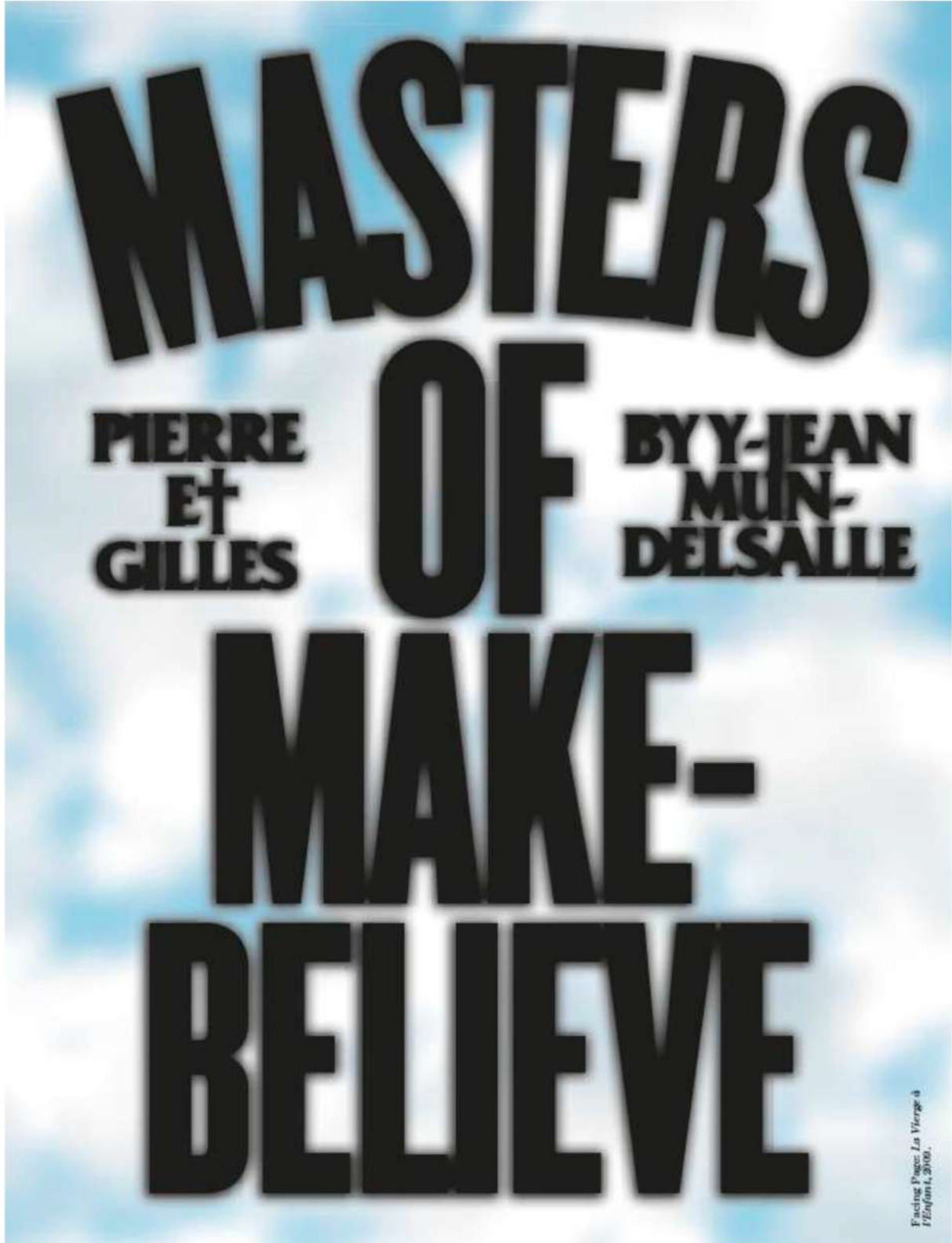


TEMPLON

ii

PIERRE ET GILLES

*THE ART REPUBLIK (Singapour), June 2014*



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ii

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ii

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Above: *Narcisse*, 2012.

Below: *La colère d'Achille*, 2013.

**"THE PAIR HAVE  
IMMORTALISED  
THE LIKES OF  
ANDY WARHOL,  
IGGY POP,  
MADONNA, KARL  
LAGERFELD, JEAN-  
PAUL GAULTIER,  
MARC JACOBS  
AND CATHERINE  
DENEUVE..."**



180

# TEMPLON



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THE INSEPARABLE FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER-PAINTER DUO KNOWN BY THEIR FIRST NAMES, PIERRE AND GILLES, HAVE BEEN CREATING OVER-THE-TOP PORTRAITS OF SEX KITTENS, MYTHOLOGICAL GREEK GODS, BRAWNY ATHLETES, BARE-CHESTED SAILORS, STREET URCHINS, POP CELEBRITIES, EROTIC ROMAN CATHOLIC SAINTS AND HEAVENLY GODDESSES SINCE THE LATE '60S. RECENTLY, THEY SAT DOWN WITH ART REPUBLIK TO DISCUSS THEIR INGENUOUS TECHNIQUE AND THEIR INSATIABLE ATTRACTION TO RELIGIOUS THEMES.

