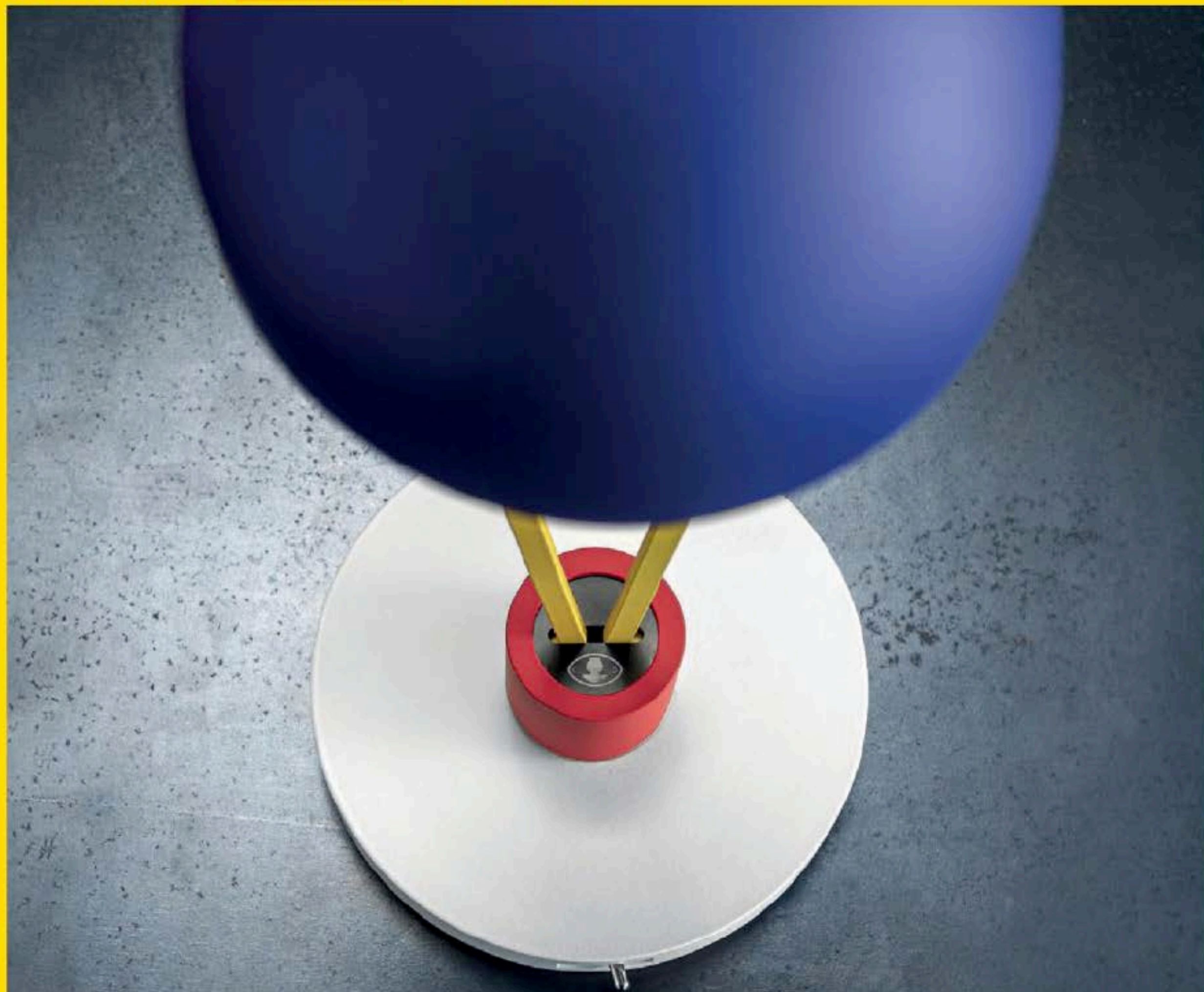


# FX 332

CITY CYCLING  
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GILBERT + GEORGE

