

TEMPLON

II

PIERRE ET GILLES

SLEEK, 6 October 2020

**“The word ‘kitsch’ doesn’t
mean anything anymore”:
Pierre et Gilles reinvent camp
for the metamodernist age**

6 October, 2020



Pierre et Gilles, *Lit jumeaux* (Pierre Bouvier et Nick Champa), 2018

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"The ultimate Camp statement," Susan Sontag famously ponders in her 1964 assortment of aphoristic jottings, *Notes on 'Camp'*: "It's good because it's awful." By now, Sontag's adage has come to trigger a reaction of atavistic assent in the vassals of mainstream postmodernism who've happened upon the culturally nested, if enduringly diffuse concept. *Camp* may not have a specific referent, but flourishes with aesthetic signifiers: feather boas, plush walls, drag acts. The artificial, exaggerated and sentimentally charged. At its core, however, the attribute that reigns supreme is irony.

Over their 40-year-long career, French visual artists Pierre et Gilles — born Pierre Commoy and Gilles Blanchard — have altogether refashioned the mythos surrounding the glittery establishment of camp art as a reservoir of flat, peacockish and humorous frivolity. The duo's work sits at the slippery intersection of fashion photography (their most iconic subjects have included Thierry Mugler, Olivier Rousteing and Jean-Paul Gaultier) and the unmistakable brand of pop art which later paved the way for the likes of Jeff Koons and David LaChapelle. Combustive colours, celebrity pixie dust and 'postcard' aesthetics are nonetheless never meant to convey sarcasm or laughable farce; the artists' body of work articulates a deep-seated social empathy, and a keen interest in fundamentally elevating the mundane, beyond the illusory prestige of fame and glory. Titled *Motionless Wanderings*, Commoy and Blanchard's latest retrospective now on view at Paris' Galerie Templon spotlights, perhaps with more conviction than before, the artists' commitment to reviving the French literary and artistic tradition of exalting the extraordinary in the quotidian, the people, the everyday heroes. As the exhibition opened its doors, Pierre et Gilles review four decades of prolific work, with a touch of nostalgia.

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Pierre et Gilles, La Reine des océans (Adèle Farine), 2020

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“Errances Immobiles” has been described as your most introspective and critical collection of works to date. How do you feel about your latest body of work being described as political? If this dimension is not intentional, are you comfortable with this term being ascribed to it?

We have always worked in the same way, simply observing the world and being inspired by it. We like the feeling reinventing it, and behind these dreamlike images, there is always a hidden message: *Le Cowboy* in 1977, *Le Petit Communiste* in 1990, *Le Triangle Rose* in 1993, *Vive la France* in 2006 or *David et Jonathan* in 2005, for instance, talk about the world and add a political undertone to the work. Our vision of the world has also changed with our experiences, with the tragedies the world has witnessed. Sexual liberation, the place of homosexuality in society, the drama related to the AIDS pandemic... Every major social issue has somehow inspired us when making our work, and continue to inspire us today. We navigate between shadow and light. The public can understand us better now, as they go beneath the surface of our pieces, beneath the beauty and prettiness.

You’ve noted that this collection of images represent “a world which is no longer that world of delight that it used to be” — this translates a sense of disillusion regarding the current state of the world. Would you say you’re disillusioned? If so, when was the last time you felt optimistic?

We are neither pessimistic nor optimistic. The world has always changed and will always continue to change. We must accept this, and avoid taking the wrong paths. This is what we try to show in our work. We dream of the world to make it more beautiful and more liveable; that’s the role of artists.

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Pierre et Gilles, La pêche miraculeuse (Pierre et Filip), 2019

What's the significance of the recurring underwater motif in your imagery?

The underwater world, for us, translates the realm of the imagination. It's a way to turn an inner dream to reality.

I've read that you both find journalists' tendency to call your imagery "cute" or "kitsch" slightly irritating. Do you think that those who make such comments overlook the psychological, social or emotional underpinnings of your work?

The words 'kitsch' or 'cute' are adjectives we find reductive; we feel they can't quite define our work. The word 'kitsch' doesn't mean anything anymore. In the world we live in, it has lost all its meaning. Our work is actually much more complex. It has several layers, and a lot of hidden meanings.

Are your images meant to be an escape from reality or a reflection of it?

Actually, a bit of both.

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The underwater world for us is the world of the imagination and a way to bring reality to an inner dream.



Pierre et Gilles, *Le petit Bizut (Vincent Cohen)*, 2018

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Your portraits visibly elevate the subject, almost in a liturgic way reminiscent of Christian iconography, which is often directly referenced. Does your work attempt to see the best in people or is it an exploration of the transcendental potential of the “everyday heroes”?

Our work has always been marked by icons, from our early days working with pop culture imagery, all the way to *Errances Immobiles*. It certainly comes from our childhood, which was influenced by religious imagery, as well as the representations of these icons in film or music. We discovered them in magazines, and they made us dream.

Where are the pretty actresses from our childhood? Those fragile, dream-like moments that we have loved so much now belong to the past. Magnifying and elevating our subjects is our way of rendering them immortal. In a world that is changing so quickly, we somehow aim to fight death.

Visually, your work draws inspiration from 19th century French Realists such as Courbet as well as religious Renaissance art, which you overlap with a pop, “post-card” aesthetic — yet you disavow irony as a driving force in your imagery, and you manage to elude any sense of parody or caricature. How do you elude that dimension?

Our work is very personal and inspired by all dimensions of time: yesterday, today and tomorrow. We draw from nostalgia, reality and dreams. We work with our feelings. It's like an adventure that sweeps us away, and never fails to surprise us.

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Pierre et Gilles, *Le Vendeur de Tour Eiffel* (Ibrahima Ramon Magassa), 2019

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By Irina Baconsky