

New Statesman

February 25, 2010

Stuck Record

By Fisun Güner

Billy Childish, painter, writer and prolific musician, was a founding member of the Stuckists - that minor, rather silly, anti-conceptual art movement. In 1999 they published a manifesto proclaiming that, instead of sticking a shark in formaldehyde to somehow "explore ideas about death", or embroidering tents with names of all the folk you've slept with in order to "explore ideas about intimacy", all artists must paint, and paint figuratively, too.

So, this raises the question: just what is Childish doing at the ICA, the grand old lady of conceptual art? The institute has given him his own exhibition, displaying not only his most recent paintings, but lots of archive material upstairs relating to his records, poems, novels and film work. There's a whole wall devoted to his record sleeves, including one featuring a young Tracey Emin, his one-time girlfriend, dressed as a French maid and managing to look both very bored and very minxy.

Perhaps, after decades of being of minor cultural interest - something in the tradition of the Outsider artist - Childish is finally getting the establishment recognition he deserves. Or perhaps, more cynically, the ailing ICA needs to get its attendance figures up pretty sharpish, and who better than this semi-underground cult figure to help it do that, one whose musical admirers have included Kurt Cobain, the White Stripes and, er, Kylie Minogue? (In fact, you sometimes wonder if Childish has somehow been selected to play stooge to the cool, clever guys - a naïf Henri Rousseau indulged by the real players, who, in Rousseau's case, were the early modernists.)

In the main gallery you'll find his paintings: self-portraits; a painting of the Swiss writer Robert Walser, dead and taken from a forensic police photo; a still life of irises; a sad industrial landscape depicting somewhere in Rochester, Kent. All are painted with ragged, swirling, expressionistic gestures in dissonant colours. I particularly like the one of him wearing his French artist's beret - very Rousseau - and canary yellow hill-walking outfit. You might say that he's no Munch, the artist Childish most resembles here; but then you might counter that neither was Munch, really, apart from two or three of his best paintings.