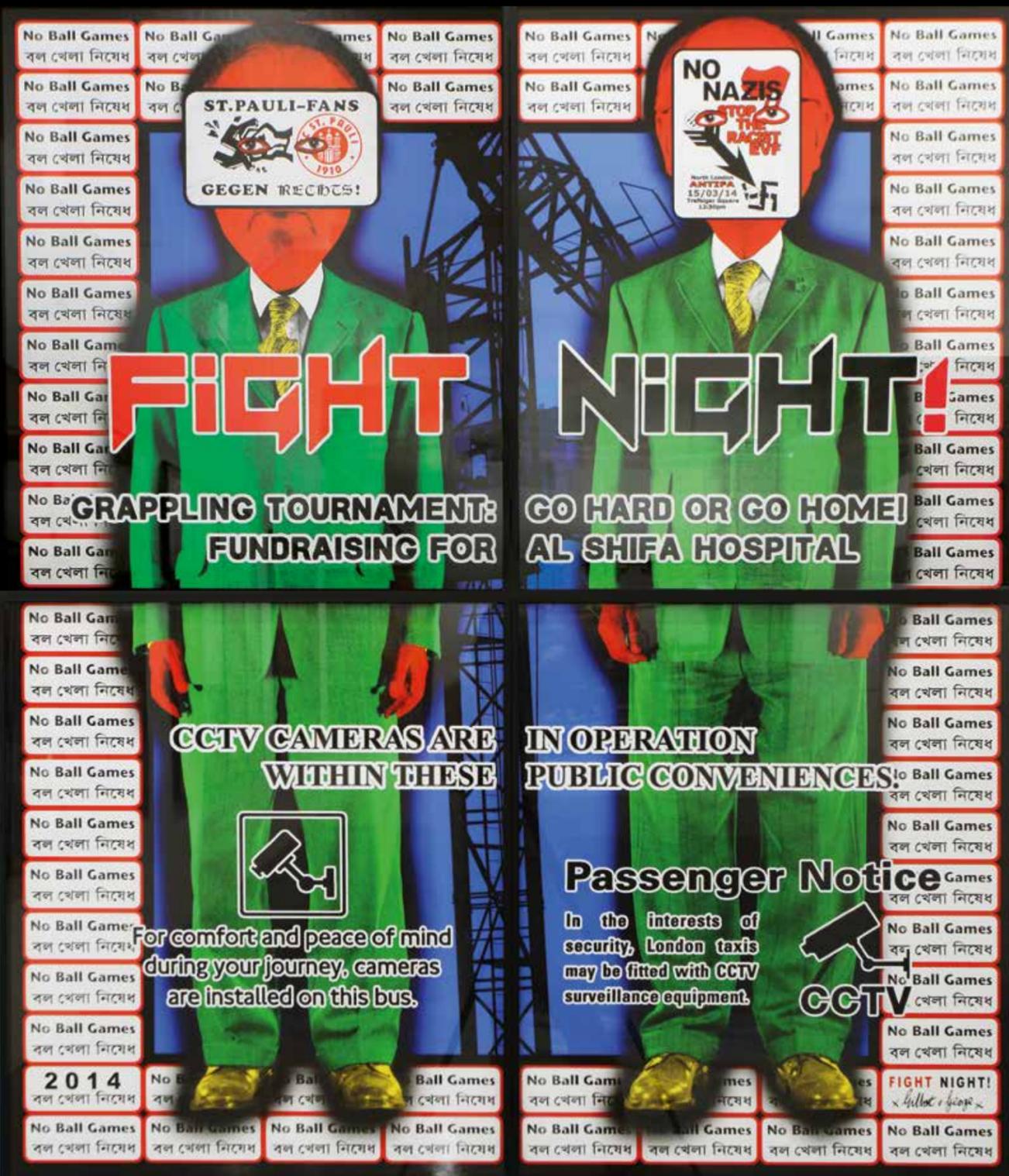


GILBERT & GEORGE  
 FIGHT NIGHT, 2014  
 4 panels  
 151 x 127 cm  
 Courtesy the artist  
 and ARNDT, Singapore

# GILBERT & GEORGE

## SIGNS FROM THE STREET, SHOUTS FROM THE CHORUS

Contemporary art's original living sculptures,  
 Gilbert & George, are freezing fleeting moments  
 in a life moving all too fast.  
 By Dan Rule



George Passmore has concerns. Worries. Foibles. Or at least that's the impression. Authority is zero in contemporary London. The CCTV, the signs, the warnings – it all amounts to nothing. Men still piss in the street. Dogs still shit. Vomiting occurs from time to time.

