

Pierre et Gilles



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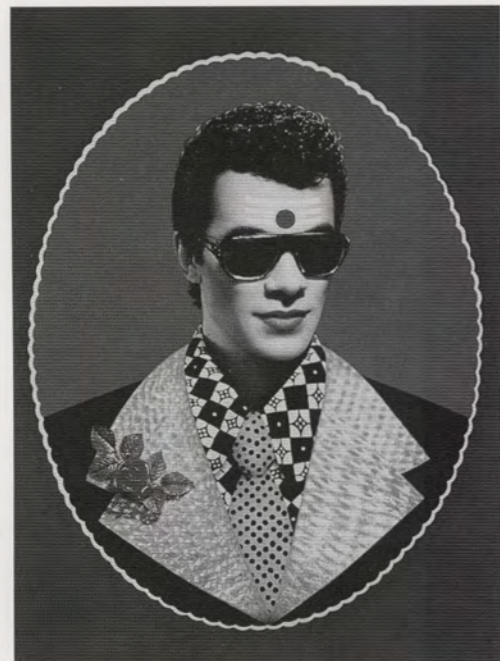


Pierre et Gilles

curated by Jonathan Turner

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
Wellington City Gallery, Wellington
Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland

presented in association with
Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras



Tamoul mafia

PIERRE et GILLES

1993

Glamour and glory

by Jonathan Turner

At a certain moment in the lives of some adolescents, their handwriting becomes rounder and more extravagant. They dot their i's with circles or small hearts. On the page, they end their words in spiralling scrollwork. Although there is no precise word for this flourishing style, if there was one, it would also apply to the work of Pierre et Gilles.

This aspect of elaborate intervention has long characterised the French duo's painted photographs. Some of their best known works feature pampered figures posed in sets made from fields of blossoms, shining stars and glistening arabesques. Nowadays, the viewer's might feel a vague familiarity with the representation of overt decoration, but the real influence of Pierre et Gilles is more insidious, probably more far-reaching than we all first realised. Fifteen years ago, they began to develop a lavish style that lashed out against stark minimalism and tidy rationality. Like beacons on the horizon, their pictures flash with visual references to Parisian chic, Orientalism and the American dream. Sometimes a subversive attitude of well-groomed punk also emerges.

Pierre et Gilles's unsettling mixture of ornamental excess and esthetic control has now entered into the lexicon of contemporary culture. Magazine graphics, rock videos, and the twin worlds of advertising and fashion have borrowed freely from their work. The premise is one of mesmerising beauty, and Pierre et Gilles continue to dazzle us with fresh possibilities. But theirs is the concept of beauty with a challenge, of desire with a message.

Perhaps the difference between the classical *femme fatale* and her male counterpart (embodied in the sailor, the martyr, the gigolo, the god-like workman or the lone man-child) is that the *homme fatal* threatens to leave, whereas the *femme fatale* can stay for good. Starting with the lore about Eve's apple, Medusa's hypnotic gaze, Salome's unquenchable thirst for a love token and those ancient bewitching sirens luring seamen to their deaths, right up to *Fatal Attraction* and the recent glut of films about evil enchantresses, the message embraced by Pierre et Gilles is that charismatic beauty is a killer. (Frighteningly enough, one of their more cherubic models is currently in jail in England for attempted murder.) The very core of Pierre et Gilles is that their figures lead us into temptation.

Even the historical villains they portray are pure, perfect, idealized. Libido may be out of control, but Pierre et Gilles infer that surely this is no sin. It is the viewer who might feel uncomfortable, trapped in the role of a voyeur, secretly looking at such polished innocence. The viewer is forced to admit lust, not only for the figure frozen in the frame, but also for the desire itself. The attraction is equally in the lush imagery. There is guilt, and there is gilt. Springing from the fictions and formulas of pornography, Pierre et Gilles tell us what we desire and then instruct us how this desire can be perfectly manufactured. Ecstasy on a repeat button.

Pierre et Gilles do not make images of straightforward sexuality but instead record a corrupting form of eroticism. In this, they appear unique - at least to the degree that they seem to have secured themselves a sacred allure by all and sundry. In fact, the whole discussion of art versus pornography easily passes them by. Theirs is more the celebration of symbolism - the chocolate box containing a single poisoned candy or the example of exotic tropical blooms, an explosion of beautiful petals and stamen emitting the acrid stench of rotting meat instead of a sweet perfume.

Pierre et Gilles's love of such symbolism has inspired their ongoing series of portraits of Catholic saints and figureheads from eastern religions. Both were brought up as good Catholic boys. Gilles still likes the gospels and one of his brothers is a Benedictine monk living in New Caledonia. Meanwhile, Pierre recalls his

mother taking him the long way around the neighbourhood church to foil his desire to light candles at the altar. Their belief in the cult of the personality - be it a movie star, pop singer or god - is re-iterated in their photographs of singer Nina Hagen dressed on separate occasions as Kali and then as the madonna, Boy George as Krishna, or artist Christian Boltanski in the guise of Saint Vincent de Paul.

The duo treat all religious icons with the same generosity. There is no derision in their depiction of *Saint Pierre Marie Chanel* holding a dying youth on a beach of a South Sea island nor is there mockery in the way *Saint Roch* points to the bloody wounds on his leg peeking through the folds in his cassock. Pierre et Gilles merely give new meaning to the concept of "heavenly bodies". Sexual undercurrents have long been present in religious imagery, and the emotions of Pierre et Gilles's devotional figures are certainly not as crude as those in the heavy-handed excesses of the Baroque. Even in their double self-portrait as bride and groom, they are able to broach in a sweet way one of the last taboos of the Catholic Church.

