

# Singapore-made graphic, taken off the street, pops up in art by London's Gilbert & George

PUBLISHED ON JAN 26, 2015 1:06 PM



(#2)

Graphic designed by Deon Phua from Tell Your Children. -- PHOTO: DEON PHUA



(#1)



(#2)



(#3)

BY NABILAH SAID

A sticker designed by local art collective Tell Your Children of their group name, has found its way, uncredited, into an artwork by renowned British contemporary art duo Gilbert & George.

The work, part of the duo's ongoing solo show Utopian Pictures at the gallery Arndt in Gillman Barracks, depicts figures of masked men with a message that reads "These toilet facilities are on occasions cleaned by male and female cleaning staff", and features the graphic text, "Tell your children", along its borders. The work is also titled Tell Your Children.



A public Facebook post reporting Gilbert & George's appropriation of the graphic was published last Thursday by a friend of the one-year-old collective, which specialises in illustration-based design work.

One of the collective's four members Deon Phua told Life! the "Tell your children" graphic used by the duo is a "variation of a graphic we had done for an event last year". The graphic was modified slightly by the London-based duo by colouring in one of its elements, but otherwise was used as it is.

The 23-year-old said that they were "initially unhappy at what seemed to be a blatant rip-off from the Internet".

When Mr Phua contacted the gallery for an explanation, it said that the artists, both in their 70s, had stumbled upon a sticker designed by Tell Your Children featuring the graphic image in question in Shoreditch and Bricklane. Phua had left those stickers in the East London neighbourhoods while visiting London a few months back.

Gilbert & George, whose full names are Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore, are known for using stickers and posters pilfered off the street in their work. The photo piece Tell Your Children was created last year, and is on sale at Arndt; prices for the works in the show, which runs till April 5, range from \$110,000 to \$265,000.

Though the artists could not be reached for a comment, a gallery spokesman said via e-mail that East London is "the area that Gilbert & George live in and take their entire inspiration from".

"On their walks through the neighborhood, they photographed it and incorporated the photo in their artwork. Thus that sticker inspired Gilbert & George to this artwork and it came around to be exhibited in Singapore," said the spokesman.

Inspired by street culture, the works of Gilbert & George touch on issues of politics, sex and religion. For example, another artwork in the current show incorporates the message, "Please do not use this corner for urinating as this is a sacred place i.e. mosque. Thank you", taken from a handwritten sign the artists found near their home in Spitalfields.

Curators Life! spoke to say that using existing images, messages and even found objects in artworks is a fixture of modern and contemporary art.

This method of appropriation has been used by everyone from Marcel Duchamp in his "readymades" in the early 1900s, which incorporated seemingly ordinary objects such as a stool and a snow shovel in art, to Andy Warhol and his Campbell soup prints of the 1960s featuring row upon row of identikit Campbell soup cans.

At the same time, such appropriation does raise issues of copyright and originality, and artists like Warhol have found themselves in lawsuits from time to time.

"Appropriation is a primary language in contemporary art. It's never really an issue," says Singapore-based curator, lecturer and critic Iola Lenzi.

But Lenzi adds that the more important takeaway of this incident is the fact that an exchange took place between Tell Your Children and Gilbert & George, through the gallery, which adds to the original artwork.

She says: "Appropriation works like quotation in language. The artist borrows the image but by placing it in a new context, creates and says something new."

Perhaps imitation is the best form of flattery. Deputy programming director at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and former Singapore Art Museum curator Khairuddin Hori believes that

Tell Your Children can ultimately choose to view the incident in a positive light.

"They can choose to take it in the right perspective and embrace it - that their artwork and message resonated with exceptional artists such as Gilbert & George," he says.

In his latest statement sent to Life, Phua says that while he understands the artistic practice of Gilbert & George, "the fact that they used someone else's branding without proper research or notice prior doesn't entirely resonate with me".

However, he adds that he is "more amazed at the coincidence. I would never have thought a tiny sticker I stuck around Shoreditch a couple of months ago would have caught their eye and inspired them to create a piece that would eventually land in a Singaporean gallery".