LEHMANN MAUPIN

540 West 26th Street
New York NY 10001
Telephone 212 255 2923
Fax 212 255 2924

201 Chrystie Street
New York NY 10002
Telephone 212 254 0054
Fax 212 254 0055

lehmannmaupin.com

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Gilbert and George's Postcards from the Edge

Marcus Field

George, the taller bespectacled half of the artist duo Gilbert and George, is reading aloud to me from one of their new artworks: 'I'll drag you round my posh flat by your nuts you filthy vetch,' he intones in his perfectly enunciated English. Close your eyes and it could be Prince Charles speaking. I can't help sniggering. 'Why is it funny?' asks George, deadly serious. The words are from a collage of telephone-box cards, part of a collection called The Urethra Postcard Art, and George finds it fascinating. 'Someone will call for that service you know. Extraordinary!'

I shouldn't be surprised of course. After all, Gilbert and George have become household names in Britain for the way in which they take taboo words and images and present them in the rarefied world of the art gallery. What is impressive, though, is the fact that after more than 40 years they are still finding ways to provoke their audience. For example, when their new show opens at White Cube later this month it probably won't be the telephone- box cards that offend the chattering classes, but the many collages featuring the Union Jack, a loaded image which has lately become a Gilbert and George favourite. 'We think it's the best flag in the world,' says George. 'Taxi drivers like it. People from overseas buy clothes and postcards with it on. But the art world – this so-called educated group – rejects it. Extraordinary!'

The Urethra collection is the first set of new work by Gilbert and George to use collaged postcards since 1989, but their use of the form goes back to 1972 when they exhibited their first 'postcard sculptures' at the Situation Gallery in London. 'Postcards speak,' says Gilbert. 'We were always attracted to them.' In those days the pair would rummage through boxes of vintage cards in London shops, selecting the ones that most appealed to them: photos of London landmarks, portraits of kings and princes, soldiers, gaudy still lives of flowers and parks. These were arranged in abstract patterns that could be read by the viewer in whichever way touched them most. As time went on the patterns became ever more elaborate, culminating in huge works filled with hundreds of postcards of whatever was the most popular theme of the day, including the wedding of Charles and Diana in 1981.

Over the past 12 years Gilbert and George have again been collecting postcards, together with flyers and telephone-box cards. Their rule was to collect any postcard that featured the Union Jack and any flyer or phone card which 'was not boring'. Another rule was that they had to be able to get 13 items the same. This is the number they worked out they needed to form the cards and flyers into a shape approximating the sign for the urethra (a circle with a dot in the centre) which was used by one of their heroes, the theosophist Charles Leadbeater (1854-1934), on all his correspondence. Leadbeater, it turns out, was a great advocate of masturbation in boys, and the urethra – the channel that carries the sperm –was for him a symbol of what he considered this healthy occupation. Once the format was agreed, Gilbert and George were able to make the works fast and almost without thinking – a process they liken to the 'automatic writing' promoted by theosophists. There are

564 Urethra works in all, enough to fill the huge second volume of a new Gilbert and George book,The Complete Postcard Art, which comes out this month.

In 1967, when Gilbert and George first met and began working together at Saint Martins School of Art, it wasn't the Union Jack or the subject of masturbation that caused outrage among the staff and fellow students but their challenge to the prevailing trend for abstract art. 'They were all doing this minimalist stuff – it was all about weight, shape, colour. Real life didn't come into it,' remembers George. This cerebral, disconnected art meant nothing to the two young students who were determined to make work that somehow reflected their own background and experiences of the world.

Both boys, after all, had grown up in rural working-class families where practical concerns came first. George Passmore was born in Plymouth in 1942 and lived with his mother and brother in Totnes until he was in his twenties. His parents were divorced – a scandal in those days – which set him apart from other children. He was an eccentric boy, given to cross-dressing (there is a photo of him in a skirt and flowery hat at Totnes Carnival in 1951). He left school at 15, but enrolled for art evening classes at Dartington Hall where his interest in the subject blossomed. Gilbert Proesch, meanwhile, was born in the village of San Martino in the Italian Dolomites in 1943. His father was a shoemaker and young Gilbert learned to use tools in the family workshop. He soon became an expert woodcarver, honing his talent on images of the Virgin and saints. He left home at 17, travelling first to Austria to study, then to Munich, and finally to London where he enrolled at Saint Martins aged 24.

When the pair met on the Advanced Sculpture course George remembers that 'it was love at first sight'. Photographs from the time show Gilbert as a particularly handsome boy, with fine features and dark, piercing eyes. As well as being homosexual (a word they don't use about themselves, preferring to describe everybody as 'sexual'), he had the added attraction for George of being foreign and exotic, and therefore a kindred outsider. The two became insep-arable and quickly began to formulate the idea that would be their greatest achievement: to devote their entire lives to becoming living sculptures.