Adding to these dual emotions, Pierre et Gilles regularly use the same model to play very different, almost contradictory, roles. "The same person can be both a devil and an angel, a sad person or a comedian," says Gilles. Thus the Paris-based Italian actor Salvatore Caputo appears as the pagan *Bacchus*, to re-emerge in another work as *Saint Louis de Gonzague* (also known as Luigi Gonzaga or St Aloysius), the patron saint of youth. The choice of this saint is a further indication of Pierre et Gilles's growing concentration on subjects with themes of oppression, tragedy and social comment. The eldest son of the Marquis of Castiglione, Luigi Gonzaga renounced his title to become a missionary; when Rome was stricken with plague in 1591, he devoted himself to the care of the sick but was himself infected and died. He has recently been declared the patron saint of people with AIDS. Then, in another direction, Pierre et Gilles have just portrayed Salvatore as the virile, youthful Marquis de Sade, standing in a floral arbor with a whip in his hand and a thrill in his jodhpurs.

A similar extent of play-acting is also undertaken by Tomah, Pierre et Gilles's studio assistant for several years and also a regular model. Born in Laos, Tomah has been photographed as executioner and condemned man, opium smoker and beggar. In 1993, Tomah accompanied Pierre et Gilles to Bangkok and to Vientiane, where his father runs a restaurant. During this voyage a new series of works was created, recalling the simplicity of the duo's portraits of children from the early eighties. In Asia, rather than constructing elaborate stage-sets, Pierre et Gilles photographed kick-boxers at practice and children playing on the banks of the Mekong River. Back in Paris, Gilles repainted the photographs. Then he covered the backgrounds of the pictures in goldleaf embossed with patterns or outlines of dragons and Chinese demons. In the triptych *Trois garçons au bord du Mekong*, three boys coated with sand grin back at the viewer. Winged gods in silver filigree hover in the sky above the smiling boys, functioning both as spiritual guardians and as ominous apparitions.

Pierre et Gilles's main souvenirs of Laos, apart from some carved wooden banisters set into the steel spiral staircase in their Paris home-studio, are a number of tattoos. "We've had tattoos done in Japan, London and Amsterdam," says Pierre. "But the dragon I had done on my chest in Laos," continues Gilles. "Using the traditional method of bamboo needles, it is the first tattoo that really hurt." Pierre has a small teardrop tattooed under his left eye, a reference to the glycerine and diamante tears cried by some of their saints, and to the icy mermaids mourning the loss of drowned sailors.

But this is part of the growing mythology of Pierre et Gilles, who met in 1976 at a party thrown by the fashion designer Kenzo and ended up leaving together on the same scooter. The artistic partnership struck root, creating a true synergy. Together they develop concepts as well as costumes. Building scenery and the lighting is a shared task. Pierre, the darker one who resembles a circus knife-thrower, takes the photographs. Gilles uses paintbrushes to add acrylic colour to the photographic prints. He has been described as a grown-up version of Charlie Brown.

Pierre et Gilles's home and studio in Le Pré Saint Gervais on the outskirts of Paris is part of the fairy tale. Upstairs, against glittering walls, are craven images of some of the deities in their pantheon - guitar-shaped Elvis Presley clock, Hindu figurines draped with flickering Christmas lights, Samantha Fox pillows, a wind-up Jesus whose eyes open and close, statues of David, and postcards featuring Bruce Lee, Sylvester

Stallone and Brigitte Bardot. The chandeliers, obviously, are plastic. Fan-club magnets stick to the refrigerator door. The television is set into its own gold, mosaic altar. It is usually left on so that Bibic, the parakeet, and the other birds that fly freely about the place are fooled into thinking that someone is at home. Otherwise, says Pierre, they attack the furniture.

The large basement downstairs is the studio. A dummy of Michael Jackson, one of their heroes, is propped up on the floor. Pierre et Gilles use the dummy as a stand-in when they are setting up the lights for a shoot. Cotton-wool cloud screens hang like curtains and the polystyrene cross made for *Saint Affligée* now resides in a hole cut in the floor. Action movie posters cover one wall, along another are shelves filled with boxes of props, labelled like the catalogue of a mad botanist - irises, jonquils, fruit, feathers, aquarium plants, bubbles, tissue flowers.

"Our life is completely mixed up with our work," says Gilles. "We work with our friends," says Pierre. "It's always a nice day when we do a picture."

This joy is evident in such works as *Le garçon papillon*, in which a muscle-boy in a posing pouch flits through the garden masquerading as a pollenating butterfly. *Dream Catcher* features the singer Sandii radiating halos of contentment and there is intimate affection between two girls in *Les deux amies*. In *Boys and Girls (Mardi Gras)*, garlands of figures and flowers burst against a galaxy of stars with the same brilliance of a fireworks display. Nearby, *Adonis* is poised in his lacey heaven, arrow ready, piercing eyes gazing back in a universal come-on.

Recently, a tougher aura has been creeping into Pierre et Gilles's work. Some of the decorativeness has receded, leaving a hard-core, hard-edged residue, social realism with a clever veneer of glamour. In *Le petit boxeur*, model Wilgens spars triumphantly against a backdrop of tenement housing, his gloved hands confidently raised. Meanwhile in a late-twentieth-century version of the little matchgirl story, *Le vendeur de fleurs* stands forlornly on a slick, wet street in Paris, shut out of the cafe behind him. The meagre props and the defiance shown in the flower-seller's eyes come as something of a shock. The heady *Glory Hole*, however, is more blatantly provocative. Charly holds a hard cock in his hand, his eyes gazing heavenwards in praise. Or is he simply looking for further divine enlightenment? As always, in the work of Pierre et Gilles the viewer focuses on the expression captured in the eyes of the subject.

