

## **The New York Observer** **October 31, 2011**

### **Life After Thee Milkshakes: After Decades of Underground Music Fame, Billy Childish Tries Blue Chip Art**

By Andrew Russeth

"There are people who have said to me, 'They're not going to swallow you in the art world until you're dead,'" the musician, poet, novelist and artist Billy Childish said. "The chance that it has been moved forward 20—or 30 years, hopefully—is something that I never expected."

Mr. Childish, 51, was speaking on the phone from Chatham, England, where he was born and still lives, and he was discussing his upcoming painting show at the Lower East Side branch of the Lehmann Maupin gallery, which opens Nov. 4. He has had a handful of shows in Europe, but this exhibition will be his first at a commercial gallery in New York.

These days, many visual artists are multitaskers. They write, they make clothing, they work in multiple mediums; art's expanded field has made experimentation and cross-disciplinary practice not just an attractive option, but de rigueur. Which makes Mr. Childish inadvertently prescient: he has been at it for years. Not that it's been easy.

"Really creative people are not liked in literature, in art or in music," he said. "They tend to be excluded, and the reason being that they're not containable and they're pains in the ass. I'm one of those people—uncontainable and a pain in the ass."

What from all appearances has certainly been uncontainable is Mr. Childish's output. Since the late 1970s, he has completed more than 2,000 paintings, published more than 50 books of poetry and written five novels. He has run a printing press and a record label, and he has played a supporting role in many of British contemporary art's major events.

But he is best known as a musician. He has released more than 110 records with a variety of post-punk, blues-inflected bands since the late 1970s with monikers like the Pop Rivets, Thee Milkshakes, Thee Mighty Caesars, Thee Headcoats, the Musicians of the British Empire and the Buff Medways.

"In the 1990s, I think I must have seen Billy's bands play more than 100 times," British-born curator Matthew Higgs told *The Observer*, "and I will say without hesitation he was the best front man I have ever seen." Mr. Higgs, 47, presented the artist's work at the White Columns alternative space in the West Village, where he is director, and is curating the Lehmann Maupin exhibition.

"They wanted someone who has some history with me to try to tell this very big

story without confusing people," Mr. Childish said. He and Mr. Higgs have been friends since the early 1990s, when the painter Peter Doig introduced them. Messrs. Doig and Higgs co-curated a show of Mr. Childish's work at London's nonprofit Cubitt gallery in 1993, the very first show that Mr. Higgs ever produced.

"It was the first stirrings of the YBAs," Mr. Higgs said, referring to the group known as the Young British Artists, who were gaining fame at the time. "The work Billy was making was very different." As YBA Damien Hirst began making his first sculptures with live animals and carcasses—a 1990 work consisted of a white box in which maggots fed on a rotting cow head, eventually growing into flies—Mr. Childish was looking to painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

That work, Mr. Higgs said, "was very influenced by German Expressionism. There was a very strong line; it was almost a painted version of woodcuts." He painted pastoral scenes in long strokes and bright colors, recalling the work of Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch. Sometimes a silent solitary figure appears in these landscapes, wandering through them.

"Both Peter and I knew Billy's music, art and writing," Mr. Higgs told us, "but his painting simply wasn't as well known." And yet that had been the artist's first passion. In his youth, he painted at home and often took trips to the museums in London, where he developed unfashionable tastes, leaning away from conceptual and abstract work. "I would look at the Rothkos, and I found them completely depressing and uninteresting," he said.

After dropping out of school at 16 to work at a dockyard as a stonemason, Mr. Childish continued to draw, but, having no credentials, he had to fight his way into art school, first at a local college. "I was very unimpressed by art schools and art teachers telling me what to do," he said. "I came from an educational background where we didn't listen to teachers at all. We were just dockyard fodder."

Even when he did manage to enroll at Saint Martins College, he remained an iconoclast. "I refused to paint inside the college," he said. "I painted at home, and told them I did not want to be contaminated by painting in their building." Not unpredictably, he was expelled. On the plus side, he met Mr. Doig. "We were into the same type of music, and he gave me—I'm looking at it right now on the shelf—it's Bukowski's *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions, and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*. Pete said, 'Oh you'll like this.'"

At the time, Mr. Childish was already churning out material—drawing, printing, painting, writing and cutting records at a rapid pace—not unlike Bukowski. "He's not my favorite writer by a long shot," he told us. "There's a huge amount of work, and there's a lot of it that isn't that good, when he's acting like a macho idiot, but there is a hell of a lot of it that is, and that bit is still more than a lot of people do in a couple of lifetimes. I realized in retrospect that I was doing the right thing."

