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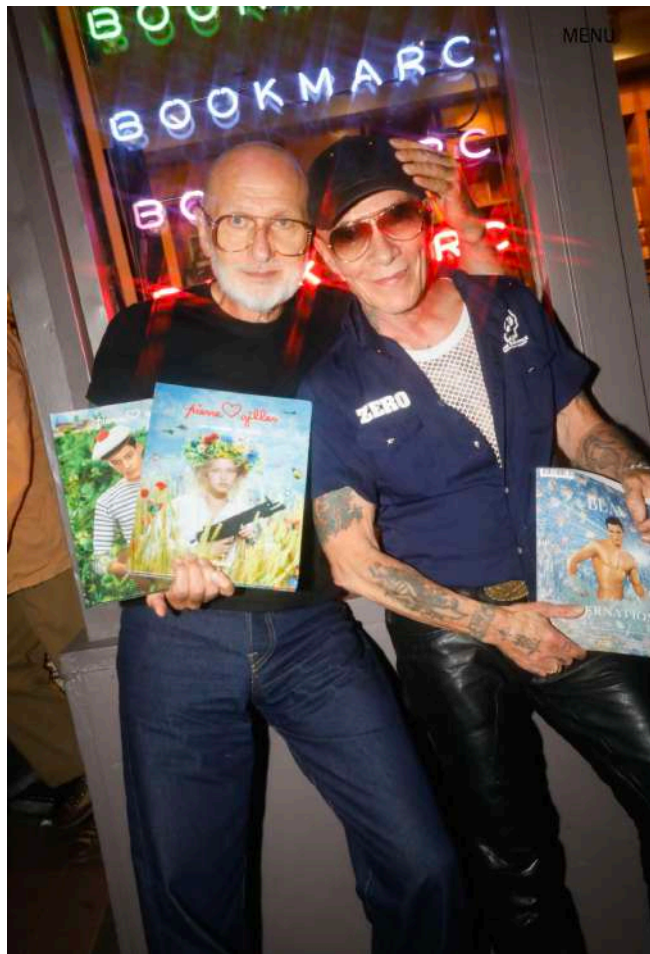
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PIERRE ET GILLES

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Pierre et Gilles Meet Their Models on Instagram Now, But Their Work Is Timeless

by Kyle Munzenrieder



Sometimes it feels like Pierre et Gilles's images were made specifically for the Internet. Their hyperreal, candy-colored work has buzzed about online practically since the advent of dial-up modems, traveling from LiveJournals and Tumblrs to Instagram grids and Pinterest boards. Reading like dispatches from some queer utopia or liturgical art from a religion that worships at the altar of camp, their art has a particular resonance with gay audiences. It dials up the volume on the queer whispers found throughout art history work, while also portraying an idealized world yet to be realized. Their work isn't just timeless—it reminds viewers that a particularly gay point of view has always and will always exist.

The couple—both in life and in art—known individually as Pierre Commoy and Gilles Blanchard, has maintained their artistic process since they first began working together in 1976. Together they find models, imagine dream scenarios, and build sets. Pierre photographs the setup, while Gilles paints on top. Together, they've captured everyone from Mick Jagger to Sam Smith. Their work may flutter about online at the speed of light, but the process behind each work can take several years.



Courtesy of the artists and TEMPLON, Paris - Brussels - New York



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Based in France, Pierre et Gilles recently traveled to New York City for the first time in ten years for a rare international trip set up by the art magazine Blau International. Their itinerary included a book signing at Bookmarc and a dinner and after party at the PUBLIC hotel. We caught up with the artists for a chat at their gallery, Templon (a new show, "Nuit électrique," is currently on display at the gallery's Paris outpost through October 26th). Communicating through a translator, and often finishing each other's sentences, the pair discussed their online relevance, changing social attitudes about nudity in art, and the artists who informed their work.



Alex La Cruz

I was trying to remember where I first encountered your work, but in a way, I felt like I've always known it. It's extremely popular on social media, and a lot of younger people know your work from digital spaces. How do you feel about your work living online?

Gilles: It came naturally. We used to work for magazines and do record covers. We've always had a broad audience, much larger than just regular gallery shows. So it was quite natural that social networks would start taking over.

Pierre: It's a great way for us to give more exposure to our work in every country. It's also a great way to get into contact with the actual public. Over time, we've started getting contacted by followers, and sometimes that's how we meet models. Even famous people reach out to us. Before, we used to meet models by going out to clubs.

You once said you're kind of like journalists who are reporting on a world different from our own. Since you've started, do you think that our current world has become more in line with the one you're imagining?