Death, too, is a recurring theme. Often Pierre et Gilles portray an attractive demise, with pretty red rivulets of blood and a gorgeous corpse. In *Sur la plage abandonné*, Rupert Everett plays dead, luxuriating amidst flotsam and jetsam. Wrapped in the chain of an anchor, with just a small head wound, he demonstrates the seductiveness of death.

Perverse innocence and dark romance rule the mystical paradise of Pierre et Gilles. They don't wallow in escapism, although their use of the carefully staged frontal view lends a theatrical tone.

The handsome cadaver in *Elvis my love* is attended by a family of china chickens. "It's a shame we never knew Elvis," says Gilles. "Our photo is not a portrait, it's a homage. It shows the suicide of an Elvis Presley look-alike. The gun is still in his hand. When I was taking the photo, I asked the model to look straight at me. It's strange to be looked at by someone who is supposed to be dead. There's this vital expression in his eyes."



Saint Louis de Gonzague

1991

SALVATORE CAPUTO

135.6 x 107.2 cm

"Each photograph I have done with them has been a theatrical experience involving props, sets, costumes, make-up, performance and attitude. They have made me into an icon several times."

Marc Almond

Before there were movie stars, rock musicians and professional athletes to serve as glamorous incarnations of society's fantasies and desires, there were saints: such is the message of Pierre et Gilles. Their staged photographs from the lives of saints suggest what might have happened if a big Hollywood producer from the '40s or '50s suddenly got religion.

Eleanor Heartney, *ARTnews*, New York

The "gallery of saints" by Pierre et Gilles emphasizes the grotesque, in an aggressive, violent interpretation of sexuality and that treatment of the complex theme of the body so much affected by machismo.

Peter Weiermair, Director, Frankfurter Kunstverein

Without a glance back at the grey hordes of the Holy behind them, Pierre et Gilles hoisted themselves over the sill of the hatch and flung themselves happily down into Hell.

Nicholas Currie (Momus), London

Saint Martin (c.316-c.400), the patron saint of France, was born in Savaria, the son of a military tribune.

Educated at Pavia, he served in the army under Constantine and Julian.

Following persecution by the Arian party, he founded France's first monastery, in 360 at Ligugé.

The fame of his sanctity grew and he became known as a worker of miracles. His military cloak, which he gave to a beggar, has become the symbol of charity, and he is the patron saint of publicans and inn-keepers.

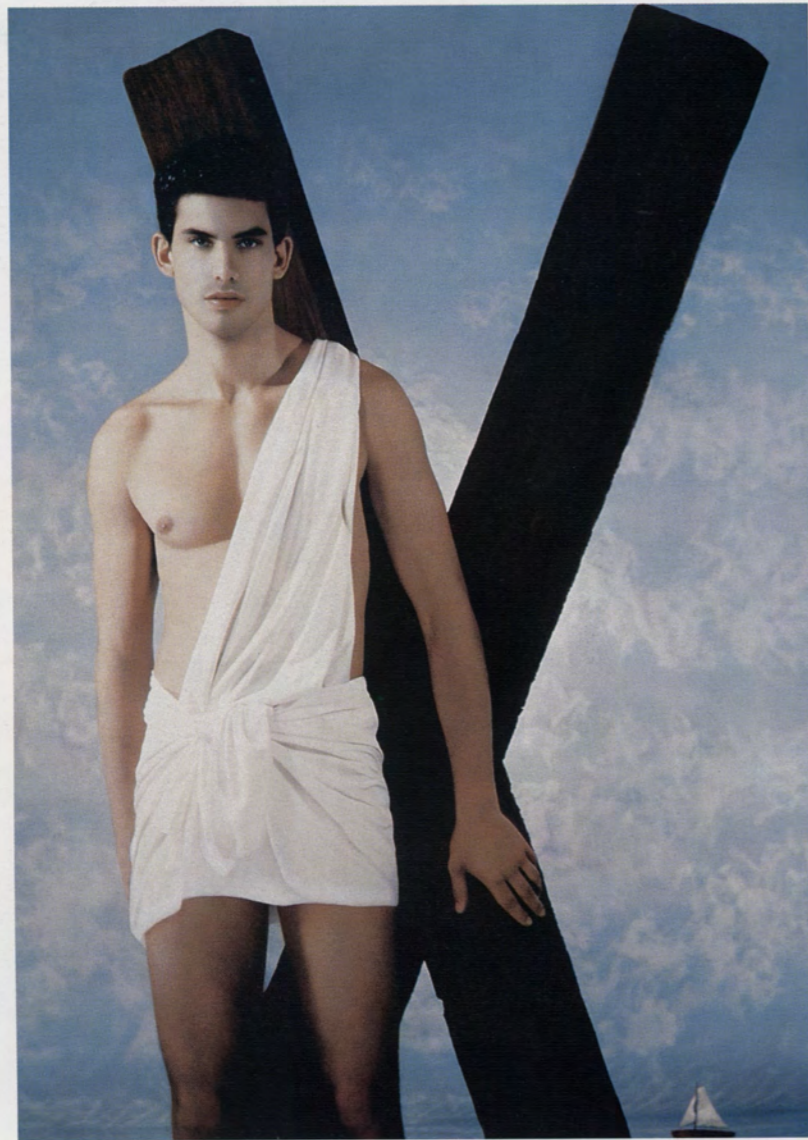


Saint Martin

1990

MARC ALMOND & KARIM BOUALAM

136.5 x 109 cm



Saint André

1989

JEAN PAUL

54.8 x 38.2 cm

Saint Andrew, one of the 12 apostles, was a fisherman converted by John the Baptist. Tradition says that he preached the gospel in Asia Minor and Scythia, and was crucified in Achaia (Greece) by order of the Roman governor. The belief that his cross was X-shaped dates only from the 14th century. He is the patron saint of both Scotland and Russia.



