

**GILBERT & GEORGE**  
**THE CORPSING PICTURES**

2022

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Whatever the temper of an individual picture or group of pictures created by Gilbert & George, their art addresses the viewer directly and forcefully, immediate and urgent. The mood may be dream-like, crazily vaudevillian or withdrawn; likewise it can be anxious, violent and confrontational. Most usually, it is a mix of all these states – replicating the ways in which we experience and respond to the unpredictable pageant of modern life.

Each picture by Gilbert & George draws the viewer into a world of atmospheres, memories, reactions and events, the encounter with which – vitally and elementally – provokes in each viewer individual feelings and multiple meanings. Does this picture make you feel uneasy or sad? Does it remind you of a moment or time

in your own life, however obliquely or directly? Does it speak to how you feel right now or felt last night?

For Gilbert & George make art from and about emotions – which as every viewer knows, can assume many forms, many speeds, and unfathomable contradictions.

As their intensity is drawn from a concise and highly concentrated gathering of pictorial elements, each picture created by Gilbert & George conveys both a singular visual statement – like a shout or a cry or a sudden chord – and many ‘meanings’, simultaneously. This creates the tempo of their art and of each picture: slowly unfolding the viewer, or accelerated and high energy.

Meaning is inferred through feeling and atmosphere in the art of Gilbert & George, and these possible meanings

can be in stark contrast to one another. They can be read like a paradox or aphorism in which the juxtaposition of apparent opposites creates levels of interpretation beyond those first encountered.

Axiomatic is the notion that art does not have to make sense, in terms of narrative or logic, in order to make exact emotional or nervous sense. This is a quality described by Gilbert & George as the ‘moral dimension’ in their art – the tracery and imprint of feeling and memory on time and place.

Such a high velocity interplay of meanings is acutely felt in the CORPSING PICTURES - beginning with the arresting or even shocking title of the group, that could refer, dizzily, to both death and dead bodies, and the theatrical slang for an actor who suddenly steps out of character during a performance, by either forgetting their lines or laughing, or indeed causing another actor in the scene to lose their composure. To break the spell therefore: to admit the illusion of acting, to revel in revealing the ‘pretence’ of theatre.

As such, from the outset, the CORPSING

PICTURES present the viewer with ambiguity, contradiction and enigma, as much as pathos, poignancy, sepulchral eeriness and a visceral sense – conveyed by the attitude and expressions of Gilbert & George within the pictures – of sudden helplessness and somnolence in the face of entombment and entrapment. Might Gilbert & George be depicted ‘corpsing’ in both meanings of the word? An unanswered question; an oscillation between different senses of an ending.

This complex weave of feelings and interpretations is created by Gilbert & George from a very small number of visual devices. In addition to the figures of the artists themselves, the tableaux of the CORPSING PICTURES are comprised solely of bones, string knotted or cut into lengths, and decayed plant stems, stalks and leaves. An exception is the picture CHAINAGE in which the artists, each with arms raised and fists clenched, are depicted lying upon a folded length of chain, with a second length of chain coiled snake-like on top of them. Gold and silver glint around the artists.

The confronting mix of arrest, stasis and dream

that pervades the CORPSING PICTURES is likewise intensified by their vivid palette. The colours in the pictures are exclamatory and urgent, limited to just red, gold and black-and-white monochrome. In conjunction with the highly restricted number of pictorial elements, these colours give each picture an almost three-dimensional quality of depth, strangely bringing to mind both gravitational weightlessness and profound stillness. It might seem as though Gilbert & George have suddenly or unknowingly crossed into a place where they are rendered helpless and remote, empty headed yet able to convey reactions to their new condition in coded gestures, as though through the weight of sleep.

All of these CORPSING PICTURES, however, share a powerful sense of confinement and entrapment, in which the artists are depicted either lying across one another (as in BOW CROSS, STRIPES or STEM) or side by side (A1 for example, or GATE) and always under a covering of either decayed plant debris or lengths of loosely knotted string. Exceptions occur, such as BONE TIE, in which Gilbert & George lie head-to-toe on top

of one another, or FORKFULL, where we see the suited artists side by side, each in semi-profile, stern faced and senatorial, and each staring as though towards destiny itself, their individual gazes crossing diagonally.