**A**sportsman and a musician incarnate King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba posing in a glittery enchanted garden before a Jewish temple; a hard-porn actor portrays a toreador with bare buttocks in a kitsch Baroque and Hispanic setting staring at his reflection in the mirror; a dancer takes on the role of the doomed Icarus before he takes flight, dressed solely in long red feathered wings against an electric-blue sky; a model stands in an imaginary, voluptuous paradise, nude save for some well-placed blooming purple orchids, his torso dripping in what could be sugary sap.

Instantly recognisable, Pierre Commy and Gilles Blanchard's colourful, camp and dreamy hand-painted photographs are iconic, having influenced the worlds of art, publishing, advertising and fashion. A team for almost four decades, the pair have immortalised the likes of Andy Warhol, Iggy Pop, Madonna, Karl Lagerfeld, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Marc Jacobs and Catherine Deneuve, drawing viewers into their eccentric make-believe universe, through their invention of a new, daring airbrushing technique, where their version of Photoshop consists not of digital manipulation but of using real paint on their photographs. Pierre shoots their subjects using a Mamiya 6x7 medium-format camera and prints them on canvas, then Gilles adds his masterly brushstrokes to the photos to further express their vision. The result is a combination of the saccharine-sweet wonder of childhood memories and the provocative extravagance of adult fantasies, which reflects the duo's interests and backgrounds.

In an era of high-tech photography and computer-generated effects, Pierre and Gilles insist on doing everything by hand and avoid the use of a computer (except for the printing on canvas, which is done digitally). Gilles favours working on canvas as it is enjoyable to paint on, thereby creating ambiguity between painting and photography. Each portrait generally takes about one month to complete from A to Z – from building their own sets to taking the photo, with the painting process being most time-consuming. The final image consequently takes on a life of its own because it is the product of an organic, artisanal process.

For this real-life couple, work and life mix completely, having started living and working together only a few months after their first meeting in 1976. Their studio has always doubled as their living quarters, and they have been based in Pré-Saint-Gervais, a suburb northeast of Paris, since 1990, after stays in the Bastille and Marais areas of the French capital.

Art Republik sits down with the pair – both in their 60s – prior to the opening of Heroes, their latest solo exhibition depicting heroic mythological figures and pop culture superheroes at Galerie Daniel Templon in Paris, they're dressed in jeans and covered in a lifetime of tattoos (often acquiring a new piece of body art in the different countries they visit like Japan, Laos and Thailand), giving them an urban, edgy public persona. But in private, Pierre and Gilles are extremely mild-mannered and courteous, two gentle beings obsessed by their art.

**ART REPUBLIK: Tell us about both your upbringings, and how and when the two of you became interested in art.**

**PIERRE (P):** I come from La Roche-sur-Yon, a small town in western France that's a bit sad and austere. There wasn't much to do, and I was often left alone because my parents weren't around as they were working, so it was very calm at home. I spent a lot of time reading film magazines, looking at photos and dreaming. Afterwards, I went to photography school and my dream was to be a photographer in Paris. So after the army, I went, and a few years later, I met Gilles. I began working for various magazines like Rock & Folk and Andy Warhol's Interview, and mainly shot black-and-white photos.

**GILLES (G):** I was born in Le Havre and I was a very bad student in secondary school. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was guided by chance to the Beaux-Arts (Fine Arts Academy) because my art teacher noticed that I drew well. It was a huge surprise and, from that moment



Above: Pierre and Gilles.

on, my life changed. I started taking an interest in my schoolwork at the Beaux-Arts, and I became a very good student. I arrived in Paris a bit later where I started to discover the city and myself. I went to the cinema a lot and I constantly visited all sorts of exhibitions. I later enrolled in the Arts Décoratifs (School of Decorative Arts), but I didn't go to class much. What interested me at that point was discovering life and getting to know people, and that's how in 1976 I met Pierre at a party organised by Kenzo. It started as a love story but we very quickly began to work together.

**What made you decide to work together and how did you come up with your unique technique of stylised hand-painted photographs?**

**G:** Pierre was already a photographer and I was a painter.  
**P:** We fed off each other's creativity and bounced around ideas between us a lot. We did a series of pictures inspired by photo booths with some friends whom we snapped making funny faces on backgrounds with very vibrant colours. But we were disappointed with the rendering of the prints, so Gilles said what if I had fun painting them, and we were so happy with the result.

