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The new Gilbert & George Centre, in London's East End | CREDIT: Gilbert & George

REVIEW

The Gilbert & George Centre: The great Right-wingers of British art may actually live for ever

★★★★☆ 4/5

The veteran contemporary artists have turned a former brewery near their home into a fantastic permanent gallery for their work

By Alastair Sooke, CHIEF ART CRITIC
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“That always gets a giggle,” says George Passmore, after informing me that the distinctive hat worn by his partner in life and art, Gilbert Prousch, picked up in their local furrier’s in London’s East End, is made from “shaved beaver”.

Dressed in a speckled red tweed suit, with stylised ants crawling across his yellow tie, the Devonian half of the artistic double act Gilbert & George glowers at me, his eyes, magnified by thick spectacles, watery yet still sharp. “Can you think why?” Deadpan doesn’t do justice to these self-professed “Living Sculptures”, whose visionary, quasi-vaudevillian shtick has lasted for more than five decades, since they met, at St Martin’s School of Art, in 1967.

We are standing in a cobbled courtyard off Brick Lane, a stone’s throw from their 18th-century home and studio in Spitalfields, at the threshold of the Gilbert & George Centre, a new gallery (and registered charity) that’s about to open to the public, for free (naturally: “Art for All” is their mantra), on – when else? – April Fool’s Day. Beside us stands a pair of recently planted trees (a black-tulip magnolia, and a ginkgo of unknown sex that, if female, will eventually emit a foul stench); at the courtyard’s entrance, adjacent to a boozier, there’s a resplendent green gate, which seems to promise access to a secret garden. Its curly ironwork forms the letters “G&G” beneath a monogram: “C III R”.

There aren’t many British contemporary artists who would proclaim allegiance to their sovereign in Latin. Yet, Gilbert & George have long set themselves apart from the lefty art world – which may explain why they’ve spent around £11 million to transform a former brewery into their centre. Recently, they railed against Britain’s “woke” museums, and suggested that their work had been sidelined; now, it will be on permanent display within the capital. “So we can live for ever,” explains George, looking none too pleased at the prospect. “We’re believers in the force of culture, not the vicar or the policeman.”

Unsurprisingly, given their antiquarianism, the renovation of the 19th-century building is everywhere on point. Details, including bespoke oak furniture and solid-bronze handrails, will delight design enthusiasts; even the Portland-stone-clad lavatories nod to Christ Church, Spitalfields, down the road. I was won over as I locked my bike to a rack resembling, at the artists’ insistence, a Gothic arch.



Rosy, one of Gilbert & George’s psychedelic Paradisical Pictures from 2019 | CREDIT: Gilbert & George

The courtyard’s Dickensian atmosphere, though, is swiftly replaced by something more state-of-the-art inside, as visitors circulate through three large, artificially lit galleries, one with an impressive vaulted timber ceiling. First up, G&G are showing their psychedelic “Paradisical Pictures” (2019), which glow against soft-grey walls.

In them, like Green Men decorating a cathedral, or incongruously suited sprites hiding in hedgerows, the artists appear, surreally, to merge with, and decompose among, swirling, fluorescent blooms and mulch. On the other side of town, at the White Cube gallery in St James’s, in a more recent set of “Corpsing Pictures”, they pose like recumbent tomb effigies surrounded by blown-up images of bones collected on long urban rambles.

Evidently, then, the afterlife is on these octogenarian artists’ minds. With the centre, which, thanks to the stained-glass-like effect of the Paradisical Pictures, currently has the feel of a memorial chapel, their position in British art’s pantheon should be secure.

From April 1; gilbertandgeorgecentre.org. ‘The Corpsing Pictures’ will be on show at White Cube Mason’s Yard, London SW1 (whitecube.com), from March 29