"Outside of London, no one's pissing in the street and they don't need signs for that either," he asserts in his impeccably measured, hushed, British accent. "In London you have all these signs on the street, but they're still pissing. The signs don't stop people doing it." There's a pause, a sudden cackle from his creative and life partner Gilbert Proesch, who sits beside him, a smile replacing what is, for the most part, a steely gaze.

It's the inconsistency of it all, you see, that gets Passmore's goat. "There's vomit outside in the street almost every morning, but there's no signs against vomiting," he forwards, stifling a smile as he adjusts his perfectly circular spectacles. "They have signs against dog shit, but no signs against dogs pissing. There are signs against men pissing, but no signs against men shitting." A guffaw from Proesch. "There's just this huge tangle of regulations."

We're stationed in a long, hallway-like space adjoining the Singapore offices of the duo's Berlin art dealer Matthias Arndt, perched on the top floor of a restored colonial building in the Gillman Barracks precinct. Proesch and Passmore are as resplendent as ever in their signature light grey and beige suits, as we gaze out over the dense tropical canopy hanging above the grounds of the nearby ISS International School.

But back to the problems at street level. "I think people are more excited to be forbidden to do all these things," Passmore continues, clasping his hands. "They all come in from villages to sit on the pavement in London, eat fish 'n' chips and pee and vomit a bit, and then they can go back to their normal existence, having lived it up for once in their lives." And the laughter continues.

"That's why we call it utopia," says Proesch finally, in what remains a strong Italian accent despite almost half a century in Britain. "It is the unattainable in society."

Proesch, now 71, is referring to the pair's new body of work, *UTOPIAN PICTURES*, which fills the gallery adjacent (and shows until April 5). Collecting photographic and physical evidence of the signs and signifiers of the street – the council warnings, DIY stickers, political graffiti and various other forms of official and unofficial text in their local surrounds of Brick Lane in London – to create vibrant, collage-like arrangements, the vast panelled images form a kind of taxonomy of public messages and discourses. It is a dialogue of authority, control and rebellion – an articulation of state authority and the disjunctive oppositional choruses that rear up in response.

"The question really is: what is authority?" poses Passmore, now 73, before answering his own question. "Back to the individual. Anti-collectivism. Culture is anti-collectivism."

Continues Proesch: "The first person who came to see the show said they were very liberating pictures and we liked that idea," he says

of the series, which was several years in the making. "You can get very excited about this work; it's not heavy art in that way, even though everything behind it is quite heavy."

It says much of the wider Gilbert & George vernacular, which has forever aspired to speak directly to and of the public. If there is one charge that can be levelled at the pair, it's certainly not that of elitism. "What does art mean when it is hidden away in a billionaire's house?" offers Proesch, growing ever more slightly riled with each consecutive phrase. "What does a painting mean [in that context]? Nothing.

"The whole idea of speaking out, whether it actually works, is an interesting proposition," he continues, a little calmer now. "In Europe, it works because you have an active and critical public – it's not just about selling the works. When we did the *SCAPEGOATING PICTURES* [their exhibition at White Cube, London, in 2014] we sold 5500 posters, and that's different. [In Singapore], even if somebody buys a picture, where does it go and what does it mean?"

Passmore takes up the mantle. "Everyone thinks that art and artists and galleries are looking down their noses at them – like they're so superior – but we always try and go the other way," he says. "We want to embrace the limited chances that there are to speak to the general public."

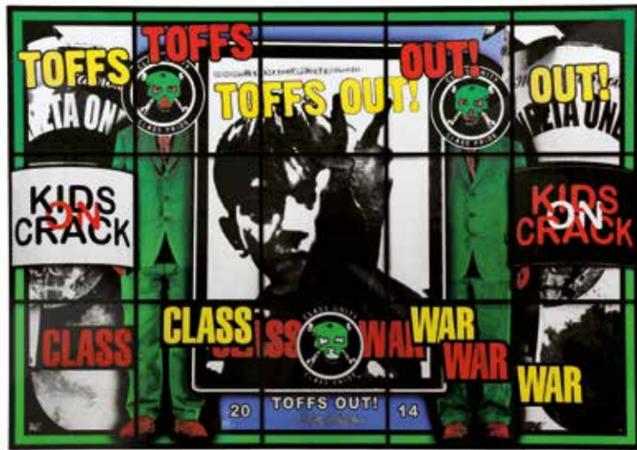
Proesch reframes it as "a full-frontal attack". "We don't want our art without a public. We don't want to be a living sculpture in an empty environment. That's why we don't like the forest so much," Laughter. "We like the city. We don't like art that is gazing at the sky or at the emptiness of abstraction; we like art that is human and part of humanity... We've always said that art is freezing life for a second. We want to let the pictures make themselves. We shouldn't interfere."

