

## Poster Boys: Q+A with Gilbert & George

brienne walsh 05/01/12

In much the same way that Charles Dickens's writing brought to life the roiling-and frightful-humanity of London in the 19th century, Gilbert & George have used the city as the main subject in their work since the early 1970s. In their exhibition "London Pictures," currently on view at Sonnabend, and the Chelsea and Lower East Side locations of Lehmann Maupin, they bring the streets of East London to the walls of the galleries. By doing so, they elevate the violence, the horror, the oddity and the quotidian of urban life to the status of high art, and in the process, cement a place for it in history.

Based on 3,712 newspaper posters announcing the most sensational headlines of the day in bold, block lettering—mostly culled from the *London Evening Standard*—which the artists stole from the front of kiosks and newspaper stands on the streets near their shared home in East London, the works are marked by Gilbert & George's characteristic insertion of self-portraits into each image. In their studio, the artists photographed five years' worth of posters and then collaged them together according to recurring subjects, including "Killing," "Playboy," "Muslim" and "Terror Plot." The resulting works are the 292 "London Pictures."



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) GILBERT & GEORGE Murdered, 2011 mixed media 118.9 x 124.8 inches ; GILBERT & GEORGE Robbers, 2011 mixed media 88.98 x 100 inches ;

Each piece features one of the Queens of England in the bottom right corner, the images lifted from portraits on coins issued throughout their reigns.. The posters are then laid over background images of such materials as black lace curtains or brick walls, which the artists refer to as "house burkas," dividers that allow the works to look out, but no one else to look in. Except, of course, for Gilbert & George themselves, who hover in the background like ghostly visitors, always present, always bearing witness.

A.I.A. met with the duo at Lehmann Maupin in Chelsea to discuss how the "London Pictures" were originally conceived, and why, despite all appearances to the contrary, it is ultimately an optimistic body of work.

**BRIENNE WALSH** What first drew you to the posters, and why did you decide to turn them into art?

**GILBERT:** We used to look at these posters again and again, because they are very close to Liverpool Station, where we are located. We just took some photographs of them, but we didn't know how to use them. Slowly, it came to us that they could tell an amazing story. One that is real. One that is not fake. It is quite a brutal story. It's not like sunshine all over the place.

**GEORGE** They are the celebrations of the lives and deaths of the people who are forgotten, but are in the pictures. We had this huge piece called *Murder* that is the biggest group of posters. If you do a drawing or painting of a man shooting a man, it doesn't mean anything. It's totally irrelevant. But if you have all of these real instances, where someone really does get murdered—a wife, a man, a son, a boy, a girl, they are a sensation. They tell a story.

**GILBERT** Even over there [points to a work], "a man dies after sex act gone wrong."

**GEORGE** "A man dies after drinking cocaine laced rum." There's a warning to us!

**GILBERT** You actually couldn't make them up.

**GEORGE** [*points to another work*] "Old aged pensioner died after a wart operation." That's a tragedy! He wanted to improve his appearance.

**WALSH** It's really an art form to write great headlines.

**GEORGE** And they're not exaggerated. They're very matter-of-fact. Very straightforward.

**GILBERT** We did do one for ourselves when we had a big show at the Tate Modern in London. We always thought, "Why don't they write about art? All the posters ever have to do with is killing and knifing."

**GEORGE** So we did a spoof on them for the *Evening Standard*. It said, "Perv Duo Desecrates Tate Modern."

**GILBERT** We would like to do that!

**WALSH** It seems odd that there aren't any names in any of the headlines. It's always just "man," or "girl" or "thief," or "Muslim."

**GILBERT** That's how they are. We didn't change them at all.

**WALSH** Looking at the works, it strikes me that you are capable of great empathy. You feel for humanity and are trying to capture what its like for an average person living in London. You are trying to memorialize them.

**GEORGE** In London, but also in New York, or Paris, or Johannesburg. Everyone is stabbing and raping, everywhere you go in the Western world.

**GILBERT** There is such complexity to life. There are so many layers of existing. It's not all perfect.

**WALSH** I read somewhere that you said that each poster moves through your gut. Do the headlines linger in your mind even after the initial shock of seeing them, moving you not only physically, but also sparking your imagination?

