

Time Out New York

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Review: Billy Childish, "I Am the Billy Childish"

By Joseph R. Wolin

Overachieving English eccentric Billy Childish has had a nearly 35-year career as a musician, a prolific writer of both poetry and prose, and a founder of at least two contrarian art movements, but he's perhaps best known as an appliquéd name on Tracey Emin's tent sculpture titled *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*. This exhibition of Childish's accomplished paintings should help to remedy that.

Childish paints as if he were a Postimpressionist à la Munch or Bonnard. Yet rather than retro or jokey, his large pictures on unprimed linen of mountaineers, volcanoes and classical composers seem freshly conceived and sincerely felt. The craggy Expressionist mountain in *Erupting Volcano (Sea View)* belches a rolling plume of smoke into a two-tone sky, while long intertwined strokes define low-lying clouds; surprisingly gorgeous, the image resembles a blown-up woodcut or a storybook illustration. *Russian Shepherd Boy* shows a small figure with a ghostly white face wearing a red coat and hat, nearly engulfed by a meadow that covers the rest of the canvas. The allover field of vivid green, pale blue and pink, writhing in sinuous lines and curlicues, and punctuated by blue and yellow triangular flowers, appears restlessly alive—an atavistic, animist vision of nature.

On a wall upstairs, curator Matthew Higgs has installed 55 records (representing about half of Childish's output) by his various garage-style bands, along with showcases holding a number of his books and zines. A formidable, if mute, display, it paints a portrait of the artist as a protean genius.