Nearly always, the edges of each 'CORPSING' picture are lined by an immediate inner frame made of one of the principal pictorial elements. In HARK! for instance (in which the artists are putting their fingers in their ears in order to block out whatever they are being summoned to listen for) an inner frame is made of lengths of string. In TIMES – where we see the artists lying diagonally across one another, like a multiplication sign – the frame is made of dried out plant stems.

Most dramatically, the picture CHERRY BONES depicts Gilbert & George seeming to almost hover, inclining towards one another, their heads nearly touching, between a ghoulish mass of bleached small bones and a chaotic mass of cherry stalks. The scene is framed by more of these grubbily whitened, somehow mean-looking tibias and fibulas. Like the plant detritus they convey a profound, brutal and unarguable sense of

organic debris. The 'deadness' of the dead.

The CORPSING PICTURES are shocking in their apparently direct address to not only mortality but the state of death in a corporeal as opposed to philosophical or allegorical sense. As always in the art of Gilbert & George, from its extraordinary beginnings with the living sculpture, 'UNDERNEATH THE ARCHES', as early as 1969, the progression of the artists through a visionary journey of life is depicted in a manner at once mysterious and vulnerable, overtly physical and mystically emblematic.

For the art of Gilbert & George has always been their vision of the journey of life, in which all things are as starkly and unarguably 'real' as the city streets themselves, yet also within a seeming dream-realm that accompanies and overlays the most prosaic, degraded or drear manifestation of modern existence.

Thus to see Gilbert & George in these CORPSING PICTURES is also to receive a transmission or report from their psychic existence as it is lived by the artists within their art. The artists appear to offer clues to the

viewer about existential meanings; at the same time, these meanings are debunked or questioned. There are semantic ambiguities, reversals or dead-ends included within the visual narrative of each picture, or acted out by Gilbert & George as they proceed through the visionary landscape of their art. What is conjured from this mix of strangeness and familiarity is a classical sense of the monumental: that which records, commemorates and bears witness.

GATE for example, depicts the artists seated almost like dolls or mannequins, with their legs stretched out. The weather-proof soles of their boots are gold, their suits and ties are bright red. George clasps his hands lightly against his chin, and stares either unseeingly, or to something or someone out of sight. Gilbert, appearing care-worn, rests his right hand against the side of his face.

Both men look anxious and troubled. They take their places behind the emblem of a five-bar gate, crudely depicted by seven bones. Behind them are more bones. It is as though Gilbert & George are trapped, powerless, in an ossuary.

In WALKERS the red-suited artists lie side by side,

George's feet level with Gilbert's head. Gilbert covers his mouth with his hand and looks anxiously and sorrowfully towards the viewer. George's hands are raised to his face. One covers his right eye, the other covers his mouth. Two little wraith-like figures – their shapes mere outlines of loosely knotted string – appear to drift or wander across the prone figures of the artists. Tiny visitations, maybe – little ghosts – as the spirits of Gilbert & George – or comic emblems of same – are suddenly released from their bodies. The effect is both cartoon-like and disquieting: deadly serious and 'corpsing' – breaking the spell of illusion, unable not to laugh. The viewer can decide.

The art and vision of Gilbert & George is never ironic in the modern sense but draws upon contrast, reversal and paradox, multi-faceted and many-layered. In their most classical meanings, their art abuts the devices of both comedy and tragedy. The visually stark directories of quotidian horror, drama and dysfunction proclaimed by newspaper headlines in the text-based panels of *THE LONDON PICTURES* (2011), for example, are answered by the frieze-like absurdist psychedelia of *THE BEARD*

*PICTURES* of 2016.

As they traverse cosmic states, metamorphosing into monstrous, puppet-like or possessed versions of themselves, carried along on the current of time, Gilbert & George encounter contradiction and portent wherever their journey takes them. In this they have always been the strangely eternal agents of modernity, acting out the mix of seer, stooge and everyman, thrown between the city and the supernatural, who travails piteously and entertains uproariously, at the heart of modernism itself. A dualism that might well be summarised by both principal meanings of 'corpsing', as well as by their seeming contradiction.

END.