Saint Pierre Marie Chanel

1990

PASCAL MOUNET & CHRISTIAN

84.7 x 59.5 cm

"Sainte Affligée was the daughter of one of the Visigoth kings of Portugal.
Her father wanted her to marry someone she didn't love, so she prayed to God for help.
On the morning of her wedding, she grew a thick beard
and the man didn't want to marry her any more.
Her father was so cross, he crucified her.

Pascale is a singer who used to sing in the group called Mikado.
We chose her to wear a beard because we thought she was very feminine.
It was a good contrast."

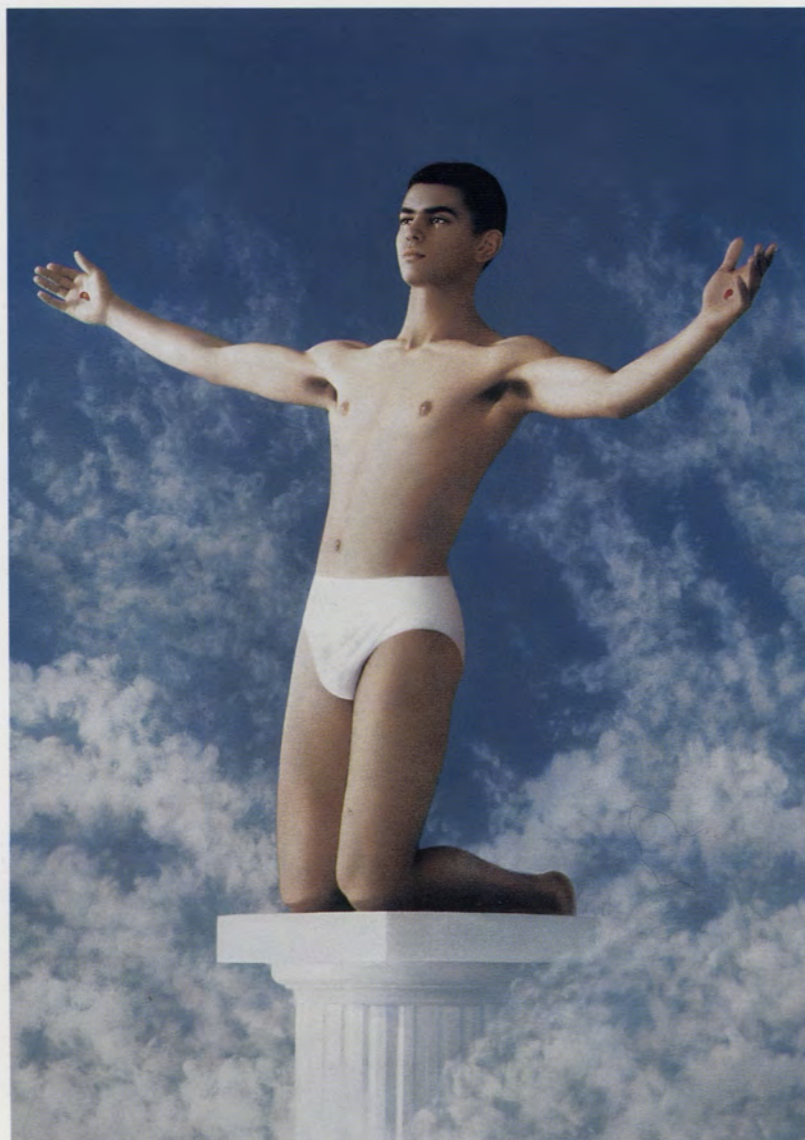


Sainte Affligée

1991

PASCALE BOREL

133.7 x 106.2 cm



Saint Simeon Le Stylite

1990

KARIM ZERIAHEN

126 x 102 cm

Saint Simeon Stylites (387-459), a Syrian ascetic, was the earliest of the Christian "Pillar saints" (or pillar-dwellers). After living nine years in his Syrian monastery without leaving his cell, he established himself on top of a pillar 24 metres high at Telanessa near Antioch. There he spent 30 years preaching to the crowds.



Saint Roch

1993

TREX

95.5 x 117.3 cm

The two men who fill their work with so many tears, flowers, hearts and glamour are not, as you may expect, vulnerable, slight types. Pierre et Gilles have stocky, muscular figures. The arms that emerge from their t-shirts are labelled with tough tattoos, souvenirs from trips they have made together to foreign countries.

Catherine van Houts, *Het Parool*, Amsterdam, 1993

Why do you always do portraits?

Gilles: "I think portraits permit us to express profound things. The clairvoyant looks at a person, and she also sees the whole space around the image of the person inside the ball. When we do a portrait, we're not interested in that person per se. We're interested in what's mysterious about that person and the space around them . . . the whole picture."

Interview with David Thorpe, *10 Percent*, London, 1994

PIERRE: We find folk art truly beautiful. We use it in an honest way. We admire the innocence and purity of religious images and pictures of crying gypsy children. Although they show real life in a varnished manner, their authenticity thrills and touches us. A world of pain and cruelty is often hidden just behind the image.

GILLES: Alongside this, we simply think that kitsch is beautiful. You can't call a plastic flower ugly just because it's made of plastic. What's good or bad taste anyway? The only thing that counts is whether it's done with love and care.

Ferry Schoew, *MAN*, Amsterdam, 1993

"Christ on the cross is a violent image - an image we adore. Violence and eroticism are a part of everyday life; in that way they can't be censored. The crucial thing for us is to be able to create images in exactly the manner we desire, without interference or prohibition . . . The problem of pornography or art - it seems quite crazy to us."