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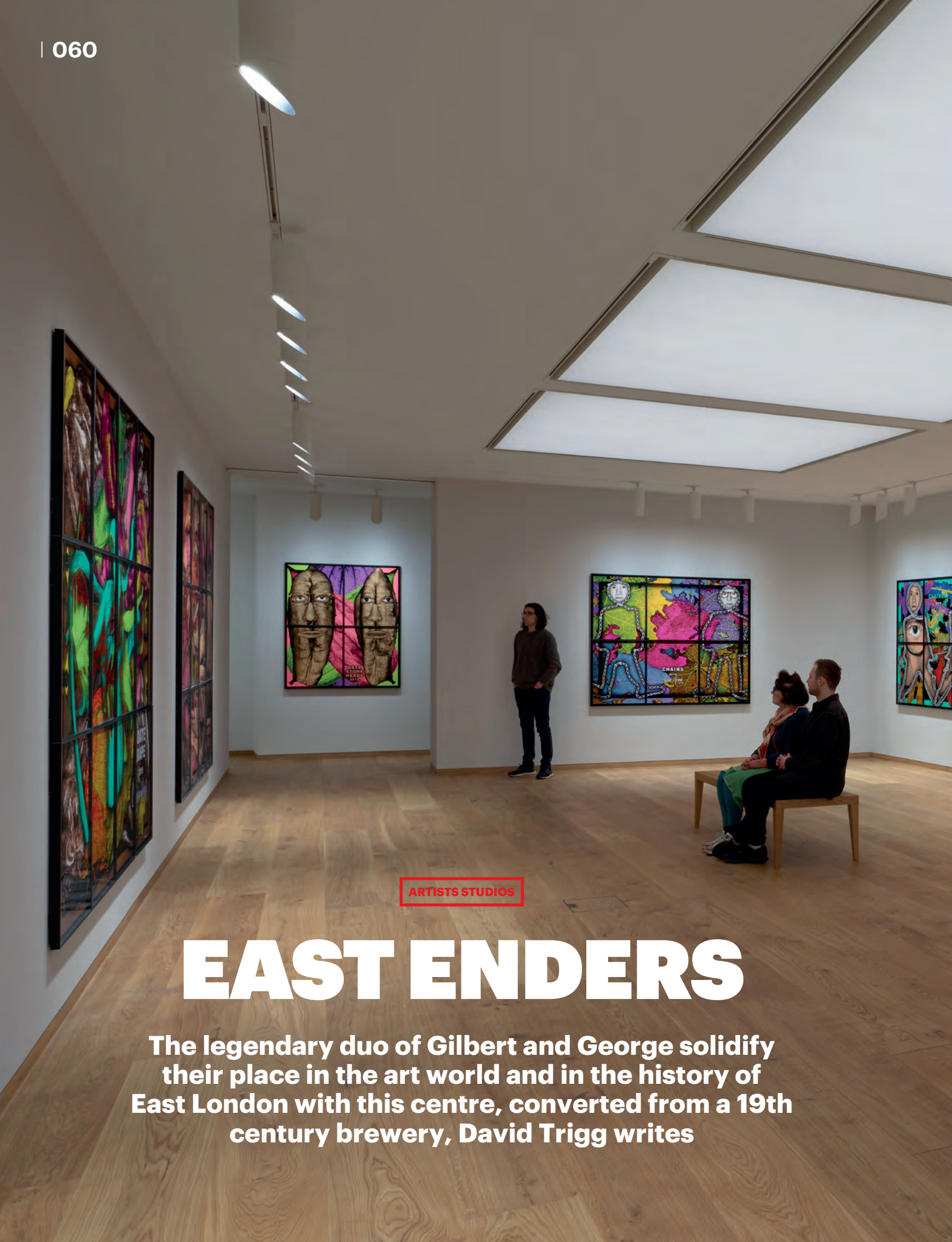


## SMALL MERCIES

*Examining the  
reinterpretation  
of the humble  
portable light*







ARTISTS STUDIOS

# EAST ENDERS

The legendary duo of Gilbert and George solidify their place in the art world and in the history of East London with this centre, converted from a 19th century brewery, David Trigg writes









**PIONEERING ARTIST** duo Gilbert and George are world renowned for their visually impactful and sometimes shocking artworks, which they have created together since 1967. Rejecting the elitist, dispassionate and overly formal art practices of the late 1960s, Gilbert Prousch (b.1943) and George Passmore (b.1942) decided they would produce 'art for all', embracing colour, sentiment, emotion and sexuality, which at the time were considered taboo. Soon after leaving St Martin's School of Art and unable to afford a studio, they declared themselves 'living sculptures'. Refusing to separate life from art,



they put themselves at the centre of their work, from their earliest performances as 'singing sculptures', to their colourful large-scale, multi-panelled photo works juxtaposing self portraits with gritty images of urban life, nature, religious symbols and, controversially, their own bodily excretions. Having tackled head-on the realities of modern life, warts and all, for more than 50 years, the artists are now considering their legacy and have opened a new museum in London's East End dedicated to preserving their life's work.

