

## Pierre et Gilles

New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York

For over a quarter of a century, Pierre et Gilles have collaborated on extravagantly stylized, hand finished photographs that would find an essential place in any history of postmodern art, fashion photography, celebrity portraiture, album covers, music videos, or “beefcake” magazine imagery. This retrospective exhibition of fifty-five photographs at the New Museum of Contemporary Art is the first in the United States devoted to the French duo. Their earliest work, from the late seventies to early eighties, consisted of largely conventional and unembellished portraits, mainly of friends and celebrities such as Iggy Pop and Yves Saint-Laurent. The elaborately constructed work shown here, however, dating from after the mid-eighties, displays the full force of their signature style—a gay kitsch aesthetic that is by turns playfully trashy, sentimental, star-struck, and full of make-believe. *Le Marin-Philippe Gaillon* (1985), from the series “Les Pleureuses,” displays a preternaturally

wholesome-looking French sailor lovingly framed within a ring of soft-focus daisies against a bright cerulean-blue sky. With movie-poster artifice, hand-painted glistening tears fall from the sailor’s eyes. Other series, of saints and pagan gods, continue this sweetly artificial visual world. *Saint Sibastien-Bouabdallah Benkamla* (1987)—most captions named the model, suggesting that their glamour and exoticism forms a significant part of the work—displays the hairless, muscled torso of the Christian figure (who often appears as a contemporary gay icon), his arms stretched erotically above his head and tied with a twine of flowering vine, in a manner suggesting a gentle form of playacted sexual bondage. As in many of Pierre et Gilles’ photographs, each drop of simulated sweat on the figure’s body has been painstakingly painted with sparkling white highlights. For all the myriad ways in which Pierre et Gilles’ work crosses the lines of kitsch, glamour photography, and postmodern irony, it often seems to fail to rise above merely celebrating the popular forms of imagery it employs. For the appeal of their work derives, at times, from the appeal of the very sources it appropriates—sources with which their photographs sometimes share a form of sexual transgressiveness that is ultimately as acceptable as that of the advertising images for clothing, cars, or perfume from which they borrow.

Jonathan Gilmore

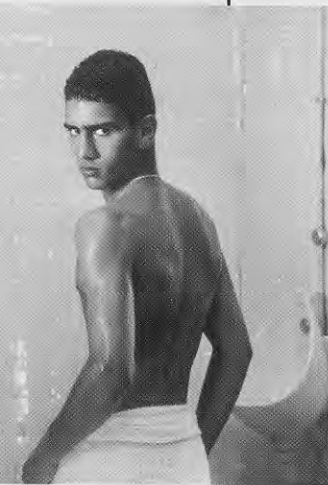
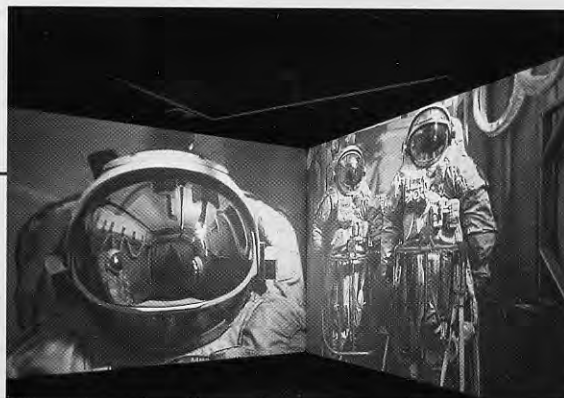
Jane & Louise Wilson, *Star City*, 2000, 4 DVD projection on 4 screens, 300 x 410 cm each, installation view.

## Jane & Louise Wilson

303 Gallery, New York

In their latest New York exhibition, the Wilson twins continue their analysis of modern “power structures.” In particular they examine the architectural impact of sites such as the East German secret services command center, an abandoned American missile base, and the British parliament. Their new work takes the form of two videos set in Russia and some stills taken from them. The first, *Star City*, depicts scenes from a “secret” location, an hour’s distance from Moscow, which serves as a training center for astronauts. The video is projected onto four screens suspended in each corner of the room. This, combined with rapid camera movements and clever editing, creates a stereoscopic effect. The sequences move through these abandoned sites, provoking a sense of widespread dread and paranoia. Once again, the artists demonstrate their ability to emphasize different viewpoints by alternating scenes filmed from four different angles with all-encompassing panoramas. During the opening sequence, the viewer is slowly hypnotized by the gradual discovery of places, and disoriented by the continual change of images on different screens. The video then penetrates the astronaut training center, eventually reaching the special hydro laboratory designed to simulate zero gravity. Scene after scene is devoid of any human presence, evoking an overwhelming sense of nuclear disaster, or a future dominated by machines. These abandoned spaces become “psychological zones:” their emptiness defined more by echoes of absence than a lack of physical presence. The second video in the exhibition, *Proton, Unity, Energy, Blizzard*, imparts an uninterrupted attack on the senses, deafening us with the roar of turbines and drills. The video brings to light two sides of the complex political history of the Soviet Union. Starting with *Energy* and *Blizzard*, two long-abandoned launch pads, it moves on to *Proton*, the base where Russian rocket parts are still assembled. We are confronted with the contrast between successful advances in space travel and neglected space stations, symbols of a bygone era. This feeling of inescapable destruction is softened by scenes of a religious monument in Kazakhstan, which are followed by a close up shot of an advertising billboard in *Unity*, celebrating Gagarin’s successful space launch in 1961. The video concludes with the image of a rocket base in the distance and camels roaming freely in the foreground. And the viewer is left to ponder on the eternal conflict between nature and technology. Will nature take possession once more of the lands which technology stole from her?

Ilaria Bonacossa



Pierre et Gilles, *Said*, 1999, color photograph, 88 x 69 cm. Model: Salim Kechiouche. Created for the François Ozon movie *Les Amants Criminels*.