In the 1980s, Mr. Childish became involved with the artist Tracey Emin, who went on

to become one of the progenitors of the YBA aesthetic, becoming best known for confessional work, like a camping tent in which she sewed the names of every person she'd ever slept with. (Mr. Childish was included.) She had been studying fashion at the time and worked with him on his printing press. After they split, they remained friends. "Tracey and I did not see eye to eye on Britart," Mr. Childish said with good humor, using another name for the YBA's art. "I called it bankers' Dada."

On the phone, Mr. Childish is soft spoken and gracious, every bit the English gentleman. But he can be biting. He has a "primal, aggressive, antagonistic aesthetic," Mr. Higgs said. He sings songs with titles like "I've Been Fucking Your Daughters and Pissing on Your Lawn" and "Get Out of Here Pretty Girl." The lyrics of the latter announce, "I'm gonna put a sock in your mouth / and throw you out that door." He often performs these songs dressed in a tweed blazer and bow tie, sometimes wearing a newsboy hat or a fedora.

He has also written acerbic diatribes about the state of contemporary art. In the mid-1990s, he wrote what he calls "very strong anti-art manifestos. They were very volatile, very contradictory, very sarcastic." One manifesto, published in 1997, which railed against conceptual art, includes the dictums "Good taste is fascism" and "We must embrace the unacceptable in all spheres."

Mr. Childish's candidness, and his prolific output, which dealers frown on, did not help his art career; nor did joining with an old literary rival, Charles Thompson—"He used to try to have me banned from readings for being so outspoken and condescending about his work," he explained—in the late 1990s to form a group called Stuckism, which devoted itself to painting and figuration, and aligned itself in opposition to the YBAs.

The name for the movement came from a poem by Mr. Childish in which he recounted Ms. Emin telling him, "Your paintings are stuck, you are stuck!"

"Charles Thompson had a big problem with Tracey at the time, because I think that she hadn't made him a cup of tea when she went to go visit," Mr. Childish told us. "She hadn't been as welcoming as he thought she should have been."

These days, the Stuckists tend to surface for half-baked protests surrounding festivities related to the Turner Prize, the annual art award that Tate bestows on one artist under 50, and which has often favored conceptual or abstract work. "I never attended any of the demonstrations, or condoned it," Mr. Childish said. "I thought that they were overly concerned about what Britart represented, and I did not want to get into a reactionary situation of validating bankers' Dada."

He now says that he wanted to leave the group after its first exhibition in 1999, but stuck around for about a year and a half, formally resigning in 2001. Nevertheless, that short involvement, as well as his music background, has given him a reputation of an outsider.

"He is constantly being anachronistic," Mr. Higgs told us. "Whatever he is doing, it seems to be wrong, and you have to have an extraordinary amount of self-confidence to believe in that." Indeed, as cultural tastes have changed, Mr. Childish has kept working as he always has, churning out records, honing his painting and writing prodigiously.

"He comes in and out of focus in the culture," Mr. Higgs said. As interests shift, people discover him and he becomes a star; other times he is forgotten. He added, "Now, more than 30 years after he started, we can see what a remarkable thing he set in motion as an 18 or 19 year old. His idea was fully formed at the beginning, and his life has really been fleshing out this idea."

Mr. Childish's painting has gradually evolved, and he has been working on a larger scale. "I paint a little less than I used to," he said, "and I make a little less music, which is still too much. I'm trying to moderate myself." His new works at Lehmann Maupin (which, by coincidence, also represents Ms. Emin) will include paintings of figures like the Finnish composer Sibelius and the German mountain climber Toni Kurz, who died tragically at the age of 23.

"I like this existential loneliness of people who go out into the void and do something," Mr. Childish said. "The heroism of it; pitting yourself against yourself."

Does he see himself in that role? "It's not something that I want," he replied. "I'm interested in it, but I don't think that it's the truth—I think it's a very easily believed lie."

But, Mr. Childish allowed, "Sibelius is a bit of a kindred spirit in the sense that he was a completely messed up, melancholic young man. He wrote his last symphony and decided it would never be quite good enough at age 60 and so he burned it and never wrote another thing and lived into his 90s."

He thought for a moment.

"That's almost the opposite of what I'm like," he said. "But I don't know. I'm not 60."