

LOVE THROUGH A LENSE

Pierre et Gilles – France’s famous art-photographer couple – met in the late ‘70s and have been inseparable ever since. It’s a very rare kind of love story, one that, as well as giving us hope, has given rise to a poetic yet plastic style of studio portraiture: part painting, part photography, teeming with celebrity cameos, religious imagery and pop iconography. Speaking at their Paris home, where they also work, they reveal how they thrive on being misunderstood, like working with handsome unknowns as well as cherished icons, and, in light of the recent murderous attacks on their home city, are now drawing inspiration from terror.

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Paris, in the days following the bloody slaughter of 130 people by armed ISIS terrorists, was a city in shock and in mourning but also engaged in acts of somber defiance. While the streets were unusually and eerily quiet, the sights of the attacks – cafés, restaurants and the iconic Bataclan music theatre – were now places where the shocked and tearful came to honour and to remember. Similarly, the Place de la République was a shrine to the dead, its grey-stone perimeter blanketed in flowers, candles and messages of condolence and peace.

Life was down in Paris but it was definitely not out. In scenes that brought to mind the sit-ins and protests of the Peace Movement, students sat in circles singing songs, couples hugged tightly to ward off the cold as they took it all in, and people from opposing camps argued vehemently over what they thought was the justified response to such a brazen and callous attack. And watching all this with cool fascination was the Western media, which had erected a ring of tents around this hallowed monument symbolising France's founding principles of fraternity, equality and liberty.

Across town, Pierre et Gilles – long-time lovers as well as producers of hand-painted photographs of gorgeous celebrities, models and unknowns – were also showing signs of defiance. Before arriving at their home-cum-studio in Paris' Saint Germain district on a cold, rainy Monday, just three days after the attacks, I had half expected to find this famous couple – soul mates as well as artistic collaborators – off-duty, shocked and eyes glued to a television, like much of the nation. But no, they were working, seemingly unfazed by the events of the past few days. On walking in, I found them saying goodbye to an impossibly chiseled, tanned and youthful male model – the latest Adonis to feature in one of their highly choreographed photoshoots. There were effusive laughs and goodbyes.

It was as if nothing had happened. Business as usual... almost. Two things said otherwise. Playing on a television in the next room was rolling news coverage of the Paris massacre. Then there was the picture sitting on an easel in the corner and mounted in a frame that matches the tri-colours of the French flag. It's an image that's stayed with me. Pierre Comroy, the photographer, and Gilles Blanchard, the painter, sit behind the dashboard of a car. Pierre is dressed as an Arab lady in hijab while Gilles is a terrorist in a Paris Saint-Germain football shirt. Raw and direct, it's an image that seems at once to critique common French prejudices about its ethnic minorities – 'What are these two up to?'



Photograph by William Beaucaudet.

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we wonder – and sadly, given the events of the preceding Friday, when suicide bombers drove around the city and blew themselves up near the gates of the Stade de France during a Paris Saint-Germain game, to confirm them. Overall, it struck me as being a prescient image that might attract serious controversy were it ever to be shown in public.

Immediately, an unforeseen question presented itself: tell me about it? “We created this work before the attack on Friday,” explained Gilles, the taller and more talkative of the two, as images of a grave-looking President François Hollande and heavily armed police milling around on the streets nearby played on the TV near us. “Since January, terrorism in Paris has already filtered into our work,” he added, referring to the earlier attacks on the offices of the satirical cartoon-based weekly *Charlie Hebdo*. “Life has a good side and a bad side, and you can't only show one side of it.”

Life has a good side and a bad side, and you can't only show one side of it. This seemed a surprising statement from a duo whose entire 40-year body of work seems to be a denial of the drab, the bad and the ugly. Sleek, hairless, rippled torsos! Flawless alabaster cheeks! Beds of roses! Bows and arrows! Sailors! Shirtless pretty boys! Doomed yet heroic women! More shirtless pretty boys! Surely their hyper-real and shamelessly homoerotic images, which borrow from fields as remote as organised religion, ancient mythology and pulp fiction, and star models ranging from porn stars to pop royalty, are all about the good side?