**GEORGE** The poster is just a poster, but the story it tells of what happened in this apartment or that flat is a nightmare beyond our imaginations. When the policemen or policewomen go and tell the lady that her husband has been killed, or the children have been raped and can't be found, it's a tragedy that will extend to the workplace, to the school, to the neighbors, to the shops. It's a tragedy that will extend beyond generations.

**GILBERT** One takes it for granted. "Oh, it's just another one." But we started to think about it. We lived with them for five or six years. [*points to another work*] Like, for example, "Girl Found Hanged In Wardrobe."

**WALSH** When you were collecting each work, and thinking about each headline, were you inventing stories, and telling them to each other? Were you thinking about each life?

**GEORGE** We were just very conscious of it. More than any other picture we ever made, they move through us. We lived them. We breathed them.

**GILBERT** They are like plaques of war.

**GEORGE** Some soldiers are only remembered because they had their names on a small piece of bronze. And even that gets stolen and melted down for money.

**GILBERT** In these pieces, we are freezing time in some ways. Normally, the posters are not frozen in time because they are chucked away the next day.

**GEORGE** But we are making them art, and making them history at the same time.

**WALSH** I notice that you included an image of a Queen in the bottom of each work. I wonder why you felt the need to include an imperial presence in the midst of so many horrible human stories?

**GEORGE** She is very important, because we felt that it was such a complex, unhappy venture we went through, that we wanted someone beyond ourselves to preside over the series. Her presence is a reminder that no matter how terrible all of these acts are, they are the price we are paying for our liberties in Western society. If we all want to be free, we have to accept that some people are going to rape, and that some people are going to murder. And the Queen in each work is saying, "It's a terrible time, but all will be well. It's ongoing. It's historical." These pictures, hopefully, will be as historical as the Queen one day.

**GILBERT** And every piece has a different image of the Queen. They're all taken from coins.

**GEORGE** The coins are important, because we think that money is another ultimate democracy. If we are in New York, and we buy a bunch of flowers, coins will pay for them. If someone buys a prostitute, coins will pay for him or her.

**GILBERT** You never know where money has been. But the coins always serve the same purpose.

**WALSH** The works have so much sadness and tragedy. Is there anything good in the world today?

**GILBERT** Freedom. Not one freedom. But rather freedoms in the plural.

**GEORGE** The trick is that we all have to imagine new freedoms, not only defend the old ones. It's difficult to imagine new freedoms.

**WALSH** What would they be?

**GILBERT** Ban religion would be one.

**GEORGE** If someone could set up a United Nations whose job it was to solely, globally, decriminalize sex.

**GILBERT** If you could get people everywhere to stop killing in the name of God. Religion is coming alive again. Take Islam, and Sharia Law, which bans nearly everything that's good in life. In Europe, it took hundreds of years to liberate ourselves from religion. Yet, we feel as though saying nothing to fanaticism is the best solution.

**GEORGE** Our governments think they must make concessions, because you musn't ban the traditions of other people. But where does the line come? You cannot say "It's a tradition to shoot my wife because of what she's wearing" and get away with it.

**GILBERT** Sometimes there has to be an end to it. If not, you are going backwards in a big way.

**GEORGE** We all have conventions ingrained. We don't all know better. We're all at fault. We're all complicit.

**WALSH** Is there anything so horrible, so unmentionable, that you don't want to deal with it in your work?

**GEORGE** We didn't exclude at all. Maybe the newspapers censor, but not us.

**WALSH** Ultimately, despite all of this negativity, do you see hope for the world?

**GEORGE** Always. We've always been great optimists. We've never been negative. We know traditionally that artists have always been quite critical. We don't want to be like that.

**WALSH** What changes do you anticipate in the world in coming years?

**GEORGE** What a person was like standing in a room 100 years ago was totally different than now. And it must change again.

**GILBERT** In Europe, all of the people are very privileged compared to 20 years ago. We travel all over the world, day and night. But we don't realize how privileged we are.

**GEORGE** We are the first generation to travel without going to war. My parents and grandparents traveled only to fight.

**GILBERT** And you see the result of it everywhere! You only have to go downtown in Manhattan, and look at the variety of food you can eat. So it's not so bad!

**GEORGE** What about the handbags women carry? They are endless!

**GILBERT** So many different handbags!

**WALSH** But with all of this privilege, have we gotten lazy? Is there more to critique?

**GEORGE** I think the "London Pictures" remind people of the price of freedom. You can't only have the handbags and 20 different cuisines. There's always a price. People should come to the show to be reminded of that.