed their debt to these artists – both the men and their work. They claim to identify with the idea of the lonely, unhappy and isolated artist – an idea Van Gogh and Bacon have come to be closely associated with.

Francois Jonquet questions 'Does it mean that happiness and contentment are the worst poisons for creative artists? George came to art via Van Gogh, Gilbert via Michelangelo; for both the figure of a tormented genius served as a point of departure.'⁵

Robin Dutt writes, 'What Gilbert and George are excited about and committed to is the message of their work and they cite Francis Bacon whom they state rather categorically, they are nearest to, adding that he didn't know how to paint, only how to make a powerful image. They also say that his message is a simple one of humanity, fear, unhappiness – three concepts which again they can relate to and always have.'⁶

Gilbert & George are a collaborative duo.

Although Gilbert & George often refer to the idea of the lonely unhappy artist, they are not alone, having worked together since they met at art school. There is a strength and a confidence to the 'team' that is Gilbert & George, which is a very different presentation of 'the artist' to the other depictions in our exhibition.

They have said, 'One person looks like a bloody silly artist. We always said that two persons removed self-doubt. We can never have self-doubt. "'⁷

When Robin Dutt questioned 'Why G&G?', they replied, 'In two there is strength. We came together as students and we never look back.'⁸

¹ 'Artists/ Gilbert and George', White Cube, accessed 20 June 2012, http://whitecube.com/artists/gilbert_george/

² Francois Jonquet, *Gilbert and George, Intimate Conversations* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 13.

³ Excerpt from Jonathan Jones, 'A Portrait of the Artists as Young Men, Gilbert and George (1972)', *The Guardian*, 22 July 2000, accessed 20 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2000/jul/22/art.gilbertandgeorge>.

⁴ Gilbert and George with David Sylvester, 'I Tell You Where There Is Irony In Our Work: Nowhere, Nowhere, Nowhere', *Modern Painters*, 10:4 (Winter 1997).

⁵ Jonquet, *Gilbert and George*, 13.

⁶ Robin Dutt, *Gilbert and George, Obsessions and Compulsions* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2004), 60.

⁷ Gilbert and George with David Sylvester, 'I Tell You Where There Is Irony'.

⁸ Dutt, *Gilbert and George*, 127.