

## Artforum November 2011

### Critics' Picks: Billy Childish

By Johanna Fateman

Foreboding skies, strange foliage, and shadowy figures are busy with swirling and knotted brushstrokes in "I Am the Billy Childish." The whorls of unrealistic colors on these canvases unmistakably recall van Gogh, but Billy Childish's sincere embrace of the post-Impressionist's gesture is assimilated into his distinct, punk-painterly economy: The swaths of taupe in *Lt. Sydney A. Cloman, First Infantry, on His Horse on the Wounded Knee Battleground*, 2010, are unpainted linen; his dandy palette of avocado, robin's-egg blue, and hot pink in the bramble of *Russian Shepherd Boy*, 2011, is very much his own, and so is his cryptic selection of historical subjects. Alongside the paintings of the shepherd and the desolate site of the Lakota Sioux massacre hang landscapes of erupting volcanoes as well as portraits of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius and the mountaineer Toni Kurz.

The paintings fill the gallery's ground floor, while above, an impressive grid of mounted record covers flanks vitrines of Childish's books and zines. The collection demonstrates the prodigious and varied output of the artist, who, in his thirty-five-year span of work, has become a legendary underground character—as a painter and a writer, but particularly as a musician. A lifelong resident of Chatham, England, working with little mainstream attention, Childish has nevertheless enjoyed far-reaching influence. Cultish interest in his bands, such as Thee Headcoats (1989–2000), with their proud amateurism and raw aesthetic, informed the sound and ethos of blues-punk, indie rock, and grunge music.

While Childish's paintings, like his songs and writings, are characterized by emotional intensity, social revolt, and unprecious execution, they have been less recognized—perhaps because, in the context of contemporary art, his spiritualism and guileless adoption of past styles have exiled his work to the perplexing margins of the art world. He's hardly naive about this realm (he knows enough to object to its values), yet he is an unironic and steadfast practitioner of his teenage preferences: Three-chord compositions and figurative expressionism spoke to him early, and he has spoken through their forms ever since. Standing on a crate at the opening reception, he read from one of his poems: "i am a desperate man who loves the simplisity of / painting / and hates gallarys and white walls . . . also i am vincent van gough/ hiroshige / and every living breathing artist / who dares to draw god / on this planet." For one who has cultivated an outsider position for decades, Childish played off the apparent contradiction of his performance in his beautiful exhibition with charm, and is likely satisfied by any confusion his oeuvre inspires.