

‘We want to be weird normal’

Artists Gilbert and George have no friends, no kitchen, and dress only in tweed.
On the eve of their strangest show yet, the ‘living sculptures’ talk frankly about art, fashion and faith

BY STUART JEFFRIES
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There is a photograph of a dead young Kurdish man stuck to the door of Gilbert and George's studio. The caption reads: "Serhat Sagir, 1985-2007." Two years ago, Sagir committed suicide; he used to work in a shop the artists visited every evening on the 3km walk from their home in London's East End to the Turkish restaurant where they have dinner.

George sidles up to me as I look at the photograph. "I feel more bereaved by him dying than almost anyone else, because we saw him every night for five years," he says. "And then suddenly he was gone. Extraordinary, really. I saw him more than I saw my mother — I see her two or three times a year." Why did he commit suicide? "We don't know." It seems they never asked.

I didn't expect this. I didn't expect grief. I expected Gilbert and George's usual shtick: vexingly glib, occasionally unsavory, programmatically strange. As if not wanting to disappoint, George (Passmore, 67) stops talking bereavement and joins Gilbert (Proesch, 65) to pose for photographs. As the *Guardian's* photographer snaps away, they do what they have always done, ever since they became what they call "living sculptures" in the late 1960s: George's eyes chill into a thousand-yard stare;

Gilbert's expression mutates into that of an angry bulldog, undone by a comically raised right eyebrow.

The unexpected memorial to the young Kurdish man resonates with the memorials in their most recent work, 153 images they call the *Jack Freak Pictures*. It is the largest group of pictures they have ever made. Many of them include copies of medals collected from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, given to obscure people for achievements long forgotten. In *Dating*, for example, we see medals awarded for singing and attendance; one, presented to Master Alec French for the year 1884-1885, is for pantomime. "We have so many dead people in our pictures," says Gilbert. Why? "We don't know," says George. "We have no theories about what we do."

Rescuing the forgotten from oblivion looks like a strangely tender thing to do. But, in Gilbert and George's hands, it is not just tender — it is paradoxical. The two are proud of their defiant

friendlessness, and yet their art memorializes strangers, people they do not know or love.

"We made a big point not to become friends of anybody," says Gilbert, when I ask if they have befriended neighbors like Tracey Emin and the Chapman brothers. Why? "It's purer." Entirely without friends? "Almost entirely," says George.

They decline to discuss their previous lives, which is a shame because this is where the masks of Gilbert and George,



living artworks, slip. Three years ago, it was reported that George had a wife and family before he moved in with Gilbert. His former wife reportedly lives nearby, as do his two children. But they are not part of Gilbert and George, the 40-odd-year-old work of art, and so are not fair game for journalists. If George has tender feelings for his family, he won't give them up for the likes of me.

Gilbert and George have never married, preferring, they say, "to live in sin." "We want to be weird normal," says George. "We don't want to be informed as everyone else is, because then we wouldn't have something to say." George's politics seem to stem from the same impulse. "I'm nothing, but George is a Conservative," says Gilbert. "Strangely, that's completely acceptable with any taxi driver, any waiter,

but not in the art world," says George. "For them, left equals good. Art equals left." Gilbert adds: "They believe in equality. We don't. We want to be different."

Their friendlessness, incidentally, is of a piece with their kitchenlessness. "We used to have a stove, but it was taken away." Why? "Because it wastes so much time, shopping and washing up, disposing of waste. We keep our brains for the more important things. We only have an electric kettle."

They began making the *Jack Freak Pictures* one morning last year. After a quick breakfast (they always go out for breakfast), they walked through the house they have lived in since the late 1960s and into their vast studio ("a former Bangladeshi sweatshop," says George) and started work.

They had spent the previous 18 months away, preparing their 2007 Tate Modern retrospective and then touring the show around the world. "That absolutely traumatized us," says Gilbert. "We couldn't work for 18 months." "Artists frequently become traumatized by having a retrospective," says George. "But we've had a good trauma — we've produced 153 pictures."

When they arrived at the studio that morning, they had a thought about what they would do. What was it? Gilbert points to the medal at the center of the first work in the new series. It reads: *The Metropolitan Police Annual Pornographic Football Awards*. "That phrase came to us. We don't know why." The medal is flanked by digitally distorted heads, weird tangles of limbs and other body parts. It looks like a right old carry-on. "Doesn't that look like a man's balls?" Gilbert asks, drawing my attention to a detail of a digitally manipulated image, possibly of Gilbert's head. "And that's a big fanny, don't you think?"

In another new work, *Burn in Hell*, their distorted bodies (George with what looks like two vaginas, Gilbert with a corseted quartet of breasts) and folded faces scream in flames.

