

## Artinfo

### February 7, 2006

#### Billy Childish

By João Ribas

Billy Childish is a prolific painter, songwriter, poet, filmmaker and photographer and something of a cult figure around the world.

He has recorded more than 100 LPs, published 30 collections of poetry, created thousands of paintings, published three novels, and is often cited as an influence on musicians and artists extending from Kurt Cobain and Jack White to Kylie Minogue and Tracey Emin.

Born in 1959 in Chatham, England, Childish, whose dyslexia was undiagnosed, left school at the age of 16. He became an apprentice stonemason after being refused entrance into a local art school, and then briefly attended St. Martins School of Art, from which he was expelled. He then spent 15 years painting on the dole, as he puts it.

Childish, who recently showed a series of his van Gogh-inspired paintings at London's Aquarium gallery and at the London Art Fair, has been busy adapting his first novel, *My Fault*, into a screenplay, for a film to be directed by photographer and filmmaker Larry Clark.

He is completing his fourth novel.

When did you start painting, and have you always painted and written music simultaneously?

No, music came later. I've been painting since I was little. I never started painting as such I just didn't stop. It's my main thing. I did it before I went to school and carried on with it.

Painting saved me when I was kid. I couldn't read or write. I'm quite dyslexic. It took me a long time to get a handle on a lot of things you had to do in school and I hated school intensely. But painting was the thing that I liked you could be yourself and with yourself.

I started playing music when I was 17. But because they said I was tone deaf, I wasn't allowed in the school choir. When punk rock came around and I was one of the few punk rockers around town some people asked me to be the singer in their group.

People tend to think my work demands a lot of effort. But those who know me realize that's not the case. I don't have to try and be anything. I don't have a game plan or anything. I do what I can do because it's what I like doing. I make pictures because I make pictures. I dislike posey music because I dislike posey music. I don't like music very much anyway, but I particularly don't like rock music. You know, I

never believed that David Bowie was a scary Martian. I always thought he was a bit silly.

So you didn't get into the choir, and you hate rock music, but in the last 10 years you've made an enormous amount of music that has been hugely influential.

Well, outside of the mainstream. I've never made much money out of painting or music. I spent 15 years on the dole doing it. Recently I've sold a few paintings, and I've gotten a little bit more recognition, but I've still not made any money as such. I don't own houses or things like that or even one house for that matter.

Yet there are people out there who will go out and find anything that has your name on it, be it a record or a book of poems.

Some people will people who don't like what's served up in the canteen. Some go off and see if there's anything growing in the garden next door, and that's me. Its like, once you put something into a supermarket, it's no longer made by granny. It's made by someone pretending to be granny. I think the quality of something is important. It should do what it says on the tin.

In a way you can see painting as part of that, of being in control you control something. Control is really, really important to me. I don't feel comfortable if I'm not in charge of what I do. I won't be cajoled into doing something, and that's why I've never been absorbed. It's physically uncomfortable for me to giveaway what I want to do. So painting is a freedom.

But it's extraordinary to have maintained your kind of independent existence as an artist for so long.

It's only extraordinary if you ever wanted anything else. There's not much temptation for me. I plainly say to people, I wouldn't mind some money, but I wouldn't do what I don't like to get it. It's not my nature.

I mean, I try to get things out of people like I'll tell Jack White (of the White Stripes) he should record one of my songs, and he doesn't listen and doesn't want to. I'll tell him that very straight, but I went go to a party and tell him I think his music is good just because he said he liked me. Like, Eddie Vedder (of Pearl Jam) is a very nice chap. He's been very friendly to me. I've never heard his music. . . .Everyone tells me I better not . . . but I don't care what he does, that's his business. No carrot works for me. You know, if I was a writer.

You are a writer.

No, I'm not. And I'm not a musician. If I was a musician, my wife Julie wouldn't be able to stand me. I just do these things. I hate musicians and artists, because it's their job, and it's the most useless job on earth. They're all useless at what they do, and they all think they're more important because they do it. They'd be better off if they were bus conductors who did a bit of drawing in the evening or something.

See I'm a bit lazy. I wouldn't get a job as a bus conductor because I don't like working. I paint and write music instead of working. Maybe that's why I'm a bit

different than other artists and musicians or writers: I don't do it as a job. I don't consider myself to be any of those things.

You went St. Martins after being rejected from a local art school right?

I went to work in the dockyard, and all I wanted to do was go to art school and meet people who loved and cared about the same things I did. When I got there I found out they didn't.

I was expelled from St. Martins in 1981, because I wouldn't paint any pictures in the college. I told them I didn't want to get contaminated. My father went into prison, and so the little money my mother used to siphon off and give to me stopped. I was writing poetry that was confiscated, and that they said was obscene, and it upset the head of the college. They didn't want anybody rocking the boat; I didn't suck up to any tutors, I answered back. They didn't believe that I worked, and they didn't like that I played music. I was told I couldn't be an artist and be in a [music] group.