**G:** The result and the pleasure of working together.  
**P:** And from this day forward, we have always worked together.

**G:** We had been asked sometimes to work separately, but we didn't want to.  
**P:** We were too happy.

**G:** We created a new technique, yes, but we had been to Morocco and seen one of these recoloured images of the stars of the Arab world, with very vivid colours – a bit of Warhol, pop, and all that – and we took all this and did it in our own way. It was a new experience and it gave images a new dimension.

# TEMPLON

ii

## PIERRE ET GILLES

THE ART REPUBLIK (Singapour), June 2014



### **Describe your artistic language and philosophy.**

P: We always work at home, never at other locations or studios, even when we lived in a small 30-square-metres space; but it taught us a lot, like the illusion of space.

G: At the beginning, we did very simple backgrounds because we lived in a small apartment. And little by little, as we moved, we had larger spaces. We started to build more elaborate décors and mises en scène, and then our work progressed. Pierre does the lighting and the shooting. It is major work doing the lighting; we use plenty of spotlights. We work a bit like in the cinema with ringstien spotlights, and always with film photography. We do everything ourselves, so we invented our own language. You often find flowers and skies – we also have our own universe – and then subjects that we continuously revisit: religion, stars, and thugs. We have a kind of vocabulary like that that keeps reappearing.

### **You have depicted Jesus, Adam and Eve, martyrs, angels, saints and sinners. Where does your interest in religion come from and why is it a recurring subject?**

P: We were both brought up as Catholics, and it made a deep impression on both of us the same, even if it's something that we rejected a bit afterwards. In fact, it was during a trip to India that we discovered Christian/religious images reinterpreted by the Indians, which had a colourful side, and it stirred up the desire within us to work on this theme.

G: Because seeing Christian saints like that through the eyes of Tamil people in southern India, with very bright colours, shocked us, and that's why we did our first two saints – Saint Sebastian and Saint Theresa – and it was these saints that we had seen in a village in India, as statues, and it appealed to us so much. We have also tackled topics such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and many more.

### **What does religion mean to you and are you religious?**

G: It is the mystery, questioning and reflection about religion that draws us to it. I think that to believe is to ask questions, to move forward, to think, and there are texts that guide us. All religions interest us, and I think that it's important. We're not religious ourselves, but we ask ourselves questions. We believe that there is a mystery, and it is this mystery that interests us. Art has a religious side to it because art also asks this question of the mystery. Art has often been linked to religion and it is entirely normal. In contemporary art, there is always a religious question, a mystery. In any case, it is the artists who interest us the most.

### **Is it difficult for you to separate art and religion?**

G: Yes, there is a religious side, even in pop art, when you see paintings by Warhol or all the others. There have always been religious questions in all art, even among minimal artists. It is the way of asking the question.

### **Your representation of religious figures is often suggestive and provocative. Why does your religious work sometimes have (homo)sexual connotations?**

P: In any case, we do it without derision.

G: We're following the story. There is no blasphemy. When you look at the history of painting and see the Saint Sebastians, there has always been an erotic dimension. In Christianity, the body is very important. That's perhaps why, often in the paintings of Christ and others in the Sistine Chapel and so on, it is really a tradition. In the Christian religion, God became man, so the body, temptation and sensuality followed.

### **Do you believe that celebrities are our modern-day gods and goddesses, where what they do and what they wear have the power to influence people?**

G: They have the appearance of God. In this way, they make people dream. People need this – icons to inspire them. Madonna is somewhat of a mother for many boys and girls around the world; they dream of having a mother like that. But is it really religious, or just an illusion?

TEMPLON  
ii

PIERRE ET GILLES

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This page: *Le fruit défendu*, 2011.

# TEMPLON

ii

PIERRE ET GILLES

*THE ART REPUBLIK (Singapour), June 2014*



**"EVERYONE IS A BIT OF AN ARTIST AT THE END OF THE DAY; EVERYONE INVENTS A DREAM. WE NEED ARTISTS TO LIVE – WE NEED WORKS OF ART, MUSIC, PERFORMANCES, POETRY, AND PAINTING."**

Above, clockwise from top left:  
*Bouddha, 2004; Saint Therese;  
Krishna, 2000.*

# TEMPLON

ii

## PIERRE ET GILLES

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**What is the power of the naked body in your works?**

G: A naked body is beautiful. There is intimacy in nudity. Not everyone can show their body.

P: You need to know how to express your body. We like to work with people who can express something; we never and don't want to force an expression. It has to come naturally.