Not so, explained Gilles. “People always say that our work has nothing to do with reality, that we work in the realm of beauty and imagination and are disconnected from the real world,” he said, as their pet dog sniffed around at our feet. “But our work is always a reflection of the world and its pain. It connects the real world to our universe. It shows that we're affected by the gravity of human experience.”

In their list of collaborators at least, there is evidence to back this up. Just recently, for example, they worked with Zahia Dehar, an Algerian-born former escort who achieved infamy after becoming embroiled in an underage sex scandal with a top French footballer. In one shot, *la scandalouse*, as she's been dubbed by French media, is a virginal Marie Antoinette holding a white rose against a bucolic background. It looks harmless enough, but riled conservatives when it appeared in a show at a state-owned Paris gallery. By casting a sex-worker-turned-fashion designer from a former

French colony as the legendary ill-fated queen, it's yet another image that challenges prevalent French racial prejudices towards its social minorities.

Over the years, many of their images have, intentionally or not, challenged mainstream aesthetic and moral boundaries, and transcended the gay subculture from which they hail. There have been works featuring exposed and erect penises, and gods and goddesses in borderline pornographic poses. There have also been works that mirror and examine the social and political issues of the day, albeit beautifully, by retouching the truth.

A recent example: on the day in 2013 when France's controversial gay marriage bill passed, they appeared on the front cover of leftwing daily *Liberation* posing as newlyweds, a photo of a grinning President François Hollande behind them. When I asked about it, they revealed that it's a misleading image: though they've been a couple for 40 years – ever since their eyes met at a Kenzo launch party in 1976 – they're not married and have no intention of being. “Marriage is not for us; we don't need it,” Gilles said, smiling. “We decided to support gay marriage because we support liberty.”

Fans of their work often wonder whether they traffic in hidden messages and a certain ironic detachment, and so I asked them about this, too. Most of their portraits strike me as simply beautiful images of beautiful people – sincere homages to the beauty of the human form with themes rooted in mythology, religion and popular gay culture and poses plucked from popular imagery down the ages. When Kylie Minogue dresses up as a famous Australian saint, for example, it appears to be being done with an entirely straight face, simply because Kylie is a fan of dressing up and said Australian saint. But you could just as convincingly argue that there is more to them than meets the eye – that the use of artifice has the capacity to disconcert as well as delight.

Do subtexts and social anxieties lurk beneath the hyper-theatrical sets, shiny plasticity and hand-painted patinas? Bernard Marcadé, writing in Taschen's 1996 catalogue *Pierre et Gilles: The Complete Works*, thinks the answer is possibly yes: “The images seem too faultless, the settings too phony, the women too pretty and the boys too well behaved. They are too everything, and this generalised excess contains a form of menace.”

Historically, Pierre et Gilles have sidestepped this debate, preferring instead to let audiences wrestle with the question of whether their work is all high-camp surface or not, and so it proved when we met. “Images should talk by themselves, not through us,” said Gilles. “Our images talk to people differently, and sometimes they present questions that even we don't recognise. We have the intelligence to build the images, but after that we like to leave space for people to dream.”



From top to bottom: *Marie-Antoinette: Le Hameau de la Reine* (2014); *Le Printemps Arabe* (2011); *Les Larmes Noires* (2015).

Their home studio, which they've lived and worked in since 1991, is the stuff dreams – their dreams – are made of. Marcadé, writing in 1996, called it “an instrument through which they can look at the world” and the “motherlode of their artistic enterprise.” Looking around, it's impossible to disagree. Filled with outlandish furniture, photographs and trinkets curated from their decades of travel, it's quite clearly the plastic Petri dish in which their ideas germinate and grow. There's a room with works on easels and a small glass house where Gilles does his painting. There's a Moorish kitchen lined in glass mosaic. There's a dining area that features, among other kitschy things, a pair of life-size, African-slave lampshades and an altar-like TV stand covered in religious idols and toys. And there's a wall plastered in quirky portraits of the couple taken in photo studios around the world – a sort of shrine to their love and a testament to the magpie-like global eclecticism that fuels their style. “Souvenirs from our childhood, popular culture, cinema, music, paintings: they all inspire us,” said Gilles. “You can see this from this house. Instead of putting paintings that we did up we have put all the worlds that inspired us in it.”