Interview with Rebekah Wood, *Skin Two*, London, 1994

In recent years, Pierre et Gilles have taken a detour toward images which are much harder, and more sexually and socially provocative. "This is certainly to do with the era we are living in and with our own lives as well," says Pierre. "We have a lot of gay matter in our work, but the issues in our later pieces are issues which touch everybody."

Stephen Todd, *(not only) Blue*, Sydney, 1995

Q. Sometimes, there is a fake air of Jean Genet in your photos.

Have you read Genet?

GILLES: Actually I have never read a whole book in my entire life. But Pierre loves reading stories about movie-stars in magazines.

Michel Nuridsany, *Un Naturel Confondant*, Paris, 1994

Le garçon papillon

1993

KEVIN MEYER

70.5 x 117.5 cm



Les deux amies

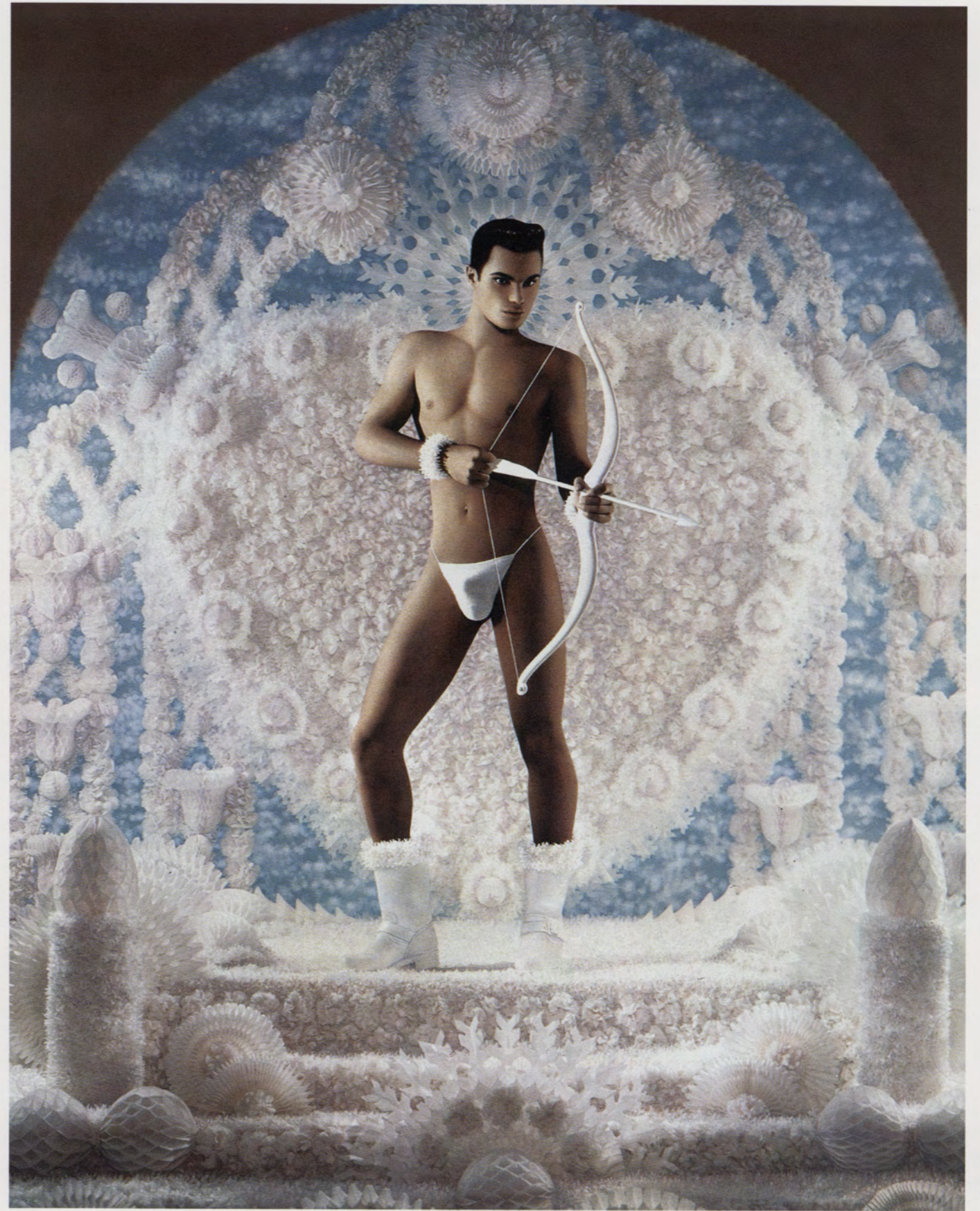
1993

ASTRID & SANDRA

62 x 65 cm



Adonis
1993
ENZO
136.5 x 114.5 cm





Boys and Girls (Mardi Gras)

1994

ENZO, LAURENT, SOPHIE, PASQUALE

120 x 79 cm



Le jeune marquis

1994

SALVATORE CAPUTO

91.2 x 61.1 cm





Suzy
1994
SUZY BICK
78 x 96.5

"On the beach at Pampelone, the sea is milk white and barely distinguishable from the early morning sky."

First sentence from *The Hairdressers of St Tropez*, the second novel written by actor Rupert Everett.

The story is about St Tropez's oldest and most famous coiffeur whose addiction to Rosé wine has resulted in progressively worse blunders on his clients' heads.