G: If someone doesn't like to show off their body, we won't ask them to show it. There are people who adore expressing their body, who work with their body, like actors, athletes and dancers. And us, we love all that is human – the face and the body are our basis of inspiration above all, so sometimes they're naked, and other times we dress them with flowers. Our work is always an icon around a person, or a group of two, three or four people at the maximum, but it is always around this. It's an obsession for us. I like the bodies of athletes a lot; they have beautiful proportions. But we also work with fragile bodies. If we were asked to do a sumo, I'd love it as well. We have had models from all countries, races and sizes – all were equally interesting.

**What are the greatest challenges you face when creating your artworks?**

P: Each image is a bit like a beautiful adventure and a big challenge each time.

G: Yes, we know roughly where we want to go, but we don't know the path we will take. There are always many surprises and that's what we

love. As soon as we finish one image, we want to do another. Work at times can be hard, a little complicated, and it can even make us suffer, but it's our passion. It's impossible to stop ourselves from doing it.

**Is your work over the past 37 years like a photo album of your lives and your friends?**

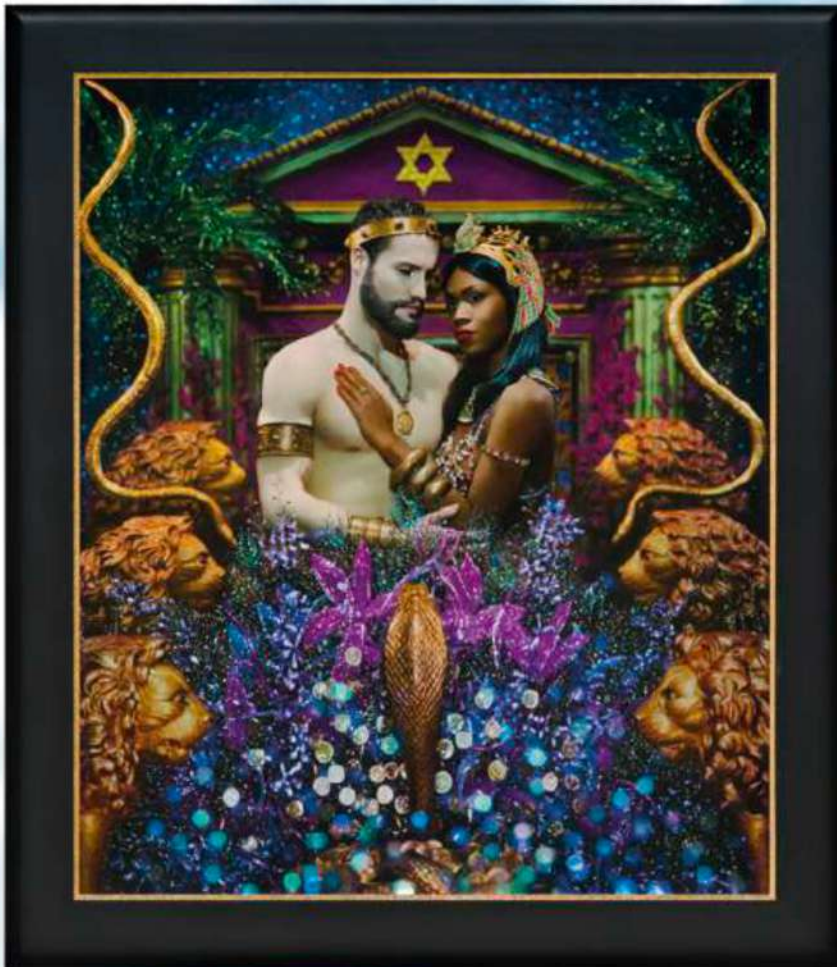
G: Yes, completely, it's a family album that evolves all the time. It's linked to many memories.

P: In general, our models are our friends or the chance of encounters.

G: Yes, encounters, personalities or friends, but it's not our thing to call someone or hire an agency to have a certain style of model. Moreover, we meet with the person and build an idea based on the personality of the model. It's the model who inspires us. Sometimes we have an idea and we look for the model to match but, more often, it's the model who incites a desire or an idea in us. It's a discussion. We like to know the person before working with them.

**What do you feel is the role of the artist in society?**

G: It's to lift people up, to make them dream, as reality is very rough. Everyone is a bit of an artist at the end of the day; everyone invents a dream. We need artists to live – we need works of art, music, performances, poetry, and painting. It's very important, and life would be terrible otherwise if there was no art. We really need it. Everyone needs it. □



Left: *Le Roi Salomon et la Reine de Saba*, 2014.

Top: *Jésus d'Amour*, 1989.