I was asked to believe a load of rubbish. And if you don't buy it, they say you're trouble. It's the same as if someone wanted me to be on their record label, and I tell them that I don't want someone else producing my music or telling me anything about it; they'll me to take a hike. They've got an endless queue of people who do exactly what they want, so who cares if you've got a bit of talent? Talent is of no use in the commercial world. It's a hindrance, actually.

You met Tracey Emin at St. Martins. Your now infamous relationship was hugely influential on her work.

It doesn't say that in her book or anything. It totally ignores the fact that I even existed. Tracey was a fashion student who wanted to be an artist. She'd seen my work and wanted to be a painter like I was. But she got famous and then didn't want anybody to know about that influence. Tracey won't even speak to me now.

But she reinvented the confessional poetry I was writing through the 1980s as the mainstay of her art when she gave up painting in the 1990s. Most of her work is paraphrases of my poetry. Which is all right, except that she doesn't want people to know that . . . But if anyone wants to read them, they can see that they are. And lots of similar ideas, you know. But it's not highly flattering to somebody who's a confessional artist to have to spend all of their time hiding the truth.

Tracey sort of reinvented herself as a version of me, in a female form. She's the white Billy Childish. You can sell that shit. She's the female, white Billy Childish. She's like Elvis. It's like Sam Phillips saying, "Look, if we can get a white boy to do this rock and roll stuff we'd be rolling in it".

The Stuckists, with whom you were associated, also came about at this time . . . it doesn't seem like you to start a movement.

Well, I didn't. Tracey made this comment when I wouldn't go to some party with her, and it appeared in a poem in the mid-90s, this thing about being stuck. Because I wouldn't swallow this rehashed Dadaism done 70 years later as being radical. She was very upset about that. This was in the early 90s, when she first got involved with

this very high-profile, commercial, big-money-backed, supposedly radical art group. Tracey tried to get me involved with some of those people. I can't swallow that stuff. I won't swallow it in music, and I won't swallow it in art.

Tracey always said she wanted to be a household name. When she actually said that, I say, what, like Harpic [a toilet cleaner]? I used to call her Margaret Thatcher . . .

You've been very critical of that line of British art, particularly its overemphasis on very sophisticated or conceptual things.

Well, I don't think it is sophisticated at all. The problem is it's pseudo-sophisticated and it's actually even pseudo-conceptual. There isn't any concept other than calling something that isn't art, art. Which Duchamp already did. And if anti-art is art, then what is anti-art?

Anti-art is only useful if it's anti-art. If it's going to be art, then there's not much point, except if it's something that you're flogging. If it is, then let's talk about things were flogging; let's not talk about art. It's bullshit.

The thing that proves it's bullshit very, very clearly is that you easily ascertain that a lot of it wouldn't be made if it wasn't for sale. The artists wouldn't bother doing it as an emotional exercise, or an exercise in knowing themselves, or in communication, working on it alone for 20 years in their back room.

[These artists] don't understand [that people] already know that things look interesting. Anything you look at closely or in isolation is interesting and has a story. You don't need artists to tell you that. It's condescending, and adolescent, and glib and useless.

The problem with an art of ideas is that it's highly limited. It's showing intellect with very little intellect. So I have art without ideas. Which means you just use nature. Everything that's there is available. Art is ruined by having too much art in it.

Is there an art form you've never worked in?

Knitting. My wife does knitting, and she tried to show me how to do it, and I gave up immediately.

Do you keep up with contemporary art? No. You can't help seeing things, but I don't have television, I don't have radio. I don't read newspapers or art magazines. I went to the Tate about two or three times since I was 16. I've got a friend who's a very famous painter [Peter Doig] who I went to St. Martins with, and I've been to a couple of his shows, but I had to leave. Its funny, we like similar things. . . . He used to come see the groups all the time. He likes van Gogh.

You did a series of work as a homage to van Gogh. That homage has work by Rembrandt, Delacroix, Millais and Hiroshige all artists that van Gogh openly worked after. He didn't have this precious view of himself or try to hide his influences. A lot of the time, you're not meant to be open and say where things come from. I tell people where I get my ideas. In the past, it was very common to carry on other people's work and express your influences and move things along as a brotherhood,

not as a commercial thing. Art that isn't a spiritual journey isn't worth having. Maybe not having quite such a greedy attitude is one way to become more wholesome.

Do you think that's a pervasive problem in today's art? It's a market-led industry. Markets are very dull and uninspiring. They're mundane. Art that is of value isn't mundane.