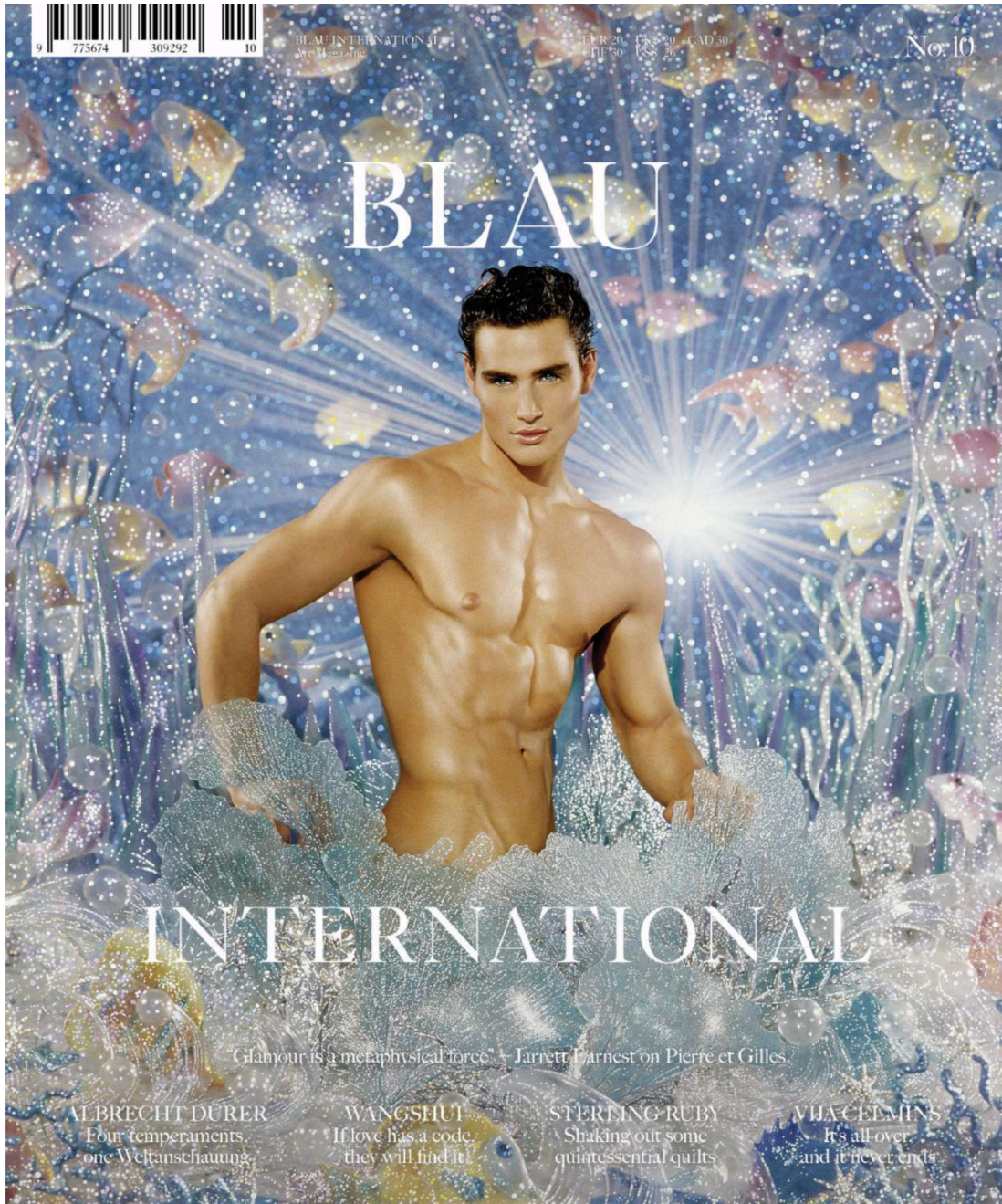


TEMPLON

II

PIERRE ET GILLES

BLAU, April 2024

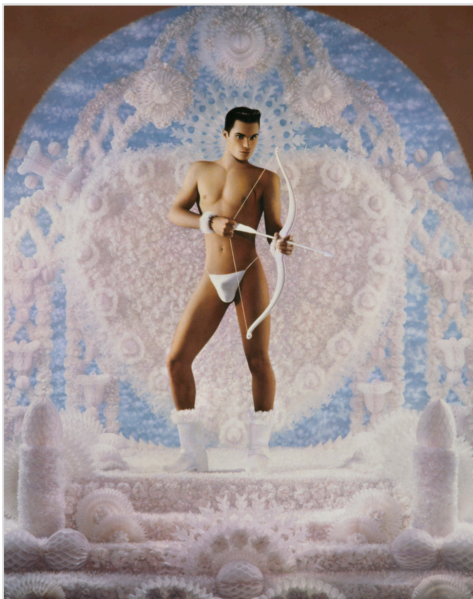




Having penetrated mainstream culture and the gay subconscious alike, PIERRE ET GILLES's influence is so vast that we tend to forget just how singular they are. Superfan *Jarrett Earnest* finally meets his heroes in their Paris

house-cum-studio. Glamour, he learns, is a tool to remake the world—one highly crafted image at a time