From this key moment in Gilbert and George's career, everything else flows. In order to stand out they did the opposite to what was being done by every other artist of their generation. They began to wear formal suits every day, at a time when George recalls other students wearing 'bell bottoms and platform shoes'. They embraced old-fashioned values of courteousness and formality, making 'postal sculptures' on embossed cards and collages of vintage postcards featuring the Royal Family. They set out The Laws of Sculptors, which began: 'Always be smartly dressed, well groomed, relaxed, friendly, polite and in complete control.'

Most memorably of all, in 1969, they painted their faces bronze and performed the music-hall song 'Underneath the Arches' in art schools around London (evocative footage of this is now on YouTube). It is a mark of the originality of this work that the pair were soon being courted by the smartest galleries and, in 1970, were invited by David Sylvester, the most famous critic of the day, to make a 'magazine sculpture' forThe Sunday Times. In the published text, Gilbert and George described their lives: 'We are only human sculptors… loving nightly… tea drinking… looking…

encouraging life… fighting boredom… dying very slowly… greeting politely and waiting till day breaks.' They signed the piece and added the motto 'Art for All'.

Forty years later it is remarkable to discover how consistently they have stuck to these early principles. They still live in the same East End house in Fournier Street that George moved into when it was a derelict wreck in 1968 and which they bought together in the early 1970s. The Georgian houses on this street are now wildly expensive (Tracey Emin lives across the road), but when the pair first came here it was an area for immigrants and the dispossessed, far away from the fashionable arty centre of Chelsea. George answers the door and shows me down a long passage filled with shelves of Victorian glass and out across a small yard to a large, tidy studio where Gilbert is waiting. We pause on the way to admire a salvaged drinking fountain engraved with the words 'Jesus said if any man thirst let him come unto me and drink'. 'Extraordinary!' says George. 'You would never be able to have that in public now, would you?'

We sit down at a long table to talk. George is wearing a green tweed suit, Gilbert a matching one in brown. They both have Parker pens in their top pockets. They wear different ties: George's is covered in images of their work and Gilbert's is patterned with a street map of the East End. At first there is something unnerving about sitting opposite two men dressed the same, with their formal manners, George's 1950s English and Gilbert's Italian-accented speech. But they smile and laugh a lot, which is reassuring. I say how impressed I am that over the years they always seem to have spotted exactly the subject that will most irritate the critics and gallery-going public and therefore elicit a response. In the early 1970s this began with photographs of themselves getting drunk (not con-sidered high-brow enough for art in those pre-YBA days), and soon moved on to large multi-panelled photographic works of London street scenes, most famously The Dirty Words Pictures of 1977, in which graffitied expletives such as 'Fuck' and 'Queer' appeared above their self-portraits. It is an indication of how both art and times have changed that those works now seem less confrontational than Gilbert and George's most recent pictures, the huge colourful compositions that feature Muslim teenagers, Arabic script, newsstand posters announcing the London bombings, and words such as 'Hooded'.

What is their intention when they make these works? Gilbert is quick to respond: 'We want people to remember that picture forever. That's our motto. It has to be outside the norm. It has to be different, otherwise people won't talk about it. If people read books and go to concerts they might change. Exhibitions can do that, too.' Right from the beginning Gilbert and George said they wanted to change the world through art, and George gives me an example of how this can happen. 'When we showed the work Queer in New York, the so-called gay community was very anti the picture. Then a few years later they were all dancing the night away with 'Queer as Fuck' written on their T-shirts. So things can be changed. Nobody minds the word queer now.'

Now with so much of their work featuring iconography from both Christian and Muslim religions there seems to be an attempt to neutralise the fear of alien cultures, as if by enlarging the words and pictures to giant size, the idiocy of killing each other over differences of faith can be made plain.

Of course Gilbert and George have always been anti-religion. 'We are against it,' declares Gilbert. 'All religions. Because we believe they are based on lies. Every one.' One of their most recent shows – Sonof-agod Pictures: Was Jesus Heterosexual? – raised questions over the tenets of Christianity. When exhibited in 2006 this resulted in a debate on the Today programme and incited the wrath of Ann Widdecombe, who called it 'blasphemous in the extreme'.

So much for the things Gilbert and George are against. What are they for? They like David Cameron, for a start. 'He's very good looking,' says Gilbert. 'He's very sharp, a very good leader I think.' George agrees: 'Very honourable,' he says. Have they always been Tories? 'Yes, we are the monsters who are the only ones in the art world who say there's nothing wrong with being Conservative,' explains George. 'You can discuss politics with your mother or with the taxi driver, but not with the art world. It's the only world which is so narrow-minded.' Is it true they admired Margaret Thatcher? 'Of course!' says Gilbert. 'We still do. And there's an article in the Telegraphwhich says more people believe what she stands for now than ever before.' Such are Gilbert and George's Tory credentials that they were once invited to lunch with Sir Edward Heath at his home in Salisbury. 'He was charming!' says George. 'He introduced us to all the other guests as "the very great artists Gilbert and George".' I don't think this is just a pose. They have always said they believe in the individual and in prudent fiscal management. 'We have never borrowed money, never,' exclaims Gilbert. 'We think it should be unconstitutional for governments to borrow money.'

