

Press release

Gilbert & George THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES

731 Zeedijk
8300 Knokke-Heist

07.08 - 10.03.2021

Opening

Saturday August, 7
from 4 to 8 pm

Gilbert and George

THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES - text by Michael Bracewell, 2021

These 'THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES' are as vivid and disquieting as a lucid dream. The episodes and events they depict appear both agitated and frozen in time. Epiphany and confrontation combine in their mood, buffeting and stunning Gilbert & George like sudden cyclones. The weather of these earthly scenes feels simultaneously humid and chill.

Intense sensibilities pervade the 'THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES' and combine within them, setting the antic pace of their mysterious and unsettling chapter. The pictures derive from that which is 'earthly' (relating to the Earth and the human race) yet pictorially the worlds of their temper appear both external and internal: a journey to the centre of the Earth, perhaps, that might also be a journey within the raw organic matter of the Earth.

At the same time, in some of the pictures ('CROSS KISSING', and 'BRAKED', for example) these journeys are suddenly glimpsed as manifestations on the modern city streets, where slick new cars are parked and office towers are separated by tastefully landscaped precincts of concrete and young trees. Gilbert & George seem to bring sudden squalls of violently strange event into these commonplace streets of concrete and pavement.

This confluence of scenes, arrests and sites, this brutal terrestrial pageant, maintains the singularity of its mood throughout the 'THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES'. This mood could be described as the shock of being accosted, confronted and stopped – the route suddenly hindered or denied.

As the art of Gilbert & George is an endless visionary journey through life, this most recent path has taken the artists to a sinister, unpredictable and lonely place. The 'THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES' show Gilbert & George stopped in their tracks by a host of strange and seemingly malevolent agents, some man-made, some from nature, some machine-made. Yet all are ordinary and local – might be found in the immediate locale, almost anywhere. The drama of a cosmic incident is seen played out by the sudden moral animation of the mundane and most usually unregarded.

Specifically: blossoms, buds, seeds and fruit stones become fleshy and grown to monstrous size. The magnified folds and creases of vegetable discard appear either moist or petrified. Frond-like strands extrude from the artists' mouths like weird ectoplasm or gigantic millipedes. (In 'KISSED', 'KISS CROSS' and 'CROSS KISSING' these spore-seed-millipede fronds propose an especially repellent ticklish kiss. The 'landscape' these presences inhabit, into which it would seem Gilbert & George have strayed, is again both earthly and interior, urban and primeval. As the modern city suddenly manifests we see the blank façade of tower block windows, or cracked concrete. ('ROADWORK'). And yet the bizarre sentinels that patrol this earthly journey are sleepless.

As Gilbert & George give largely descriptive titles to their pictures, so these descriptions can become pictorial puns. Wooden struts ('BARRED'), olive stones the size of rocks ('OLIVARY' – also a neurological term); the machine-moulded cowling of car lights ('BRAKED', 'LAMPING'); slugs the size of the artists themselves ('SLUGGED')... 'Lamping' and 'slugged' both slang for being punched, taken by surprise...

The viewer of these 'EARTHLY PICTURES' might experience the amphetamine panic of trying to run in a dream as threat draws near. Gilbert & George look stunned and startled, at times puppet like, at times vaudevillian. Their demeanour and expressions appear possessed. The artists have become witness-participants in an earthly dream that might also be a moral pantomime or modernist commedia.

In the picture 'PEACHED' we see Gilbert & George as though stepping out on a music hall stage, flanked by grotesque pink drapes that are sections of magnified fruit stone

– the monstrous extent of which also serves as a backdrop. The scarlet suited artists appear urbane, mournful, uneasy and elegant. For half a century, each group of pictures by Gilbert & George has held in tension the feelings and individual intimation of the past, the present and the future. Likewise, each picture and group of pictures contains the presence – the genes - of its ancestor, becoming part of a cumulative process that is the vision of Gilbert & George. Time in the art of Gilbert & George is a continuum.

