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PHOTO
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Le Diable, 2001. Model: Marie France.

PIERRE et GILLES

A FRENCH LOVE AFFAIR



No portrait deserves anything less than the royal nine, and no amount of flamboyance is too much for the far-out and fabulous French painter/photographer team **Pierre et Gilles**. **Sunny Buick** visits their den of sin ... and gets a little more than she bargained for.



Nina Hagen, 1993. Model: Nina Hagen.

Sunny Buick 2007. Model: Sunny Buick.

I NEVER THOUGHT MY DREAM to meet French photographers Pierre et Gilles would come true, but after a roller coaster ride of a story, it did. I first saw the duo's work on a huge billboard of a mermaid and sailor advertising their retrospective at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. The exhibition was being held the very next night, but it was sold out, and I nearly cried. I called the director, Renny Pritikin, a former college professor of mine. Doubting that I would ever hear back from him, I pictured myself getting busted trying to sneak in, but Renny called me back to say that the show wasn't sold out after all, and he confirmed that the artists were even going to be there.

A gift for Pierre et Gilles was *de rigueur*, so I created an envelope and filled it with art. At the museum, I found that only members were being allowed in. Fortunately, as the Almighty had apparently intended, a client of mine was working the door. I got my ticket and made a beeline for Pierre et Gilles.

There they were! Two extraordinary icons acting as a unified force of energy, their spirits like Siamese twins, the unbreakable connection being art ... they looked right at me as I timidly approached them with my offering. I explained that I was a tattoo artist and a devoted fan, and that I wanted to share some of my art with them. That captured Pierre's attention; he said they wanted to get tattooed during their stay. They were sweet, sincere, and quite shy, and I realized later that they use their art to get to know people.

Pierre and Gilles (pronounced soft G-eel) are the first names of the two men who comprise this visionary art team; Pierre takes the photos, and Gilles paints on them. Their first collaboration happened six months after their first meeting 25 years ago. Their inspiration starts with each other and is reflected in their models, whom they place on pedestals and reimagine as flawless and godlike. Punk princess Nina Hagen, one of Pierre et Gilles' muses, says the artists expose "the truth that we are eternally young," and that "every human is outstandingly beautiful," no matter how unusual. The pair's artwork is often funny, sometimes spiritual, other times erotic, but never dark. Their photos are whimsical, much like the films of Jeunet et Caro (*Delicatessen*, *City of Lost Children*, or *Amélie*) and unpredictable, like a Christmas store-window display in which you know the mannequin will come alive the minute you look away.

Although airbrushing photos (like George Hurrell's black-and-white pictures of the flawless screen beauties of the '30s and '40s) may seem a lost art, P et G are



À Paris, 1999. Model: Polo.



Sunny Buick, 2001. Model: Sunny Buick.



Radha, 2000. Model: Lisa Marie.

reviving it and adding a distinctly modern, personal spin to it. Eschewing modern technology, P et G prefer to hand-retouch each photo. The photographs' bona fide paint, in little globs of pastel color, glittering and sparkling and highlighting the subjects perfectly, illuminates new facets of these familiar images, which are neither photos nor paintings. The scale of the photographs—some poster-sized blowups, some even larger—is startling.

Pierre et Gilles came to me on the eve of Valentine's Day to get tattooed. They greeted me in the French manner with kisses on both cheeks. Pierre has a tattooed tear drop on his face, and Gilles has a papillon (butterfly) on his hand. They get tattooed whenever they travel, obtaining permanent souvenirs that don't get dusty, broken, or lost.

While I was tattooing Gilles, Pierre became fascinated by a photograph of the elaborate tattooed tableau across my back. At the end of the session, they offered to photograph me during my upcoming trip to Paris. To my increasing amazement, my dream was coming true.

Over the next eight months, we corresponded through gift packages and email, and I learned that P et G would be having an art opening when I was in Paris. Because they were busy working on a catalog for the show, the possibility of a photo session was looking pretty iffy, and I eventually had to let go of the idea of it happening on that particular trip. C'est la vie!