Situated within a leafy cobbled courtyard, The Gilbert & George Centre is housed in a former brewery dating from the 1830s, which, despite falling within the Brick Lane conservation area, is not listed. The site, which is accessed from Heneage Street next to the Pride of Spitalfields pub, immediately appealed to Gilbert and George when they discovered it in 2015. 'You walk in there and it is like a magic garden,' said the artists, who were keen to preserve its heritage while breathing new life into the historic fabric of Spitalfields. The Centre, which has been designed by SIRS architects in close collaboration with the artists, comprises three state-of-the-art exhibition spaces over three levels totalling 280 sq m, as well as a reception and projection room, where visitors can watch the 1981 feature-length film *The World of Gilbert & George*, a singular portrait of the artists examining the multiple themes of their work - religion, race, sex, death, drunkenness, fear, money, beauty, humour and poetry - while taking in the urban East End landscape as it was at the time. The film is an essential introduction to the artists' practice and still functions as a statement of their beliefs

despite being more than 40 years old. The artists have also created a small walled front garden and large green wrought iron entrance gates with an ornate design based on their initials.

Building work began in June 2019 and was completed in December 2022, during which time the old brewery underwent a remarkable transformation. A large basement was constructed under its existing footprint and a new overground structure built to provide barrier-free access and sufficient gallery height. In a departure from the sterile

ALL IMAGES: THE GILBERT & GEORGE CENTRE







**This spread** Use of wood and brass helps to couch Gilbert and George's collection in a more antiquated and industrial context, harking back to the history of East London.

atmosphere of commercial galleries, the artists have opted for the warmth of large oak flooring planks, exposed roof beams, unpainted wooden doors and window frames, and solid brass handrails and fixtures.

Bespoke stretch ceilings containing artificial low light illuminate the galleries evenly, giving the impression of daylight. The reception area is decked out with timber paneling, evoking the feel of the artists' immaculately restored Georgian town house just a stones throw away in Fournier Street, where the pair have lived and worked together since 1968. The

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restrooms have been clad with Portland stone in a nod to Nicholas Hawksmoor's 18th century Christ Church Spitalfields, which overshadows their studio. Accessibility was another important consideration and all public areas are step and barrier free, while a lift has been installed to serve all floors. 'It's been a privilege to work with Gilbert & George on their ground-breaking legacy project,' says SIRS co-founder Manuel Irsara, who describes Spitalfields' newest cultural venue as the 'ultimate fulfilment' of Gilbert and George's democratic vision of 'art for all'.



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By opening their own gallery space, Gilbert and George join a growing list of illustrious artists with their own museums, including Frida Kahlo, whose Blue House in Mexico City exhibits her work in the building where she was born, raised and died. In Barcelona, the Fundació Joan Miró, designed by Josep Lluís Sert, honours the life and work of Miró, holding 10,000 of the artist's paintings, drawings, sculptures, stage designs and carpets. The city is also home to the Museu Picasso, which houses an extensive collection of works by the Spanish master, who also has museums in Málaga, Paris, Antibes and Münster. One of the most famous artist museums is, of course, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, which since 1973 has honoured the eponymous artist's life and work in its Gerrit Rietveld-designed building and, since 1999, hosted temporary exhibits in a separate building designed by Kisho Kuokawa. The museum holds the most substantial collection of Van Gogh's works anywhere in the world and this year is celebrating its 50th anniversary with a series of special exhibitions including 'Van Gogh in Auvers: His Final Months', focusing on the artist's time in the French village of Auvers-sur-Oise just prior to his death. Celebrated works such as *Wheatfield with Crows* and *Tree Roots* (both 1890) are among the 50 paintings included in the exhibition, many of which have never been exhibited together before.

One of the world's largest buildings dedicated to a single artist is the new Munch museum in Oslo, Norway, which opened in 2021 to replace the original 1963 building in Tøyen designed by Norwegian architects Einar Myklebust and Gunnar Fougner. The new 13-storey waterfront museum was designed by Spanish architects Estudio Herreros and houses the world's most expansive collection of works by Edvard Munch, including his most famous painting

*The Scream* (1893). The prominent structure with its distinctive aluminium facade and leaning form is situated close to the Oslo Opera House. Rising to a height of 60m, it provides more than 26,000 sq m of exhibition space, with the top floor observation deck offering stunning views overlooking the city. The museum's collection consists of more than 28,000 artworks bequeathed by the artist to the municipality of Oslo upon his death in 1944.

While Munch had been involved with early discussions about a future museum dedicated to his art, he didn't live to see the

City of Oslo approve the project. Conversely, the Spanish painter Salvador Dalí not only designed a museum dedicated to himself but lived in it from 1984 until his death in 1989. Devised with architects Joaquim de Ros i de Ramis and Alexandre Bonaterra, the Dalí Theatre and Museum in the artist's hometown of Figueres, in Catalonia, Spain, is built on the site of the town's former theatre, which burned down during the Spanish Civil War. Construction of the museum began in 1969 and it opened in September 1974. It houses the largest and most diverse collection of works by Dalí, including paintings, sculptures

By opening their own gallery space, Gilbert and George join a growing list of illustrious artists with their own museums.

