

Life Isn't Good, It's Excellent

EATING OUT

You're like a potato. You'd go with anything.

"David Robilliard was the sweetest, kindest, most infuriating, artistic foul-mouthed, witty, charming, handsome, thoughtful, unhappy, loving and friendly person we ever met. Over the nine years of our friendship David came closer to us than any other person. He will live forever in our hearts and minds." Gilbert and George wrote the above on July 7, 1990. "Starting with pockets filled with disorganised writings and sketches, he went on to produce highly original poetry, drawings and paintings. His truthfulness, sadness desperation and love of people gave his work a brilliance and beauty that stands out a mile."

WAITING FOR NOTHING

We're all waiting for Someone who never arrives to brighten up our lives.

As poets come and go, David Robilliard arrived all too quickly, and went all too soon. He was discovered, promoted, and praised by the artists Gilbert and George (they described him as "the new master of the modern person"); their involvement alerts even the most casual reader to the presence, now twenty years absent, of a unique and unsettling talent. His poetry and art flabbergasted those in the establishment, since he had no formal training and cared little for tradition. Doing what he did with supreme panache, he felt no need to capitulate to their entrenched expectations.

FASHION

Is just a flash in the pan When you're standing next to a naked man.

Robilliard's work was funny, ironic and sad, a cross between Jean Cocteau and Andy Warhol in the line of art, and Stevie Smith and Edward Lear in written ones. He, however, detested the comparison to "that dead French artist" (although it was a justified, if lazy compliment), his nature and wit being more closely aligned to the swagger and swerve of the playwright Joe Orton. His short, pithy poems have an air of irreverent Zen.

TIME OUT

The end of the day the end of the night the tap drips the clock ticks.

Were he American, David Robilliard would be revered like Basquiat or Kerouac; as it stands his fame is now largely European. In 1995 he was the subject of a massive retrospective of the kind afforded the likes of Cezanne and Turner, *A Roomful of Hungry Lookd Looks* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, but since then his reputation has faded. His work, however, remains freshly arch and supremely funny. His approach was unique. He sent out postcards of his poems on a monthly basis, his envelopes stamped in distinctive red with his trademark phrase "Life isn't Good Its Excellent." He contributed to magazines, now sadly defunct, such as *The Fred* and *Square Peg*, but was roundly ignored by the mainstream poetry press.

INTENSE DESIRE

The thing that thrilled them Was the thing that killed them.

Yet this enfant terrible of British art was born in the Channel Islands in 1952. He gravitated to London in the Seventies, worked on building sites, but was always writing and drawing. He met the painter Andrew Heard (1958-1993), with whom he shared a studio around the corner from Old Street Tube, now fashionable and expensive apartments. They were pioneers of the now trendy art district, London's equivalent of New York's Soho. Heard, in turn, led him to Gilbert and George. They recognized his unique talents and nurtured them, publishing his first poetry collection, *Inevitable*, in 1984. His paintings were bold and brash, a perfect combination of text and color. He had a New York retrospective at Hirsch and Adler in 1990. It proved a sell-out show.

FUCK OFF

Waking up next morning By a sad and lonely person Clawing at you Oh how could I have? And the discomfort of the hangover Makes you want to say Please leave immediately Give me a break Don't stay for breakfast You're irritating My search for... Isn't loneliness a bore.

ScheiblerMitte

Like many gay men of the Eighties, Robilliard fell foul of HIV. Such a diagnosis was, in those days, terminal. He made no bones about his condition, and would introduce himself to strangers as "David Robilliards." His work, which dealt previously with crushes, fun, and disappointment, took on a darker edge. He died November 3, 1988, Gilbert and George at his bedside.

MEMORY OF A FRIEND

A burst of tears From all your friends The end.

Robilliard still has a freshness which astounds. His friend, the painter and singer Holly Johnson, reflected recently, "It's important to remember David Robilliard as a pioneer, although inextricably linked to Gilbert and George by merit of their friendship and support of his work, he was one of the few artists living in the now Artist Disneyland of Hoxton before it was a glimmer in the eye of the Trendy White Cube Generation. The draw to the area was as much G&G as it was The London Apprentice, a louche gay pub with dark room tendencies, not photographic dark rooms as could be found in his friend and photographer Alistair Thane's studio but a sexual dungeon of desire. "Expectations," a leather fetish wear shop, was the only commercial premises I can remember operating in Hoxton Square. The streets of cheap warehouse studio space before the boom echoed with a silent emptiness. This was the backdrop to David's daily life and times. A place where the quick witted and charming -- without gushing -- David could recruit or procure the urban male models for G&G'S feverish camera. Living together with the naughty cherub of Andrew Heard, a prolific painter of Dream Cityscapes and childhood memories, there were shared obsessions with pop music and culture, obscure vinyl was pondered over from Agnes Bertaille to Nightmares In Wax. It was "Black Leather" by the latter that they asked me to identify when I visited them circa 1988 after a pop star photo session with Alistair Thane just around the corner. I had earlier purchased *Inevitable* in a bookshop on The King's Road and became an instant fan of the intensely modern and unique poems and line drawings within. Andrew was working on a large painting of *The Munsters* and a cast of *Carry On* characters, David wore jeans and a blue sweatshirt silk screened with Andrew's figures, a relaxed bohemianism in the bright white space. David pissed into the toilet while continuing the conversation in plain view from the waist up in the open plan kitchen cum bathroom cum studio with an awareness that was part openness, part shock tactic. I felt immediately Andrew's optimism and David's wry cynicism were two sides of a coin that would be well thumbbed. Sadly, as is the way of the art world, it has taken their untimely deaths, works lost to European art dealers and hidden in archives, for it to be unearthed by the cultural metal detector."

Robilliard deserves the final word on his own brief sojourn. His work deserves to be better known, and though much has been lost to legal wrangling, the inevitable legacy of many artists, there is enough out there to illustrate his talent, unique and irreplaceable.

THE PEOPLE OF THE '90s WILL BE JUST THE SAME

It's funny isn't it all you've got is the natural urge to lay down with someone and say hello in a very personal way and yet life seems to offer many other alternatives.

- Robert Cochrane

Mr. Cochrane is a poet and writer living in Manchester, England. His work has appeared in Mojo, Attitude, and Dazed & Confused. He has published three collections of poems, and Gone Tomorrow, his biography of the rock singer Jobriath, will appear via SAF in 2008.