Opening show at SOLO
MUSEUM ST. LOUIS (Charles H. Winters), 1923
12 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. (31.8 x 49.5 cm)
Opening show at
LE PETIT JACQUINOT (Charles H. Winters), 1923
10 1/2 x 16 1/2 in.
LE TOUTEN (anonymous), 1923
49 x 36 cm



REVUE

Pierre et Gilles



I am a glossy photograph
 I am in color and softly lit
 Overexposed and well blown up
 Carefully printed and neatly cut
 You can look at me for hours
 I won't mind, I'll let you dream
 From the page of a magazine
 — Amanda Lear

A study in powder blue, yolk yellow, and snow white, all strong and a little too clear—the visual force of it, almost pure abstraction. In the image, a smiling white guy, aggressively pale with sparkling eyes, peroxidized crew cut, and contrasting dark arched brows, wears a blue-and-white striped sailor's shirt, holding a bouquet of plastic daisies. Lifted delicately with both hands, the flowers are poised over his heart as if he were a maiden. He loves me, he loves me not. More, and larger, daisies float around him in a hazy wreath, blending with puffy white clouds in a cornflower sky. If it all didn't seem amorphously French enough, there's a little golden Eiffel Tower in the distance, tucked beside his shoulder. He's not looking directly out of the picture, but slightly up and to the left, as though at a beloved, the photographer, lending his face the gauzy expression of a dreamer. Nothing can be this clean that isn't about something dirty. There is a glint in his eye—the whole fucking picture is a glint.

Last spring, I found myself at a fancy art dinner in Le Marais, eating *l'hamburger* and sipping champagne, because I relish playing the role of an American in Paris. "If I really put my mind to it," I began to think, "I'm sure I could meet one person I'd really like." Possibilities paraded before me: Amanda Lear, my current obsession? But I think she's actually ensconced in Provence. Thierry Mugler? Daddy! Dead. Maybe my favorite actress, Isabelle Huppert. She had once walked into a show I curated in New York. Face to face, I had nothing to say—the only, and I mean only, time that I have ever been starstruck, and I hated it. "How about an artist?" I thought, bringing my dreams a bit closer to my reality. Then I realized that the cast of characters in my mind had all been photographed by Pierre et Gilles!

I sauntered around the table. French art-world people were talking to each other in French, quite like in a film. I asked my new friend Mathieu if he knew how I could visit Pierre et Gilles. "It is my heart's desire," I added for slightly drunken effect. "That's a great idea," he said. They were so legendary, so deeply engrained in the culture, it had never occurred to him to actually try and meet them. He assured me that Paris is a small town; he'd make some calls. The next day he said that they had agreed to host me for a studio visit at their home on the edge of Paris, in Le Pré-Saint-Gervais.

A ruched curtain of gold lamé pulses over the shallow background of the picture, behind a narrow bed with a puckered silver skirt running across the bottom edge, forming a tight stage-like space. Laying sideways, in a slightly masculine adaptation of Titian's *Venus* (1534) or Manet's *Olympia* (1863), is the porn star Jeff Stryker. One leg is bent at the knee, raised in a triangle, placing a large black boot on the bed; the other leg stretches out straight, shoe lopped off by the frame, larger than life. Venus as a boy. A sex god of the 1980s and 1990s, Stryker became synonymous with his large, curved dick, cast from life and widely distributed as one of the first celebrity dildos. Sitting on a dresser, it resembles nothing so much as a silicone version of Brâncuși's *Princess X* (1915–16).

Like the sculpture, Stryker's lower half is gold, covered in skin-tight sequined leggings that tease an outline of his famous member through the image's intense glitter—eroticism sublimated into dazzling light. Everything glitters. Sparkles are slathered over his smooth, toned chest; gold rings and bracelets adorn his hands and wrists; and a pair of cheap golden devil horns sprouts from his brushed and glittered hair. He is attended by a retinue of pink stuffed bunnies with glassy black eyes and red noses, arms open and extended, enacting an artificial and timeless worship of their pagan idol. A pretend devil who looks right at us, confrontational and smoldering, eternally available and irrevocably far away.