"You can see perfectly proficient paintings at the art fair by artists who know how to paint, but it's not nearly as interesting," continues Passmore. "It's not about knowing how to do it."

It's an attitude that has permeated a practice spanning almost half a century. From their famed *Singing Sculpture* performances commissioned by John Kaldor for Sydney and Melbourne in 1973 – in which the duo covered their heads and hands in metallic paint and sang along to a recording of the depression-era Flanagan and Allen tune *Underneath the Arches* for five hours straight at a time – to their notorious *Naked Shit* pictures of the early 1990s, which saw a collage of the pair's naked bodies alongside photographs of their own turds, blown-up to monumental proportions, Gilbert & George have both made and embodied their art. The dapper uniforms, the famously kitchen-less home in Brick Lane and the routine public appearances (they proudly ride the bus and eat at the same restaurant every day of the week) all come together to form Gilbert & George's life project

"It's a living sculpture," offers Passmore. "It's a sense of purpose."

"It's about finding your own language – how to speak," continues



Left  
GILBERT & GEORGE  
*TOFFS OUT!*, 2014  
15 panels  
226 x 317 cm  
Below  
GILBERT & GEORGE  
*VICTORIA*, 2014  
12 panels  
191 x 392 cm  
Courtesy the artist  
and ARNDT, Singapore



Proesch. "It's all concentrated towards the end. Everything is done by us, every detail. We don't have assistants. Our art is done by us, in our studio, alone."

Gilbert & George's story stretches back to 1967, when a young Italian artist, born in the far northern Italian village of San Martin de Tor, and a working class kid from Plymouth met at St Martins School of Art in London. It was, quite famously, love at first sight. During an earlier conversation with the pair in 2010, Proesch described their earliest encounters in somewhat comparable terms: "We met, we shagged a lot, then we left art school and realised we needed some of our own ideas."

And ideas have never been in short supply, especially of late. When your own little section of the world is your singular muse and indicator, inspiration tends to materialise on a whim. "We never felt like we had to invent anything," says Proesch. "We just walk outside our door and there it all is... Having sharp eyes is very important, because it's there for everybody to see, but they don't see it. Maybe you need 'visionary eyes'."

It's not to suggest that they like everything they see. Indeed, the conversation snags on the radicalisation of Islamic youth, the massacre at French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and the scourge of any form of religious fundamentalism. "Once you're not allowed to criticise - if an authority or religion feels it is 'above' that - then we're finished," snaps

Proesch. "People are now thinking that you need to compromise so as to not offend. We don't believe that. No."

"Not drawing a cartoon isn't going to help," says Passmore. "If you stop drawing cartoons, you may as well give up... This whole idea is not part of our modern civilised society. I think when the killing gets so close to culture - when you're killing for a magazine - then we're in really dangerous waters."

There's more. "Take away religion and it would be a much better world," continues Proesch. "The world is filled with fantastic people, but as soon as religion is mentioned they change... When we started to think about it, we came to the realisation that 80 per cent of the world is still anti-homo, in a big way. Nothing has changed there except in a few places like Europe, Australia and North America - but not South America, not China, not Japan, not India, not Africa, not Arab countries, not Russia, not Poland."

"You look at all the countries that believe in the afterlife," smiles Passmore. "Those are also all the countries that are totally against sex in every sort of way."

Later in the afternoon, we meet up with filmmaker Julian Cole (a former model for the pair and the director of the celebrated 2008 documentary *WITH Gilbert & George*) and board a minibus to take us to the press preview of Art Stage Singapore. Gilbert & George will

later complete a book signing at the ARNDT booth, before unsmilingly posing for pictures in front of a vast work of theirs at the entrance to the fair's cordoned off VIP lounge - ever the living sculptures.

