



## Three artists on Masculinity

### Gilbert & George

'Always be smartly dressed, well-groomed, relaxed, friendly, polite and in complete control,' advised the artist duo Gilbert & George in their 1969 manifesto 'The Laws of Sculptors'. This composed, amiable and gentlemanly self-image – carefully cultivated throughout their career – exists alongside a different, far less proper, one: posing naked, 'mooning' at the viewer or appearing as decadent drunks. From the interplay of these identities, their notion of masculinity emerges.

In their series 'New Horny Pictures' (on show in their Hayward Gallery exhibition, 7 Oct to 11 Jan 2026), Gilbert & George's representation of masculinity takes on an explicitly queer dimension. *Back* (2001; 1), for instance, features the artists among a grid of newspaper ads for male sex. Intimate data – including age and body stats – is displayed within ads in the series. Here, masculinity acquires different shades and connotations, reflecting the pervasiveness of certain male gay fantasies – and how these, at times, can slip into stereotype. Facing us directly from this carnal catalogue, the artists seem to ask: How codified are our deepest desires?

### Karimah Ashadu

In her film *Machine Boys* (2024; still, 2), British-Nigerian artist Karimah Ashadu presents a squad of *okada* drivers – riding the motorcycle taxis now banned in Lagos – staring into camera, grinding their teeth. The roar of engines serves as a raw soundtrack to their performative hypermasculinity. Patriarchal archetypes of virility, however, often betray a more vulnerable side: in this case, that of a precarious working class trying to get by.

Masculinity and its expressions in post-colonial Nigeria are a central theme in Ashadu's work. In her new video-installation *MUSCLE* (2025), on view at Camden Art Centre (3 Oct to 28 Dec), we see a similar display of machismo. In the slums of Lagos bodybuilders work out relentlessly, using self-built equipment and sweating in the punishing heat. The camera lingers on sensual close-ups; grunts and clashing metal make a symphony of exhaustion and determination. Constructing a powerful body, beyond the patriarchal connotations it may evoke, becomes a vital response to the harshness of urban life – a form of social redemption, reimagined through Ashadu's lens as a dreamy, intimate spectacle.

### Hans Holbein the Younger

With a sharp eye for detail and a flair for portraying power, Hans Holbein the Younger rose to fame as Henry VIII's official court painter. The sitter in *Portrait of Simon George of Cornwall* (c. 1530–40; 3) is believed to be a young nobleman – yet the true subject is love. This stylish figure holds in his right hand a red carnation, a symbol of affection and betrothal, while the golden badge on his cap depicts Leda and the swan, whose myth alludes to the sitter's erotic intentions. This portrait presents a refined, sophisticated idea of masculinity: an influential suitor in fashionable attire, fluent in the language of love, seeking a life companion.

Holbein's tender depiction of George differs markedly from his muscular, assertive paintings of Henry VIII – brilliantly examined in Elizabeth Goldring's upcoming biography *Holbein* (published on 11 Nov by Yale). Yet both approaches reveal the power of portraiture as a tool for self-promotion – a way to elevate and advertise one's image as a desirable and powerful man.

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