That Sunday afternoon, I arrive a little early and sit in the narrow park across from Pierre and Gilles's nondescript brick building, so nondescript and elegantly suburban that I wonder if I am in the right place. I text Yurgos, my handler and translator, who meets me at the door. He is excited, too, because he was only recently hired by their gallery and has himself not yet visited the studio. We walk in to meet the famous duo, now in their 70s, looking exactly like themselves. They are very gracious, welcoming. Their English is better than my French, but still we speak in relays through Yurgos, relying heavily on body language and rhetorical pantomime.

Pierre and Gilles's home is staged as elaborately as their photographs. On one side of the dining room table sits a large altar covered with Tibetan *thangkas*, paintings of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson, figurines of Hello Kitty and Pikachu, all

intertwined with rainbow Christmas lights and strings of plastic fruits. From the chandelier, an accumulation of variously sized disco balls hangs, dripping with red tassels. Layer upon layer—of golden trimming, green beaded curtains, curvy red mod chairs, filigreed art nouveau bric-a-brac, all punctuated by leafy pothos vines, that most humble of houseplants. What should be a tacky nightmare is transformed into an undeniably elegant life arranged with humor and intelligence.

The pair proudly points out their collection of technicolor soft-core photos by James Bidgood, the gay 1960s American pornographer and anonymous director of *Pink Narcissus* (1971), and Pierre et Gilles's closest artistic progenitor. Bidgood created candy-colored scenarios with no budget and big dreams, handmade within the confines of his small New York apartment. When his work was resurrected in the late 90s and exhibited as art for the first time, it was understood through the lens of Pierre et Gilles. They ask me if I like cult painter Jean Boulet, and show me a beefcake odalisque with pouty lips and overly full lashes, a painting they say used to hang over Jean Genet's bed—holiest of holies. Later that fall, the Pompidou would borrow it for a show about queer art called *Over the Rainbow*, along with a selection of their own works.

Down a spiral stairway we go, into the basement that serves as their windowless photo studio. Of course, the basement is like the unconscious, an erotic arena, the storehouse of desire. Just the night before, I went to my favorite fetish club, Le Mensch. The ground level is a narrow bar where you check your clothes with the bartender. I stripped to my black work boots and had a shot of whisky before descending the damp stone steps into the artificial twilight. A dungeon is the best place in Paris not to speak French, the scenes dependent on a repertory of looks and gestures instead of words. All the better for projection, where the stereotype of an arrogant, ignorant American can assume its place within fantasy. Outside, these men might be dressed in dignified suits or lowly uniforms, separated by profession or class, but here in the dungeon they are recontextualized according to their dreams.

The walls of Pierre and Gilles's basement studio are lined with cardboard boxes, the facing sides covered with Day-Glo poster-board signs, stacked floor to ceiling and organized in grids, each listing its contents in looping black script: roses, multicolored, plastic; hats, cowboy; pom-poms, large; confetti; fake snow. There is even a craft area where backdrops and props are constructed. The spot where they set up their dioramas together is only a few feet in either direction. And what struck me is how aggressively handmade it all is: cotton balls dipped in pink paint, the cheapest plastic flowers, thin wooden frames from which to hang fabric, craft supplies from the corner store—all stuff that is not precious, that is readily available.

I assumed they had fabricators, a team of people building everything. They correct me and say they have to do it themselves, otherwise it is not their work. And the idea also grows as they construct the scene. Sometimes they have one guy who will come to help move big things, but making the sets is what they love doing. If they are shooting celebrities, there might be someone to do hair or makeup, or for a fashion shoot, a stylist. But really, it's just them. This gets me one step closer to confirming a suspicion I've been harboring about style: cheaper is better. Free is even better than that. As a friend of mine used to say, it turns out that freedom is just another word for nothing much to begin with. Witnessing Pierre and Gilles using these debased materials emphasizes the degree of imagination, and the impact of transformation, that is, after all, the art.

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There is nothing funnier than dick shadow. I'm always on the lookout for it, and it occasionally appears in porn, more rarely in serious painting, but it does show up there, too, turning a hard-on into a sundial. In one self-portrait, Pierre, as the Devil—lathered in red body paint, positively dripping in rivulets of red and gold glitter—holds a massive dildo up toward his belly button, casting two shadows across his stomach, one much darker than the other, formed by multiple overlapping lights. Around him, two plastic skeletons peek out from behind tangled ornamental branches, abstract slashes of rippling red, opening at the top onto a chilly navy sky. Behind his head is a white-painted starburst framing his pokey horns.

