

Whitewall November 15, 2011

I Am the Billy Childish

By Jen Hoffman-Williamson

Lehmann Maupin is now showing a new collection of artworks and music by artist, writer, and musician Billy Childish in an exhibition entitled "I Am The Billy Childish" curated by Matthew Higgs. The show presents new paintings of volcanoes and pastoral landscapes accompanied by the artist's music and literary pieces. The show will be on view through January 21, 2012 and *Whitewall* was lucky enough to speak to Childish on his process, works, and the current exhibition.

WW: Every introduction of "I Am The Billy Childish" seems to reference you as a Cult Icon. How do you feel about that?

BC: There are so many other things that could be said, and not all of them positive, so I'm quite happy with being a "cult icon". Of course any label limits you, or has the potential too. It depends how much you buy into your own myth, and although I enjoy the myth of Billy Childish I don't take him too seriously.

WW: Would you say you have any icons of your own that you look to for inspiration?

BC: Yes and no. I'm always pulling my icons down into the mud with me. I very much look on my heroes as my friends and mates, so I don't put other humans above myself. A list would read along the lines of Dostoevsky, Knut Hamsun, Robert Walser, Van Gogh. Real icons would be the life of Christ and the Buddha – because it's hard to get to the person behind the story. Love is the main thing I'm working on at the moment, of the self, enemies and icons.

WW: Your only prolonged period of employment was as a stonemason at a young age. Did this type of work direct you to where you are today?

BC: No, it was more of an interlude, where I actually concentrated on my drawing so as to move forward in my art. The job involved very little work, so I had spare time to focus only own interests.

WW: You've had three names, and are known as a musician, artist, writer, poet, printmaker, all in their respective worlds. Do you feel a need to play a variety of roles in your life and art?

BC: Actually I've use at least 10 different pseudonyms. I did divide stuff up at the beginning and painted and played under different names, but when I was exhibiting a lot in Germany in the early 1990's they would invariably use the Billy Childish name, so I got stuck with that. But I do enjoy playing in the world and so love personas. I believe that we are all only pretending to do things, and the better you are at pretending the more fulfilling life is. If you like, we are not anything, other than consciousness, and we fulfill roles within that: A father, an artist, a son. Everything is a big play, but it is important to take the joke seriously.

WW: Having been creating so long have you found that your process has changed over time and trends or has it remain consistent?

BC: There is always the constant of being yourself. So I feel no different painting now from when I was 5 at primary school. I can remember winning a prize for a painting I didn't think was very good, and I can remember making a great painting of a windmill; the real thrill of steering the paint and pencils. So it's the same.

WW: Over the course of you working you've, published over 40 collections of poetry, recorded over 100 full-length independent LP's, and produced over 2000 paintings. That's A LOT. I also read that prior to your acceptance to art school you made over 600 drawings. Can you talk a little bit about how you work (it must be all the time) and how you feel about a drive to keep producing more and more substance (whether it be music or paintings or writings)?

BC: These are estimates, the real numbers are kept quiet because they are too ridiculous. That said, I am actually lazy by nature, but also very fast and spontaneous by nature. I taught myself to make 8 ft oil paintings much in the manner of a sketch. This is also how I treat music. The only hard one is writing novels. Being dyslexic, this can be quite challenging and I don't like the hard work of making them seem effortless. The truth is this is the way God made me, I don't have to try very hard, and in fact find it easy. It's just a matter of getting up and getting myself moving. But no joking – I spend most my time twiddling my thumbs and doing nothing. I've not been playing music or doing readings for the past year and never had a career as a musician. and I'm quite happy to do less as I enjoy my 'overnight success' aged 50 years old. As someone who is essentially unemployable I've only ever made a living at painting.

WW: How does this work ethic change from music to painting to writing? Are there differences or is it a very similar creative melting pot?

BC: I paint once, or sometimes twice a week. I make woodcuts only when I'm pressured to do so now. I write songs and poems when and where I feel like it, but not often and mostly don't bother writing my ideas down so I don't have to deal with making more books and records. Novels I do very sporadically. I used to do 15 hours a day for a few weeks, but since I've had children, that's impossible and I mostly give up after the first 15 minutes of changing the first line six times.

WW: Your paintings have a very visceral and lush application of paint and atmospheric technique. Are there specific senses you like to effect or reactions you hope to provoke in the viewer of your art?

BC: When I start a painting I have no concerns for the viewer at all. The paintings are made because I have an intense nature that wants to express itself. If people like them as well I'm over the moon. Really they are a prayer to truth and God; they always were. And sometimes they look good as well.

WW: How do you choose the subjects in your paintings?

BC: It's the same as choosing a pebble or shell on the beach: you pick up the one

that delights or fascinates you. so if something rings a bell I'm drawn in and want it to be part of me, or express part of my subconscious.

WW: The show "I Am The Billy Childish" puts your music in accompaniment with your paintings. Were the musical pieces made with the artworks in mind or do they explore different time periods and inspirations of your work?

BC: The LP sleeves and books are in a different room, and are meant as a background reference to the current paintings – too give some idea of where I come from. It's a little taster if you will. All of my work is one thing. They inform on each other but they don't rely on each other. Altogether the show offers 5 percent of Billy Childish: which is as much as the average Joe can stomach.

WW: How did you work with curator Matthew Higgs on this show at Lehmann Maupin?

BC: The show is entirely Mathew's interpretation. I've worked with Mathew for many years and I see it as respectful to allow him to show his version of me, which is a smart snazzy version, though quite tiny.

WW: Having been labeled and "outsider" for so many years, does showing at an established gallery like Lehmann Maupin change anything?

BC: Ah, we're back on labels again. I've always seen myself as an insider. The ghetto can be a wonderful place, but not so much fun if someone orders you into it or they put up iron gates to keep you in and try to stop you being a free walking artist.