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London-based artists Gilbert, right, and George dispense with friends and a kitchen so they can concentrate on their work, such as *Union Wall Dance*, above, and being different.

PHOTOS: AP

[CLASSICAL DVD REVIEW]

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

One of the more interesting moments in London's musical life in 2006 must have been at the Ivor Novello Awards when opera composer Harrison Birtwistle weighed in against popular music, accusing it of sentimentality and cliché. Memories of Simon Rattle's parting shots against contemporary British art as he left to take up the baton with the Berlin Philharmonic must have been in many people's minds. But why, you wonder, did Birtwistle choose to be so outspoken?

The answer probably lies in a consciousness of the smallness of his musical world. He may enjoy an enthusiastic first night every few years, but for the rest of the time he occupies a marginal idiom. Few can genuinely love his bleak, dissonant style, and though cantankerousness may not be an intentional part of his musical oeuvre, dissonance, un-melodiousness and a jarring percussive violence certainly are.

Such thoughts are prompted by watching the DVD of his 2008 opera *Minotaur*, commissioned by, and

premiered at, London's Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, with music director Antonio Pappano in the pit and celebrated bass-baritone John Tomlinson only partly concealed inside a carnivorous beast mask.

One thing at least can be said in Birtwistle's favor — he certainly matches his musical manner to his subject matter. The prevailing cacophony accompanies a tale of bloody massacre, the ripping apart of sacrificial victims in the Cretan labyrinth, half-human vultures, plus the un-weeping complicity of the female protagonist, Ariadne, and the immovable coldness of the "hero," Theseus. An atmosphere of death, hatred and unredeemed savagery prevails.

This, imply this opera's originators, is what the world of ancient Greek myth was really like — and by implication, what all life is like, even today.

The violence and grating musical style are, nevertheless, par for the course for Birtwistle. His first opera, *Punch and Judy*, made his name for its brutality (pervasive) rather than its melodies (non-existent), while *The Second Mrs Kong* and *Gavain* both involved gruesome monsters or

mythical giants.

Yet, as this video recording shows, *Minotaur* was received with acclaim by its first-night London audience. You witness Birtwistle on stage acknowledging the ovations, and the sense is unavoidably of a great occasion, a veteran British composer launching a major opera onto a waiting world.

And perhaps it was more impressive as a stage spectacle than on this DVD (from Opus Arte). Without the hot expectancy of a crowded opera auditorium you are forced to view the work in cold blood. And little pleasure was delivered, in these circumstances at least, to this reviewer.

However you look at it, *Minotaur* relates a grisly story. The old legend tells of the annual tribute of young Athenians destined to confront the Minotaur in the labyrinth of Minos, in modern-day Crete. But one year Theseus joins their number and succeeds in slaying the beast with the aid of a young priestess, Ariadne. They sail away together, though Theseus later abandons her on the Greek island of Naxos.

Ariadne is the opera's main character, at least as far as vocal



THE MINOTAUR
Harrison Birtwistle
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden
Opus Arte OA1000D

presence is concerned. Christine Rice gives her all in the role, but her complex feelings get little support from a score that refuses to countenance a hint of melody at any point. Puccini demonstrated again and again (in *Tosca* and *Turandot*, say) that terror and death can co-exist with emotionally engaging music. Human beings the world over need and respond to this, and Puccini knew it, as did Verdi, Wagner and even Shostakovich. Does Birtwistle think that human nature has really changed?

Stephen Langridge's staging, too, left me wondering what had happened to the imagination in opera production. Innumerable nonrealistic, nightmarish effects are technically available these days, yet here we were with a simple semi-circular arena to stand for the labyrinth, and an open stage with a line of light (the distant breaking waves, presumably) to represent the shore.

A bare-chested John Tomlinson and his adversary Johan Reuter (Theseus) might roar, and utter their graceless lines with all the savagery at their disposal, but the result is unpersuasive. Tomlinson is a great Wagnerian, but here his performance, combined with

earthbound stage designs, does little to arouse awe or wonder.

The exception to this bleak impression lay in the highly poetic and memorable libretto by David Harsent. For me, this world premiere was, above all else, Harsent's evening.

There were a few other compensations. The Snake Priestess (Andrew Watts) represented a potent idea, and the chorus overseeing the slaughter down in the labyrinth at least looked impressive. But these were small rewards for over three hours of aural pain.

This DVD may increase tourism to Crete, but it's unlikely to ratchet up sales for the baleful music of Harrison Birtwistle. And most of the younger opera composers have turned their backs on this kind of dissonant modernism, opting instead for a variety of other, more accessible styles.

In the same way that bleak Bauhaus is by no means the last word in architecture, so too is this kind of user-unfriendly music surely doomed to become a footnote, albeit a rather long one, in musical history books. Maybe the sentimental pop musicians so berated by Birtwistle had a point after all.