In its pendant, Gilles, wearing a grinning skeleton head, is Death. He holds the same large dildo that now casts an even larger shadow, right up to his sternum, from the cool light below. The skeletons are gone. He is alone with hints of a mottled yellow sky and a matching white starburst halo. Together, they are the twin mirrors—Devil and Death, Pierre and Gilles, both hotter and cooler occult doppelgängers of England's Gilbert and George. Within their universe, a pair of anything, or even a reflection, can represent the twinned artists—different but the same. Pierre is the one who actually shoots the photographs, which are printed onto canvas, stretched, and moved upstairs to another studio, in the corner of the building, with windows on two sides. In the center of the room is a little

glasshouse where Gilles paints onto the pictures, smoothing surfaces, intensifying lighting effects. The booth shields the rest of the space from the mist of an air gun, which is used in places, but, he warns me *sotto voce*, never on the face—for that, only a brush. I look closely at the painting on the easel: a new portrait of their longtime friend and frequent model, the trans pop-cabaret icon Marie France, also now in her late 70s. In a black sequined dress, she holds a chihuahua, surrounded by a whirlwind of purple and pink party lights, the words “love” and

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“discotheque” spelled out in the neon murk. Not a line on her face, melted and smoothed by Gilles’s touch. “She doesn’t look like that now, of course,” Gilles says. I tell him, “You know, when we’re dead no one will know the difference, and then she will look like that forever.”

Their work had entered my life through mass media—reproductions in fashion magazines of images created for Thierry Mugler or Jean Paul Gaultier. I obliviously ask if they re-photograph the hand-painted versions once they’re done, imagining they would want to exhibit the glossy unified surfaces that I knew from books. No, that is only for publication. All of their works are handmade one-off pieces. They even build unique frames for each of them, covered with feathers or studs or glitter, or adorned with wooden butterflies—whatever the occasion calls for.

Jagged star-like petals frame a portrait against dark lavender vapor. Over and over, their images are structured this way, as though we are peeking through bushes, through a ring of flowers, peering through a keyhole or a crack in a curtain—positioned with the alluring safety of a voyeur, but also within a narrative framing that recalls silent film. It separates the sensuous realm of fantasy from the rest of the world like the passage from the street into the dungeon.

Her face is refined to geometry, like a Mel Odom illustration: the white arc of the head with straight platinum hair, the deep shadows carving the cheek and chin like stone. Wide and wide-set eyes exaggerated by lashes, shaded with metallic purple, a sparkling tear running down from each. Like everything about Pierre et Gilles’s visual world, the tear is polysemous, a drop of cum that slides, as it does in the portrait they made of Amanda Lear, into a shimmering diamond.

By working outside the art gallery, Pierre et Gilles’s images permeated the culture, moving promiscuously via album covers, posters, and postcards. Obliquely, almost unconsciously, they are potent signifiers of queer sensibility. You can live the kind of life you want, these flashing signs say, and you will find other likeminded people out there too. Their influence has been so vast, it’s sometimes hard to recognize how singular they are—that thousands of images in fashion magazines, contemporary art galleries, and selfies on Instagram are indebted to their aesthetic. I mention how I don’t think they get enough credit, and they say, perhaps too graciously, that they like it. It makes them feel humbled and happy to see their impact on younger artists—that is what keeps it alive.

Through Yürgos, I try to relay why I have come to meet them. Of all the people in Paris, their work epitomizes my belief that glamour is a metaphysical force; that they embody a specific lineage of queer artists, including Pierre Molinier, Jack Smith, James Bidgood, and Steven Arnold, all saints in my religion of decoration as transgression and liberation, artists who made things at home from what was at hand; and that glamour is one manifestation of the imagination, an important tool for how we can remake the world. I feel a real loss of glamour in our present culture—contemporary fashion is just not glamorous. Everything now is athleisure, it looks cheap while still costing a lot of money. I regard this conservatism as a profound failure of the imagination, one with serious consequences for the future of life on this earth. But within Pierre et Gilles’s queer fantasia, everything is permitted: fucked-up reveries and wild ambitions. Images that promise glittering happiness slathered with sex and buoyed by perversity: a vision that we might be free.

SAINTE AFFLIGÉE (Pascale Borel), 1991
92 × 64 cm

Following spread left:
CASANOVA (Enzo Junior), 1995
75 × 55 cm

Following spread right:
LE GARÇON AU POISSON, (Victor Weinsanto), 2020
123 × 96 cm