On my birthday, shortly before I left for Paris, I received the ideal outfit for the big P et G opening, a latex Apache dancer/French streetwalker outfit custom made for me by my friend Molly McGee. At my party, we watched *Love Stories*, a 1997 Mike Aho video documentary about P et G. I also found a perfect date: a fellow Francophile, Jon Von, an ex-San Franciscan/Paris transplant. At the opening, we marveled at the parade of drag queens congregating around the two stars, who were decked out in fabulous matching suits, one silver, one gold. I also met several of the models, who were all giggling about seeing their larger-than-life images, most of which were based on Greek mythology. My favorite new piece was *À Paris*, a portrait of man and a guitar under the Sacre Coeur that was an homage to Django Rheinhardt, the French gypsy guitarist extraordinaire.

Later that week I called Pierre from the Louvre, and he invited me to their studio. I was overjoyed. The studio, in a large brick building, was a warm, three-story sparkling feast for the eyes. Mosaic tiles, colorful knick knacks, spiral staircases, Asian/Indian influences, altars, beaded curtains, gilded frames, colorful lights, golden dragons, plastic flowers, idols, and religious figures mingled with gifts from friends. It was a scrapbook of modern bohemian life and a catchall for compulsive flea market shoppers. Holding court were P et G's two pets, a young Jack Russell terrier named Lili (a real French lover girl) and Bibic,





Ganymede (#3 in a triptych), 2001. Model: Friederic Lenfant.

the famous and much-photographed parrot who's been with them since 1984. Pierre brought out the lightbulb-framed theatrical mirror for me to do my makeup and hair. They took me downstairs to the workspace to check the lighting. They build all of their own extremely elaborate sets, and they had constructed one just pour moi.

As I waited, I sat on the same steps as many legends: Madonna, Marc Almond, Nina Hagen, Lola Ferrari and Catherine Deneuve. I thought about what Catherine Deneuve said about Pierre et Gilles in *Love Stories*: that "the great photographers succeed in an instant at seizing something that then becomes forever, a synthesis of the personality of the person. They succeed in expressing the idea of the character who was trapped inside, an image of a queen for a day, frozen in something classic and at the same time wanting out, a prisoner of her appearance. Man or woman, it is the same thing; the face is a 'medium.'" The face can unintentionally reveal feelings or hide a multitude of sins or sorrows lurking within.

To ease my nervousness, I began to look around. The work space was totally fascinating. I tried to peek around at as much stuff as possible without being nosy. The office had a captain's chamber theme, complete with a nautical bar and sailor paraphernalia. There were happy plastic skeletons hanging in a row, backdrops, supplies, and tin foil walls reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Factory. Sitting along a high ledge under street-level glass-block windows were huge containers of glitter in complete chromatic dispersion. Below was a work-in-progress painting table, and scattered on the floor were unfinished oversized photos.

Ultimately, P et G's vision of me is a timeless still from a lost world of carnival/vaudeville entertainment. Backstage before or after the performance, I'm totally committed to the role I'm playing, even down to the reflection of the lifestyle in my tattoo.

Together, P et G make one incredible force. As artists, we long to form relationships with other artists. The muse, the creative inspiration, has often been the artist's lover and companion. We need someone who will understand our passion and frustration. We need each other's help, company, conversation, and inspiration. Gilles said of art in *Love Stories*, "We can't help but believe that life is mysterious and strange. Religion and art speak of that strangeness." Nina Hagen says, "Every breath we take is art. We have to change our world and our society so that we can all do art." We have no other choice. I'm sure she would also agree that we need to love each other. And love and art are inseparable. ✱

Contact <http://pierreetgilles.free.fr/> to obtain the art of Pierre et Gilles. Check out Sunny Buick's art at www.sunnybuick.com.



Le Cauchemarde
de Pierrot, 1996.
Model: Polly.