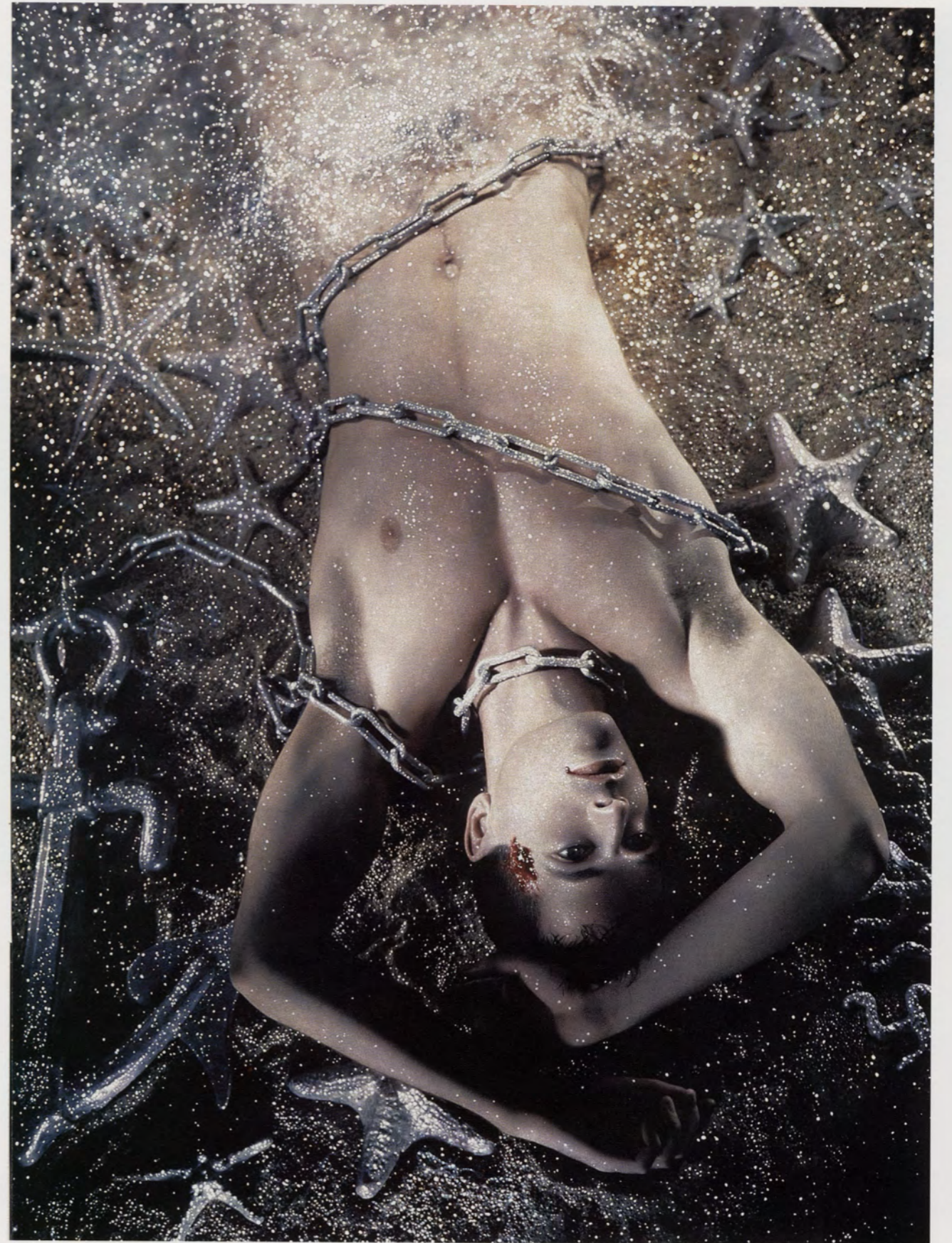
The book includes a scene in which the body of a murdered hairdresser is washed up on the beach.

Sur la plage abandonné

1994

RUPERT EVERETT

98 x 72.5





Elvis my love

1994

STAVROS

96.5 x 50.5 cm





Dream catcher

1994

SANDII

77 x 77 cm



PIERRE: Part of the exhibition consists of images that we did whilst travelling through Laos and in Bangkok. They are slightly different works. We love to take our cameras with us on the street and to capture very brief encounters. Spontaneous smiles. At the time, we played with what was locally available as backgrounds. We wanted to show a kind of truth, a basic realism like Pasolini and his street kids.