The ‘THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES’ affirm the vision of Gilbert & George as committed to raw realism, but always romantic and visionary. The mechanism of their compulsion is triggered by paradox. Finding heightened or disturbed emotion in ordinary things – the ‘local’ nature of the pictorial elements in the pictures, that becomes ‘universal’ within the art of Gilbert & George. Pictorial elements combining to become extraordinary and richly atmospheric; individual, yet interconnected by common feelings.

As such, the artistic vision of Gilbert & George derives from the union of lucidity and heightened feeling – embracing the real and unreal alike. Their art is thus channelled from the balance of control and loss of control. For Gilbert & George have always made art to communicate the living witness of the world as directly as possible. This communication appears as visionary, symbolic and archetypal tableaux: absurd, monstrous, crazed, dream-like, corporeal, hallucinogenic, portentous – at times inferring stories, encounters or adventures. And always, from the beginning, “earthly”. Time, place and activity and incident combine and mutate into strange new alloys of feeling and perception.

The art of Gilbert & George makes use of this hybridisation, contrast, and paradox to articulate mystery, urgency, stillness, tragedy, hysteria: the moods of life.

The balance of ‘madness’ and ‘normality’ empowers their art. In the ‘THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES’, visionary spectacle is shot through with shock, surprise and what seems a form of semi-mystical concussion. The iconic modern normal dress and demeanour of Gilbert & George, as they take their places in their art, is in sharp contrast to the extreme states they witness and at times embody. The viewer is shown the turbulence of feeling concealed within rational human behaviour. These contradictions and confluences of time, place and image create what might be called the formidable paradox of phantasmagorical realism.

The art of Gilbert & George is not concerned with formalist artistic problems but ethical provocation, experiential sensation and empathy. How does their art make the viewer feel? And how does the viewer’s response speak to their sense of themselves? How is the viewer changed by their experience of looking at the art?

For Gilbert & George, such self-questioning and questioning is the function of art and also their statement on the role of art. As such their art has always been a manifesto as well as an account of their emotional progress through life, age and the modern world.

As shown in the ambiguous earthliness of the ‘THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES’, in which the extravagantly monstrous, the spectral (‘MORN’), the eerily theatrical and the coolly quotidian combine into vivid unease, the art of Gilbert & George disrupts perceptual and ideological complacencies. Their art is not created to make the viewer’s experience easier, but harder. This is achieved in their art by holding the visionary in balance with concision and concentration.

Thus, each picture by Gilbert & George is made of a very small number of local, image-subject elements, presented to create the most immediate visual and emotional impact. The simple and uncluttered story – think of Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ or ‘The Christmas Carol’ by Charles Dickens – creates room for the visionary aspect of human experience. Simplicity reveals depths of feeling; statements begin to ask questions of themselves and those who make them.

As a continuum that leads so far to the 'THIRTEEN EARTHLY PICTURES', the art of Gilbert & George comprises a ceaselessly searching and self-questioning artistic vision – the collapse of meaning into the play and conflict of sub-conscious forces within the business of earthly modern life.

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Text by Michael Bracewell, 2021

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Gilbert, born in 1943, and George, born in 1942, met at the St Martins School of Art in 1967 and work together since. Recent solo exhibitions include, *Gilbert & George: The Great Exhibition (1971-2016)*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2021); Kunsthalle Zürich (2020); Reykjavik Art Museum (2020); Moderne Museet, Stockholm (2019); Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo (2019) and LUMA, Arles (2018), *There Were Two Young Men*, Fondation LVMH, Paris (2019), *The Major Exhibition*, Helsinki Art Museum (2018) and *Fuckosophy*, Neues Museum, Nürnberg (2018). Recent group exhibitions of the artists include *Schöne Sentimenten*, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle (2019), *The World Exists To Be Put On Postcards: Artist's Postcards from 1960 to Now*, British Museum (2019) and *Summer Exhibition*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2017).