**Right** The popular Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, built in 1973.

**Below** The bold exterior of the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City.



ROD WADDINGTON





and all manner of Surrealist curiosities such as an anamorphic living room that, when viewed from a specific spot, transforms into the face of Mae West. Outside, the museum is adorned with enormous eggs, loaves of bread and various fantastical sculptures. A glass polyhedral dome designed by Emilio Pérez Piñero crowns the old theatre and Dalí is buried in a crypt under the stage.

Gilbert and George have not announced any plans to have themselves interred under their museum, which is part of their charitable foundation's mission to preserve their art, archives and properties for posterity.

Spitalfields is already something of a Mecca for Gilbert and George fans, who come to the area hoping to spot them wandering the streets or riding a bus. The artists have been living a genteel, ascetic lifestyle in the area for 55 years, initially renting the ground floor of a half-derelict property in Fournier Street for £12 a month in what was, in 1968, the cheapest area of London. The street's houses, built in the 1720s for French Huguenot silk weavers and later becoming home to Jewish tailors, were largely vacant by the 1960s and many had fallen into disrepair. The artists bought their current home in 1972 for £22,000

and set about returning it to its former glory, painstakingly restoring its wood panelling and historic features and filling it with Elton Ware pottery and antique furniture by Augustus Pugin, Christopher Dresser and Edward Godwin. Today, the surrounding streets have been gentrified, dotted with bagel bakeries, curry houses and designer chocolate shops. Not least because of the artists' presence in the area, houses on Fournier Street sell for millions.

Gilbert and George also renovated their 1940s warehouse-studio annex, which underwent a major redesign by SIRS in 2010.





## 066 ARTISTS STUDIOS

The pristine, modern work space behind their home is where they create all of their pictures and it now boasts large bespoke triple-glazed skylights to ensure the even diffusion of daylight, low energy lighting and concealed heating and ventilation systems. The duo's vast archive is also housed here, within a bespoke storage wall, reflecting the importance they place on preservation and legacy. While these are driving factors behind the Gilbert & George Centre, there is another reason for wanting their own exhibition space. 'The Tate never shows our work and they will never, because nothing is good

enough for them,' the artists complained to the Evening Standard Magazine in 2017 (this despite Tate Modern hosting the largest exhibition of their work to date in 2007). 'They have 23 [of our] pieces that they never show,' they later elaborated. 'We're realising that big museums don't show your work that often. This way, we can host large-scale shows and rotate them every six months to a year'.

Frustration at the lack of visibility of their work in London may be a genuine grievance for the artists, but their desire to be seen as outsiders also has a role to play. Indeed, it's

an image they have always strived to project, from dressing in matching tweed suits and refusing to visit galleries or socialise with other artists, to their Conservative politics and support for Brexit – the latter putting them sharply at odds with pretty much the entire art world. 'We invented blinkers for ourselves. We have to do our vision and nothing else. We don't want to be socially involved,' they explained to The Critic Magazine. 'If we saw more art, more artists, we'd become normal. We don't want to be normal like them. We don't want to be normal because everybody is and we don't want to be weird because the





artists all like to be weird.' Instead of going to galleries, the pair prefer to stroll the streets of East London, photographing graffiti and contemporary urban life. Sometimes they'll watch the Trooping the Colour, or visit the Cenotaph, or simply take the number 67 bus from Christ Church Spitalfields to Wood Green and then walk all the way home again. 'That's where we differ from the rest of the art world,' they told *AnOther Magazine*. 'There is a big difference between us and them.'

In keeping with the artists' ethos of art for all, the Gilbert & George Centre will not be

charging an entrance fee. For its inaugural exhibition, the artists are showing for the first time in London their 2019 series *THE PARADISICAL PICTURES*. These fantastical photomontages show the duo wandering through dreamlike landscapes filled with psychedelically-hued fruits, flowers, leaves and trees. In some pictures, the artists appear to be harmoniously merging with their surroundings, in others, the natural world becomes a threatening presence. The paradise imagined in these works is not a destination but merely a part of a longer journey, an

enchanted archetype with both secular and sacred connotations. It is an apt way to launch a museum that they describe as their 'magic garden'. In inviting us to explore their own Eden, Gilbert and George hope their centre will become a leading cultural institution and a place for research and scholarship on their extraordinary art, both now and long into the future. **FX**

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*The Gilbert & George Centre is open Friday to Sunday from 10am-5pm.*

*[gilbertandgeorgecentre.org](http://gilbertandgeorgecentre.org)*



ALL IMAGES: EINAR ASLAKSEN

'We're realising that big museums don't show your work that often. This way, we can host large-scale shows and rotate them every six months to a year.'

**This spread** The recently-opened Edvard Munch museum (stylised as MUNCH) in Oslo, houses 28,000 pieces of art.