Really catching my eye were the studio portraits of them dressed in samurai outfits or taken right here in Bangkok. Asia seems to have been a big influence. “We've always been inspired by the Orient,” said Pierre. “We first travelled to Morocco together; after that came India, Thailand and Japan.” Thailand is, they revealed, one of their all-time favourite destinations. “It's the place in Asia that we know the most. We always find our sensibility, stuff we love, and lots of inspiration there. We love Thailand.”

Down a spiral staircase a few steps away sits an expansive basement. This is where they build their sets from the ground up, in a manner similar to James Bidwood, an icon of gay 1960s erotica and a big influence on the duo. Out of a small midtown Manhattan studio apartment, Bidwood would create elaborate photographic tableaux that popped with vibrant colours and exaggerated props. Pierre et Gilles do something very similar, but not before they've settled on an idea and have an inkling of how they'll execute it.

“We start by discussing a concept, drawing sketches and choosing a model,” explained Pierre, as I looked around at the boxes of props, stacked high and neatly labelled (cactuses, flowers, etc.). Next, they build a *mise en scène* comprised of layers of backdrops, diaphanous gauzes and fabrics, props, etc., and arrange the lighting.

Once the set is ready, the model, having been transformed, using costume and makeup, into some fabulous figure of historical or mythological legend, is put in position. Then, Pierre starts snapping. Tweaks are always made in their quest for perfection. “The adventure is in the surprise,” said Pierre. “If we

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always knew exactly what we’re going to do before, it wouldn’t be fun.” After the shoot, the image is printed out and Gilles begins the laborious process of painting and glazing over it, so that every last vestige of its reality is gone. Lastly, the image is placed in a bespoke frame. Taking about three weeks from start to finish, the end result – a fairytale-like tableaux – is unmistakably a Pierre et Gilles work of art.

Not much about this process has changed in 40 years. The decorations have become more ambitious. They’ve also switched camera formats. “We’ve been working on digital for about 6 months now,” said Gilles, showing me a fridge full of Polaroid film nearing its expiry date. “We had to switch because we can’t find film anymore and there are no more film developers in Paris.” The change might have been regrettable, forced on them by circumstance, but it has also sped things up. Whereas before they would have to ask the printer to adjust the brightness of images, now they can do it themselves. “We can work on colours in Photoshop and apply whatever effects we want.” The way they come to work with models has also evolved. Whereas in the past, models were personal friends or celebrities who approached them, today they increasingly use social media to seek them out. “More and more we find them through Instagram,” explained Gilles.

Currently working on a major retrospective of their work to mark their 40th anniversary of creativity (and coupledom), one that will tour the world after opening in Paris, they are in the process of seeking out new ones, both famous and not so famous. Images already in the bag include ones of the Spanish actress Rosy de Palma, who has been called a Picasso-come-to-life on account of her unusual features. And there’s that provocative image of them dressed up as potential suicide bombers. As for the remainder, this is up in the air. “We don’t know who else we’ll collaborate with yet,” said Pierre, “but that’s good. It’s all part of the adventure.”

One suspects they won’t have a problem finding candidates – their work might be gay, but it’s anything but ghettoized. Doors began opening for them early on (Andy Warhol was an early subject), and, as mainstream society has gotten a bit less straight, never stopped opening. Browsing their Instagram, it’s clear that they embrace every race, creed and gender preference; and that their openness to beauty in all its forms, no matter which belief system it hails from, has struck a chord. And they’re clearly proud of this, telling me just before I leave: “Our work has touched many kinds of people: ill people, jailed people, and of course gay people. Something about our work talks to people all around the world.”

Back on the street, it struck me that Pierre et Gilles could be considered proselytizers for just the sort of tolerance the terrorists despise – and that working may be the only form of defiance they know. ✕

A typically effervescent room at Pierre et Gilles’ home-cum-studio, which has been called the “motherloft” of their artistic enterprise.

Photograph by William Beaucaudet.