Les deux enfants

1994

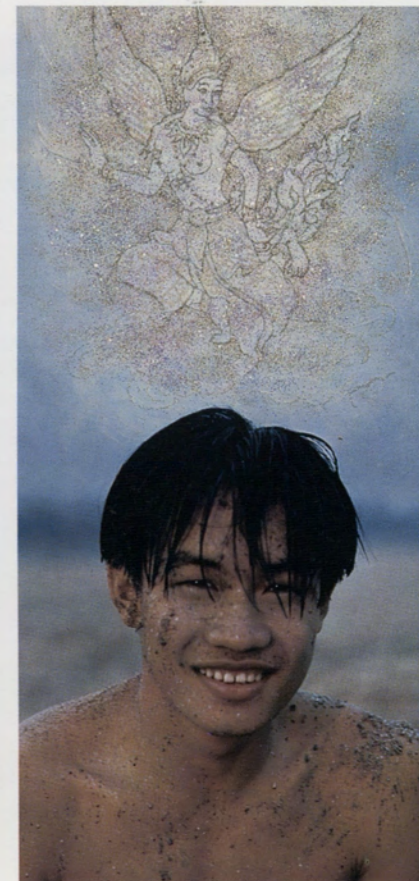
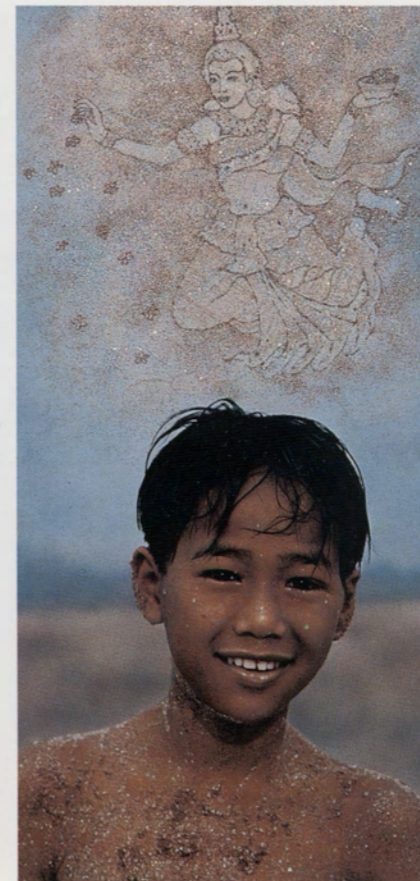
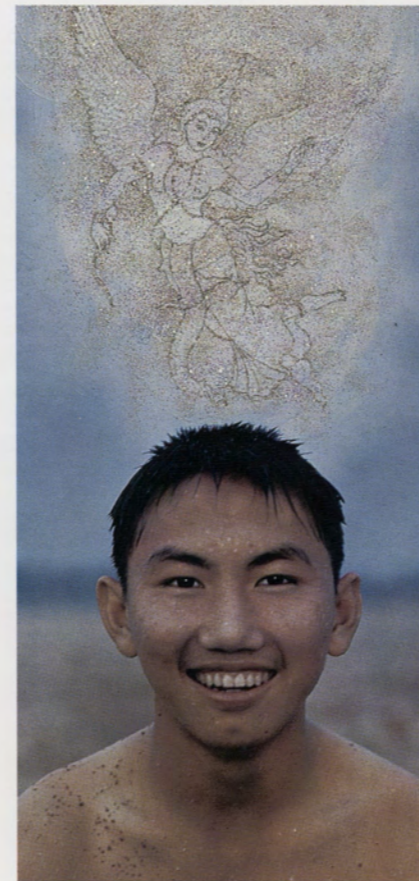
67 x 46 cm

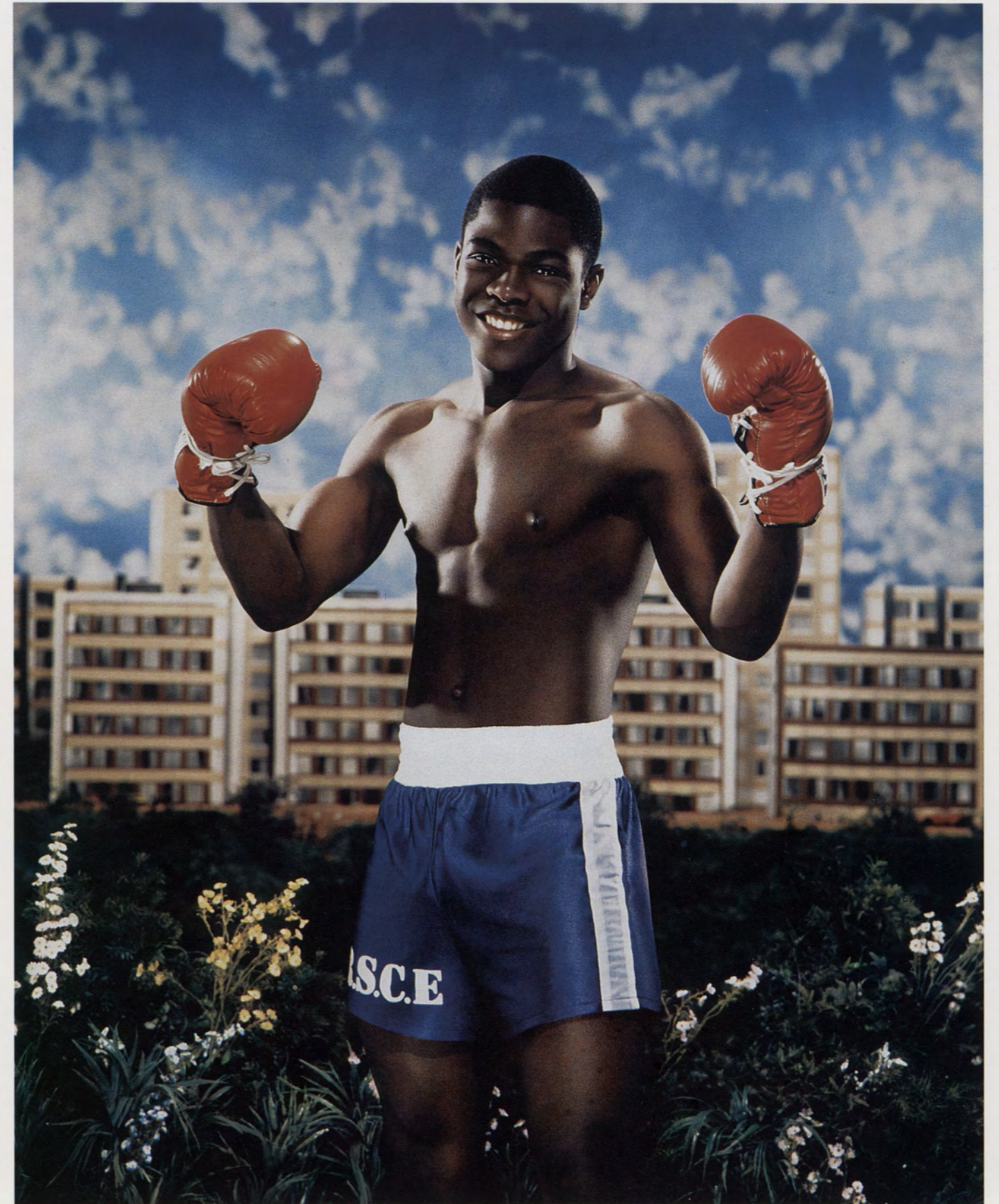
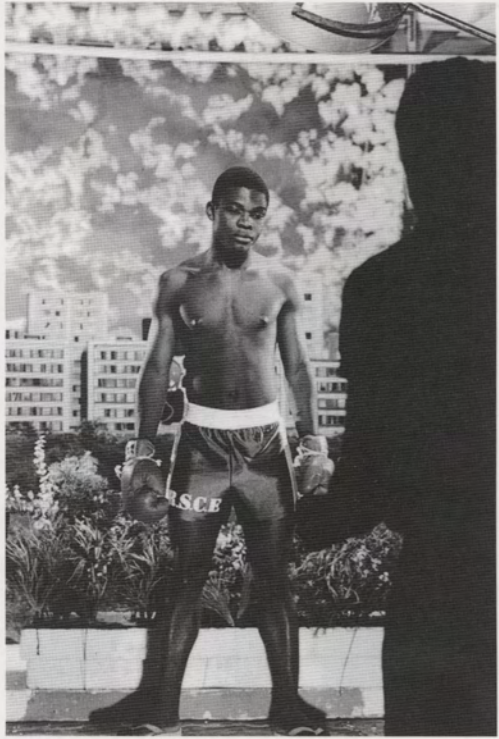


