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Gilbert & George: The wild cards strike again

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Gilbert and George's latest exhibition is their biggest ever, a show at White Cube of 155 of a total 564 new pieces composed of cards collected from phone boxes, pubs and the street, arranged in a set pattern of a dozen repeated cards framing a single one in the middle.

Inevitably it includes many adverts for sexual favours and, to drive the message home, the whole project has been called The Urethra Postcard Art of Gilbert and George. The urethra, in case you didn't know it, is the canal through which urine and semen is discharged in the male. It is also, in case you didn't know this either, the sign of the theosophist Charles Leadbeater, who was a great believer in masturbation in boys. To which the only response can be: "Count me out".

That would be a mistake. For the works are actually good in a very considered and restrained way. Inevitably there will be lots of attention paid to the smuttier items, and the double entendres in the titles which the artistic pair so love. A vicar being interviewed on camera at the preview was somewhat desperately pleading not to be put against an assembly of aggressively naked male posteriors (he didn't win that one). There will be plenty of people, even among the pair's fans, who will give a despairing shrug and say, "It's all getting rather tired, isn't it?"

No it isn't, actually. However you take the title of the project, the construction of each work of repeated cards in a clear geometric pattern gives the works a sort of vivacious simplicity when seen at a distance. Coming into one of the two large rooms in which they are shown, you feel as if you're in a salon of prints, the repetition of the cards giving them – particularly the Union Jack flyers so beloved of the pair – a sense of movement as well as boldness.

Close up, it's not the crudity or even the outright perversion of some of the cards which strikes you, so much as the sadness of the hard sell, the warmth of the patriotic flyers and the affection of a few choices. And some of the titles given are funny in a dry way. A card advertising a new sauna with a naked female chest is simply called Rottingdean, the town where it is based.

By taking just one word from the card and using it as the title, the artists actually subvert the crudity of the message rather than emphasising it. A group of cards declaring "Your Pain is My Pleasure" is called Your Pain. A card for "Tans-Gendered Boy" is called, after its smallest line, Was Born Girl. A card for "Dungeon", detailing various instruments, has its title taken from the last two items, Toys and Cross.

You don't even have to spend long with the darker side of sexual services. The largest section is actually made up of postcards for London, many of them with Union Jacks, some lovely bears and lots of Big Bens, gaining their impact less from the objects than the warmth of repetitive pattern and colour.

"If I was to buy a Gilbert and George for my own home, it would be one of these," says a gallery director. She's bound to say that, of course, and at £16,750 a pop the works are somewhat expensive for my pocket. But they're no worse, and sometimes better, than other works which are fetching a great deal more.

"Performance artists" is what most galleries call Gilbert and George, which is how they started. The difficulty is in judging how much is art and how much performance. The two are indistinguishable, they would presumably argue. For years they have been putting themselves into their art and making a performance out of their daily lives. And I do have to admit to a certain weakness for a pair who always wear a suit and tie when out in public.

Originally this was all part of a self-promoted image of themselves as respectable Tory middle-class professionals, battling the artistic establishment of leftie, badly-dressed abstract artists. Gilbert and George were about place and people at its most basic and most ordinary.

You can buy that narrative as you wish. I don't. But it is a bit tired now. Who cares how they vote? The point about good manners and formal attire is that it is a means of ensuring privacy and, above all, control of your relations with other people and your surroundings. Gilbert and George have always been the most controlling of artists, determining precisely what they choose for imagery, how they present it and (with their gallery) when they show it.

At their best – in the Jack Freak Pictures and The Naked Shit Pictures – their work has an urgency, an anger even, that is compelling and unruly. It wants desperately to say something to you. At their worst, they seem just to be creating for their own amusement, their imagery too calculated and their puns merely tiresome.

The Urethra Postcard Art of Gilbert & George falls more into the controlled than the unruly category. They are nothing if not deliberate. Over the last 20 years since their last postcard show, they have been busily collecting cards with an end product in mind. They have to be able to collect at least 13 of the same cards to make the set pattern. They like them to be a bit jokey. They have been collected, categorised and filed in a rigid system.

What they are not, of course, is spontaneous, nor an emotional reaction to the world they find around them. Gilbert and George have an audience in mind, not a people to portray. The cards certainly give a view of life in the round – the patriotism, prejudice and solitary appetites of their urban world. But the artists do not seek to understand or learn from it. In that sense, their view, as their suits and ties emphasise, is one kept deliberately at a distance from that which they observe. Their outlook in these works is ironic, not involved.

Is there a touch of the planned offensive about it all? It is being accompanied by a massive two volume catalogue of Gilbert and George's postcard works from 1972, priced at only £40 and presumably subsidised by the artists themselves. There's a documentary about them being released in art-house cinemas to coincide with the exhibition and then there are the sheer numbers of the works involved. A big push to reassert standing for two artists well into their sixties? And, if so, who by? The artists themselves or their gallery?

One hopes there is more to it than that. The Urethra Postcard Art of Gilbert & George is a fresh show. The composition is almost classically controlled, the colour carefully adjudged. But it's also cold art. Some of it – a lot, in fact – is funny and wry and telling. Some of it, one feels, is just there for the pleasure the two had in making up titles. But very little of it is engaging. Yes, it would be nice to pick one for one's walls. But I don't think it would change one.