

Paris Is Yearning

From porn stars to little Jesus—the fantastical work of French art duo Pierre and Gilles

Art

Nice hat:
*La Madone
au cœur
blessé*, 1991



Courtesy Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont, Paris

Pierre et Gilles: double je (1976–2007)
*Jeu de Paume, Site Concorde
1, place de la Concorde, Paris
Through September 23*

BY LESLIE CAMHI
PARIS—

If you ascend the Eiffel Tower, as I did for the first time recently (following the urgent promptings of a four-year-old), you will see the outline of a large heart that someone has traced, graffiti-style, on the lawns of the Champs de Mars far below. Tourists and natives may “heart” New York, as many a T-shirt proclaims, but it’s the kind of affection one bears for an old curmudgeon. Romantic love, on the other hand, is part of the mythology of Paris: imbued through the water, immortalized in song, blossoming in twilight hours beside the Seine.

A heart also unites the names of the artistic duo Pierre and Gilles, Parisian artists par excellence, whose retrospective of over 140 works currently fills the Jeu de Paume, the former royal tennis courts that are now a major showcase for photography and contemporary art. Born in western France in 1950 and 1953, respectively, the two have collaborated for some 30 years, making painted photographs—hyper-stylized, at times innocently obscene, often allegorical portraits of themselves and their friends, including a host of celebrities and demimondaines.

Their wildly popular art, like Jeff Koons’s *Puppy*, threatens to render criticism superfluous. (Koons, in fact, wrote the breezy introduction to their massive new monograph, published by Taschen.) Equally appealing is their iconic love story: a tale of boy meets boy and makes good. It was in 1976 that Pierre Commoy, a maga-

zine photographer plugged into the music and fashion scenes, encountered Gilles Blanchard, an artist and illustrator, at the opening of a Kenzo boutique in Paris. *Coup de foudre* (translation: lightning bolt)—they soon shackled up, and the following year began collaborating.

The works they’ve produced over three decades are so remarkably consistent in techniques and preoccupations that the organizers of this show have eschewed chronology, grouping them instead through thematic affinities: portraits of screen idols, porn stars, and street kids; self-portraits, religious pictures, and cheesecake. Almost all are shot in the photo of the artists’ home just outside of Paris, a domestic space that appears in the Taschen catalog as an Aladdin’s den of superlatively gaudy effects.

Together, the pair sketch out ideas, inventing sets, costumes, lighting, and makeup. With the model in place, Pierre takes the picture; Gilles heightens the color and perfects the surface by painting it; then they conceive the frame. They always credit their sitters (Catherine Deneuve, Chi Chi La Rue, etc.), though the singular objects they create—whose preciousness distinguishes them from digital manipulations—are more than mere altars to the cult of personality. Part photographic document, part painted fancy, they’re like love: elaborately embroidered and idealized fantasies surrounding the seeds of something real.

I know one person, quite well, whom Pierre and Gilles have photographed; they cast this somewhat abject sinner as a Catholic saint. The resemblance, in the final image, was faint but unmistakable. In fact, their art draws much of its power from its childlike refusal to distinguish between, say, the erotic delectation of an exquisitely

pillowy male nude, and the adulation attendant upon the Virgin Mary. The makers of Baroque art were masters of finessing these distinctions, and Pierre and Gilles borrow heavily from their iconography, though their latter-day apostles and male martyrs are rather more muscular than was once common—fishers of men, indeed. And the patently artificial tears adorning the face of their *Madonna au cœur blessé* (1991) owe something to Man Ray. A small picture set in a Baroque gold frame, of *L’Enfant Jesus* (2003) clutching the nails of his future crucifixion, shows an utterly contemporary, blond-haired little boy, yet illuminated with the intense, uncanny radiance of science fiction.

Hallowed predecessors who have explored similar territory include James Bidgood, with his fantastical gay pin-ups, and F. Holland Day’s frolicking young men and religious self-portraits. But one might say Pierre and Gilles have perfected the genre, transforming mere bodies into vehicles of transcendence. And lest you think it’s all a bunch of fun, there’s a room at the end filled with more explicitly “political”

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pictures, including one of a pale though not quite sufficiently emaciated figure with haunting eyes, standing behind barbed wire, whose artfully frayed, striped uniform is emblazoned with a pink triangle.

Also collected here, apparently for the first time, are the full range of their (always double) self-portraits, an activity Pierre and Gilles have pursued almost since they met. You’ll find them posing as American-style 1950s gangsters and members of the Hindi mafia; elegantly sporting cigarettes à la Max Beckmann or demonically distorted in fun-house mirrors. And my favorite: their two *Self Portraits as Presidents* (2007), in which Pierre’s now salt-and-pepper hair and Gilles’s deGaullesque nose make them almost credible as elder statesmen. They are, in fact, the benevolent rule of the universe their love has created.