



Pierre et Gilles (founded 1976)

by Jason Goldman

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The French duo Pierre et Gilles pose an interesting paradox: their painted photographs are stylistically unique, bearing a highly specialized aesthetic that is uniquely their own, yet their work is patently derivative, made from the overt mixing of preexisting imagery, styles, genres, and pictorial traditions.

While all artists work under the influences of the visual world around them, Pierre et Gilles have taken the next step; their pictures are the result of a grab-bag of aesthetic interests and speak to a love affair with visual culture, taking equal pleasure in divinity and banality, beauty and smut.

The duo's work is remarkable not only for the seeming ease with which so many disparate influences--such as Renaissance and Baroque paintings, pornographic images, commercial photographs, and gaudy Catholic prayer cards--come together, but also for the visual effect achieved by the application of paint onto photographic surfaces.

Everything in their work is seen through a hazy, unreal veneer that commands the unsettling perfection of a print ad, the warm, still light of a Vermeer, the emotive detail of a church fresco, and the buffed, supple promise of a dirty magazine.

The story of Pierre et Gilles--Pierre Commo and Gilles Blanchard--bears the same fairytale characteristics as much of their work: the young men, both born in the early 1950s in western France, fell madly in love in the mid-1970s after meeting at a party and going home together.

They soon began collaborating artistically, Pierre bringing the fruits of his formal training as a photographer, Gilles bringing his talents as a painter. Together, they have created a prolific body of work that now numbers into the several hundreds, including several flamboyant self-portraits.

In today's world, where unearthly visual effects are increasingly achieved with a computer, it may seem as though Pierre et Gilles's images are further results of digital dream-weaving. But make no mistake about it: their works are one of a kind, handmade objects, a fact that belies their frequent reproduction for use as magazine covers, advertisements, CD covers, and the like.

Artifice is central in Pierre et Gilles's work: their human subjects are set in frontal, didactic poses against alluring, but deliberately fake-looking backdrops. Drawing equally from portraiture, tableaux, fashion photography, and the celluloid media, their pictures serve as fanciful documentation for an array of subjects, each with its own discrete story.

This is especially true of Pierre et Gilles's series of saints, wherein allegories of miracles are rendered in the same unreal patina as the hustlers, porn actors, and movie stars who populate other works.

The artists also routinely depict scenes from mythology, historical figures, current events, nudes, children, and what can only be described as celebrities playing dress-up. The common thread: an insistence on the

(artificial) beauty of their subjects and a disregard for the limitations of their real-world referents.

That does not mean, however, that their pictures forsake complexity or criticism for beauty. While Pierre et Gilles's choice of subjects, as well as their stylistic milieu, might suggest a sort of universal humanism of shiny, happy people, the artists are equally interested in imposing on their pictures an explicitly gay (often critical) perspective.

Like many other gay artists, Pierre et Gilles focus heavily on the male body (within and outside of the context of same-sex lust), while casting women as nostalgic, glamorous camp icons.

But beyond that, Pierre et Gilles capture the nuances of modern gay life by casting male subjects who are beautiful but melancholy, in the throes of both pleasure and pain, hunting for illicit encounters, torn by political strife, or haunted by the potential for disease, death, and hatred. Heavy face make-up, scant costumes, drag, and uniforms play with notions of masculinity and the indelible male body.

Moreover, the artists' emphasis on artifice and their signature dream-like surfaces constitute a double-edged response to the prominence of the body-beautiful in mainstream gay culture by both reveling in and mocking notions of perfection, superficiality, aestheticism, and a proverbial place over the rainbow.

Thus, perhaps what makes Pierre et Gilles's work so compelling is that it achieves considerable complexity with remarkable unpretentiousness and accessibility. While their pictures certainly engage the postmodern tactic of remaking preexisting subjects, narratives, and pictorial conventions into new, highly self-conscious images, the artists hardly seem to champion postmodern critiques as the means through which to consider them.

Rather, they insist foremost on the allure of their impossible images, while also bringing new critical possibilities to the pleasures of eye-candy.

Bibliography

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