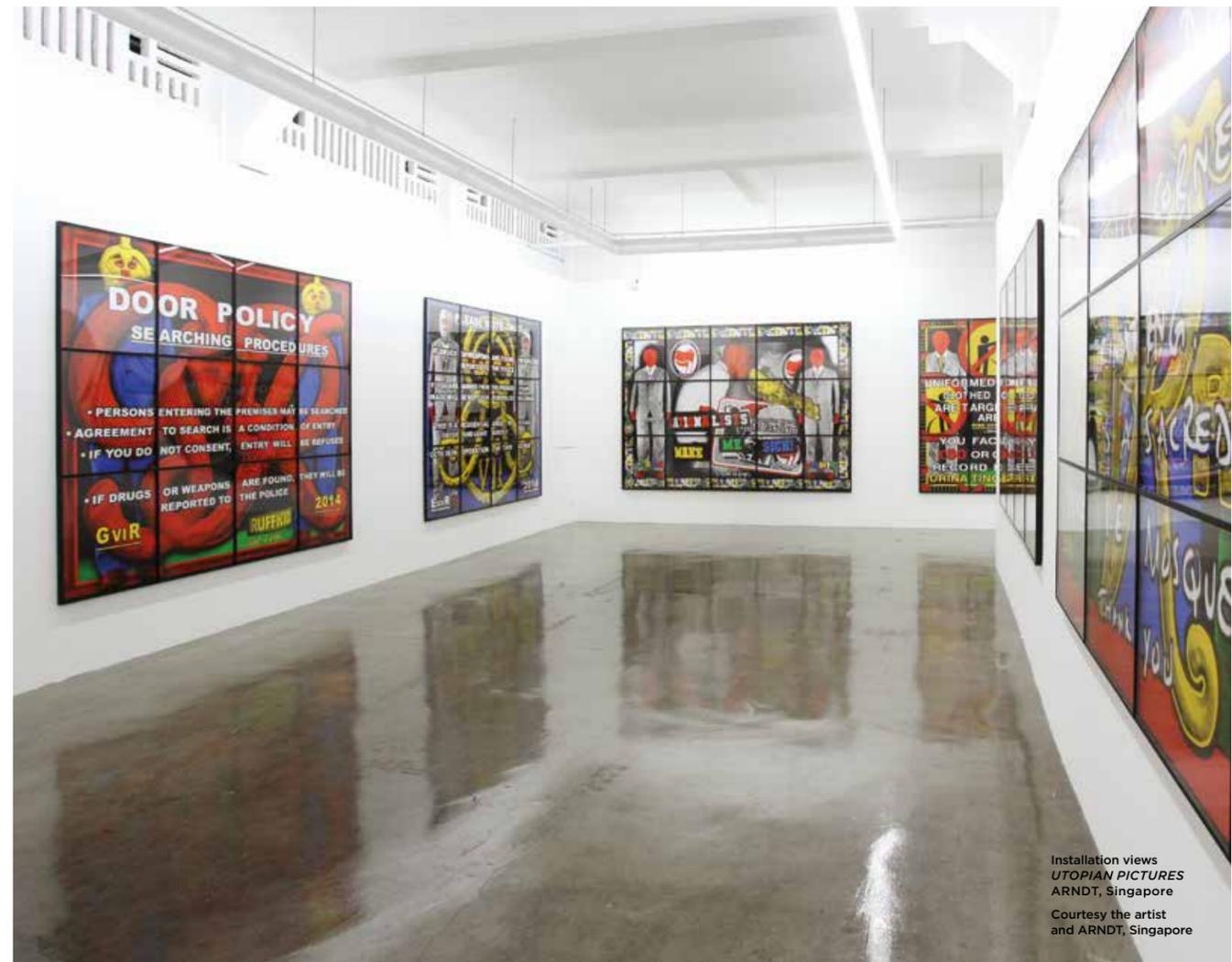
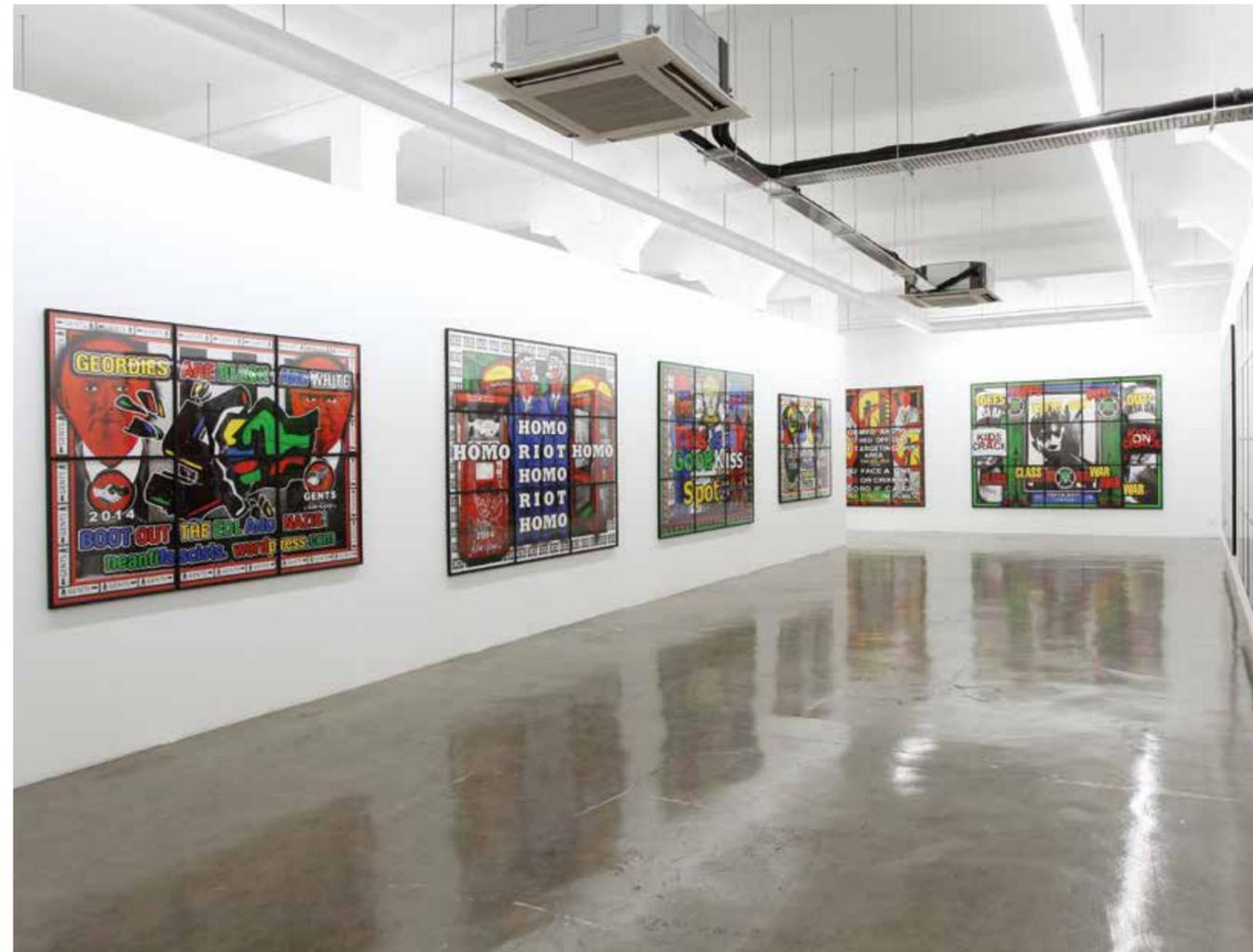
There's an earnest discussion about the beauty of vegetation as we speed down busy Singapore streets. "But how do you visit the gardens in this humidity?" poses Proesch to nobody in particular. "It is impossible. Walking is impossible." There are in-jokes and old stories as the couple sit side-by-side, gazing out at the city rushing past.

"Working together is such an enormous strength as an artist, just to be able to remove that self-doubt," offers Passmore at one point, before Proesch chimes in to finish his sentence.

"We always say: 'we are not alone'. You can imagine the poor artist in the corner, crying because he's alone, self-doubt nonstop. We don't have that," his voice trails off. "It's an extraordinary arrangement by accident." **V** *UTOPIAN PICTURES* shows at ARNDT Singapore until April 5, 2015.

Gilbert & George are represented by ARNDT, White Cube and Lehmann Maupin.

arndtberlin.com  
whitecube.com  
lehmannmaupin.com



Installation views  
*UTOPIAN PICTURES*  
ARNDT, Singapore  
Courtesy the artist  
and ARNDT, Singapore