Trois garçons au bord du Mekong

1994

triptych, 95 x 38 cm each





Le petit boxeur

1994

WILGENS

101.5 x 82 cm



Le vendeur de fleurs

1994

FREDDY, CHACHNIL & DAVID LACHAPELLE

98.5 x 71 cm



Glory Hole

1994

CHARLY HUET

93 x 64 cm





Pierre et Gilles

The Biography

Pierre was born in La Roche-sur-Yon, Vendée

Gilles was born in Le Havre

They met and began to work together in 1976.

In 1993, they were awarded the Grand Prix for Photography by the City of Paris.

Solo exhibitions

- 1983 Galerie Texbraun, Paris
- 1985 Ginza Gallery, Tokyo
Galerie Saluces, Avignon
- 1986 Galerie Samia Saouma, Paris
Galerie des Arènes, Nimes
- 1988 Galerie Samia Saouma, Paris
- 1990 Hirschl & Adler, New York
- 1992 Raab Galerie, Berlin
Diaghilev Center of Modern Art,
St Petersburg
Raab Gallery, London
- 1993 Galerie Samia Saouma, Paris
Galerie du Salon, Nantes
Galleria Il Ponte, Rome
- 1994 Le Case d'Arte, Milan
- 1995 Shiseido, Tokyo
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
Melbourne
Wellington City Gallery, Wellington
Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland

Group shows

- 1982 Galerie Viviane Esders, Paris
- 1984 Galerie Texbraun, Paris
"Atelier '84", Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris,
Paris
- 1986 Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal
- 1987 Palais des Beaux-Arts, Charleroi
Annina Nosei Gallery, New York
- 1988 Università Gabriele d'Annunzio, Pescara
- 1989 "Das Portrait", Hamburger Kunstverein, Hamburg
Salzburg Festival, Salzburg
Pinacoteca Comunale, Ravenna
"Nos Annees 80", Fondation Cartier, Paris
- 1990 The Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon
- 1991 "La photographie française en liberté",
International Center for Photography, New York;
Museum of Modern Art, Mexico City, Mexico
Biennale de Lyon, Musée Saint Pierre, Lyon
"Consorts", Pence Gallery, Santa Monica
- 1992 "Privé/Public", Edinburgh
"Illusions et Travestissements", A/B Galerie, Paris
"Images Metisses", Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris
Markthalle Moderne Kunst, Stuttgart
- 1993 FAE, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lausanne
"Prospekt 93", Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt
Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris
"Histoire de voir", Château de Villeneuve, Vance
"Les Images du Plaisir", FRAC, Laval
Austrian Triennial of Photography, Neue Galerie
am Landesmuseum Joanneum
"Discourses of Images", Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna
ArteRoma (Galleria Il Ponte), Roma
"Personal Jesus", Dooley Le Cappellaine, New York
- 1994 "Cocido y Crudo", Reina Sophia, Madrid
"L'Art du Portrait Français au XIXe et XXe Siècles",
Tokyo, Aichi, Onomichi, Hiroshima
Recontres Photographiques, Arles
"Don't Leave Me This Way - Art in the Age of AIDS",
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

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May 5 - June 25, 1995

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July 1 - September 3, 1995

Catalogue written and designed by Jonathan Turner

Black and white photography of works in progress by Tomah, Paris

Styling: Tomah
Hair & make-up: Alexis, Tony Allen, Pascale Hospital,
Marc Lopez (et Toshi), Tony Mink, Topolino
Costumes: Tomah, Stavros, IEM, Phylea
Photo Laboratory Dupon Montmartre (Jean Jacques, Gabriel, Claude & Christophe)

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Elizabeth O'Loughlin, Roslyn & Tony Oxley, Wayne Tunnicliffe and Clare Williamson



Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras (especially Jamie Carroll, Champion Decent,
Sally Gordon, Richard McIntyre, Rob Patmore, Richard Perram)



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