

FIRST NIGHT | VISUAL ART

Norman Gilbert review — a kaleidoscopic delight of colour and life

Tramway, Glasgow

Laura Freeman

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12.00pm, The Times

Holiday Caravan, 1975, by Norman Gilbert
ENZO DI COSMO © NORMAN GILBERT

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Infant prodigies, enfants terribles, bright young things and still younger Turks. Success is wasted on the young. In the past few years, late-flourishing women artists such as Rose Wylie, Rose Hilton and Sheila Hicks have been fêted. What about the chaps? The arthritic Methuselahs, the still-got-it sages, the old codgers doggedly painting into their dotage?

Norman Gilbert, who died aged 93 in 2019, slowed down but never stopped. He went from a painting a month to a couple a year. But they became ever more intricate, full and flamboyant. His final painting, *Plants, Patchwork and Two Green Chairs*, stands on an easel at Glasgow's Tramway gallery. The paints on his nearby palette, dried and hardened, match the colours on the canvas. Gilbert bought the palette in the 1950s. When his children — four boys — were young he would lock it in a box. The boys used to break into his studio and stir up the paints.

This retrospective, staged around the corner from Gilbert's former home in Shields Road, is a kaleidoscopic delight. Gilbert was a maximalist. More colour, more clutter, more more. He used to say his themes were "plants, patterns and people". "Plenty" is another word that springs to mind. Abundance, exuberance, an absence of space. Previous exhibitions have hung Gilbert in "white cube" galleries. Nothing could be more at odds with the work. Here, the room is wallpapered in suitably haphazard style.

Gilbert, born in 1926, was a South Side boy. After serving as a naval radar operator in the Second World War, an ex-service grant allowed him to go to the Glasgow School of Art. He clashed with the pattern of teaching. Tutors would do a demonstration painting and students were judged on how close they came to doing what the tutor had done. "I wasn't in that line of business," Gilbert told the BBC a year before his death. "I thought, 'I don't want to come out as a clone.'" The school wouldn't pass him — "unteachable" was the verdict — and when he transferred to Edinburgh he was called a "dangerous influence".

The Gilberts, Norman and his wife, Pat, a fellow Glasgow School of Art student, were often very hard up. Their second son, Bruno, tells me that when he was a baby, his Moses basket would freeze to the floor of the family caravan in winter.



Norman Gilbert in 2019
COURTESY GILBERT FAMILY

Gilbert was no one's clone, but with his focus on domestic interiors, busy with wallpapers, house plants and stuff, he's something of a South Side Vuillard. "Interiors" is only loosely right. Most pictures are of the artist and family at home, but also in the cramped cabins of caravans or the insides of cars. Some painters of interiors make you feel like an interloper — the Dutch Golden Age painter Pieter de Hooch, the Bloomsbury set — but Gilbert's scenes invite you in, like a school friend asked back for tea.

There's a bit of Matisse too, in Gilbert's cut-out shapes and scalpel outlines. Though Matisse on a particularly madcap day, his collages overlapping and many times layered. Gilbert hated anyone to say he painted in two dimensions: pattern was depth. And what patterns! Checks and ikats, spots and stripes, lace and net, teardrops and patchwork, quilts and harlequin tights.

A table is piled with a rummage sale of family fabrics: curtains designed and printed by Pat, a Jamaican tie-dye tablecloth brought one Christmas by Bruno's then girlfriend. See if you can spot them in the paintings. No one wears navy. It's all Seventies kaftans and Aran knits, Icelandic sweaters and jesters' hoops. When Pat suffered a stroke after 65 years of marriage, Gilbert sketched her devotedly, as he always had done, during her last days. How carefully he recreates the diamonds on her hospital gown.

The overall mood, though, is joy. The colours alone are a tonic. An Utterly Butterly combination of yellow and blue, Willow Pattern blue and white, Smurf blue and Highlands green, a cocktail of pina colada and Irn-Bru.

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Gilbert's plants have a life of their own, conforming to no known botanical shades. Fronds float, leaves levitate. He didn't like stalks: they spoil the pattern.

Bruno says that it was no good asking his father to pick a favourite painting. The answer was always: "The next one." Gilbert painted more than 300 canvases over a 63-year career. He sold about 60, which, he ruefully pointed out, was roughly one a year. He made up for it by selling another 30 or so in the last two years of his life. A late bloomer, but when he bloomed, he bloomed like an orchid.

The exhibition runs Sep 3-Feb 5; tramway.org