Gilles: It's hard to tell. We're looking for an ideal world. Our universe is a vision of our own dreams. We work from our heart, what we like, and the models we meet. You're right in a sense that the world now meets more of our concerns about identity, gender, and homosexuality. All those issues are more palpable now in the real world than they used to be. In some way, there's a fusing of our world and the real world. We also like that our work is timeless. It's a great trip, a great adventure that tells our personal story as well. There are no breaks in the story. We're always looking at the world in the same way, but we do look around the world and see change around us.



Pierre et Gilles magazine cover

Some people want to say that queerness is a modern thing, but I think for a lot of us, we see in your images a sensibility that connects to the past. When you were young, what kind of images resonated with you?

Gilles: When we were younger, we know that artists like Michaelangelo and directors like Jean Cocteau were homosexuals. There was an established homosexual point of view.

Pierre: Movies were a great testimony. Fellini, and American directors like Kenneth Anger and James Bidgood. They really inspired us. They were all links of the same chain with different personalities.

Gilles: We realized there was a preexisting gay culture, but we were interested in a gay culture that would be open to all differences. Tom of Finland and George Quaintance were also big influences.

Pierre: Jean Boulette was a French painter known for his queer painting in the '40s and '50s. He's a mythical figure in gay culture in France.

Gilles: May '68 was a major cultural revolution in France. They really thought the world would be open to all differences. It was not so easy, but there was a great exhilaration in the '60s. Younger generations have changed a lot of things as well.

Pierre: That's why we were never closeted. We never tried to hide anything. We wanted to stand as artists in our own right, expressing what we had in our hearts and souls. Our models were our friends, and they were of all colors, all genders, all sexual identities. That was never planned, they were just our friends.

So from your point of view, is it better for artists to be authentic than to stress too much of a political statement?

Gilles: Well, that's the way we did it, anyway. There are many ways of approaching art. For us, we've had many people tell us that our work helped them accept their identity and come out. It gave us a sense of pride we may not have had before in those images. It's not something we had planned, but we're grateful.



Alex La Cruz

There's an idea in America right now—and I don't know how true it is—that younger people, Gen Z, are very open to all types of identity, but they're a bit more prudish. They don't like to see sex scenes or depictions of nudity. Do you find that's true in France?

Gilles: Maybe less so in France, but there is kind of a self-censorship because of the social networks. You show less of the body, and it's not as much prudish as it is a reality. But you need to allow for the depiction of naked bodies, because this is what art history is all about.

Pierre: When you go to the Louvre, it's all nudes.

Gilles: It is true when you go to art fairs and contemporary art galleries, you see less nudity than you did in the '80s.

Pierre: There's maybe even a backlash now where, as a provocation, they're showing more body.

Gilles: Showing the body is universal, timeless. It will always happen. It's part of art.



Courtesy of the artists and TEMPLON, Paris - Brussels - New York

You both recently collaborated with Isabelle Huppert. Can you tell me a little bit about that image and how that collaboration came about?

Gilles: It's a great pleasure because she loves photography. She loves to embody new roles. The images are really built together—we do research together. The three of us, we brainstorm and build the images and the role and the costume and everything together. She transforms herself and enters into the character that she's supposed to play just for one image. She's very precise, even for just a photo shoot. We want to do another project. We have some plans. She's going to act in a play, some kind of tragedy, and she loves the character. We're thinking we could somehow play with the idea of this tragic figure.

What draws you to a subject?

Pierre: We have no physical criteria. They can be any type. We have no preconceived notions of age.

Gilles: We're looking for inspiration. From that person, we build up a character that would fit their personality. A professional actress can take on different roles, but some models are not actors. We like subjects who are artistically inclined. Some of them are artists, whether singers or visual artists, or young people who just want to express themselves.

Perhaps young people are more willing to be photographed?

Gilles: People of all ages ask us, but we don't take commissions. We need to be inspired because the process is very long. We have to build decor, they have to do the photo shoot, I have to paint. It takes time to think of a concept when we meet someone. It can take several months, sometimes several years.

Has your process changed over the years or has it remained pretty much the same?

Gilles: In the beginning, they were actual photographs, so they were much smaller.

Pierre: We always work from home, and in the beginning, we had a tiny apartment, so we could only make small portraits, almost like headshots. Slowly, the format got larger, the decor became more sophisticated

Gilles: For the past ten years we've been working with digital photography. It's printed on a really large canvas before I paint. My way of painting hasn't changed. I still work with brushes and actual paint. It's just that the photograph underneath has become bigger and more sophisticated.



Courtesy of the artists and TEMPLON, Paris - Brussels - New York

Many people who see your images now must think this is completely digital and don't understand how much work goes into it.

Pierre: It's complete craftsmanship. There's no Photoshop. There are no collages.

Gilles: What you see really happened. We build an actual environment with fake flowers, mirrors, and accessories. That's why on Instagram, sometimes we like to show the making of the images. Once you understand the background is actually built by hand, you really see the work differently. You understand what those images are about. You understand the models actually live in the image.