Their rather deferential attitude to statesmen extends to the Royal Family and Gilbert and George have used images of various Royals in their Postcard Sculptures. They are keen on Prince William and Kate Middleton: 'They look so beautiful and happy,' says Gilbert. For the pair, this fascination with Royals is partly because they relate to them as outsiders. 'In some ways they are like living sculpture. Untouchable, magic people,' explains Gilbert.

But the group they seem to respect most is what they call 'ordinary people' – the taxi drivers, waiters, cleaners, of whatever race or religion, they encounter in their daily lives. These are the ones whose opinions matter to them most. 'Of course,' says George. 'Because they are the only people who have their heads screwed on right.' These 'ordinary people' in turn seem to like them. 'They take photos of us because we look different,' says George. 'The owner of the café in Bethnal Green where we have breakfast at weekends calls us his favourite bizarre artists. He has never been to a gallery and doesn't know what the word museum means.'

Their daily routine offers them plenty of opportunities to meet these fans. They eat all their meals out, breakfast and lunch in local cafés, including The Luxe ('a trendy, young person's place,' says George), and dinner every evening at the Mangal Turkish restaurant in Dalston. They have the same food there for three months – currently lamb chops – and then change. They watch TV every day from five until six – they like Paul O'Grady – and then set off for dinner, George walking on a route that takes an hour and a half, Gilbert on a different, shorter route. This is the only time they spend apart. They are always dressed in their suits of course, and therefore find that people look at them or stop to talk. 'Because you are different, people want to ask you questions,' says Gilbert. 'Japanese teenagers take photographs of us not because we are artists but because we look stylish. German and American tourists

come to see us in our restaurant,' says George. They enjoy this attention, but there is a group they are not so keen on. 'Sometimes in the street people come towards us who make a big point not to recognise us and you see the slight frown,' George mimics the look. These are not the sacred 'ordinary people' of course, but art-world types. 'We call them the frowning classes,' says Gilbert. They both giggle. At home they work most days in the studio, making all their work themselves with the help of just one assistant (currently a young man from China – 'he followed us back from Shanghai,' says George). They don't use the internet, except for booking tickets, and never answer the telephone, although their number has always been in the phone book.

Because they have spent most of their lives as a work of art, always on show, happy to be interviewed, keeping up appearances like royalty at all times, there has been an inevitable amount of speculation about their sincerity. Are they for real, or are we being hoodwinked by the biggest and longest art fraud ever perpetrated? Rumours as wild as the suggestion that they are not really gay and that George has a family living in Hampstead have dogged them for years. This surprises them. 'We think we have been more frank in our work than any other artist,' says George, referring to the hundreds of pictures that depict them together, holding hands, naked, surrounded by penises and other graphic homosexual imagery. He has a point. And wouldn't somebody have noticed by now if they lived next door to George and his children?
Michael Bracewell, the cultural commentator, friend of the artists and author of several essays on their work, has no doubt about their integrity. 'It's not an act,' he says. 'I genuinely believe that. It's 365 days a year. They don't fly off to Mustique for Christmas.' Adrian Searle, the art critic of The Guardian, has written of Gilbert and George 'their secret is that there is no secret'.

That's not to say there aren't contradictions. They say 'Art for All' but their work sells for enormously high prices (Cherry Blossom No 9, 1974, sold recently at Christie's for £325,250, while one of their earliest photo pieces, To Her Majesty, 1973, made nearly £2 million at Christie's in 2008). All their new work, meanwhile, is sold through their dealer Jay Jopling. Of this gallery system, Gilbert says, 'Art is for the rich, we can't change that,' insisting that by putting their profits into subsidising books of their pictures they make it accessible from the lowest level. They have also recently completed the process of setting up a foundation which will preserve their house and archives 'when we are no longer here'.

The overwhelming impression I take away of Gilbert and George is one of innocence. They display genuine childlike delight or sadness at the things they discover on their daily excursions, from a gay club flyer to an incendiary poster demanding Sharia law. Michael Bracewell has described them as visionaries in the lineage ofWilliam Blake and this is perhaps a helpful way of seeing them: like intrepid explorers on a mission to illuminate the experience of modern urban life.

'We began to dream of a world of beauty and happiness, of great riches and pleasures…' George is reading aloud to me again, this time from a joint statement of 1969, '…a world of feeling and meaning, a newer better world, a world of delicious disasters of heartrending sorrow, of loathing and dread, a world complete, all the world an art gallery.' Gilbert looks moved. 'We said the whole world should become an art gallery,' says George, 'and look, now it has almost come true.'

The Urethra Postcard Art is at White Cube Mason's Yard, SW1, from 14 January to 19 February. The Complete Postcard Art of Gilbert & George (Prestel, £40) is published on 14 January