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26 Questions for Artist, Poet, and Musician Billy Childish

By Artinfo

Name: Billy Childish

Age: 51

Occupation: Painter, poet and musician

City/Neighborhood: Chatham, Kent, England

What project are you working on now?

I've just been completing a book of poetry and a double 45 / 7" record to tie in with the Lehmann Maupin show; an ongoing and evolving installation of my more polemic work with the Art Hate project has just opened at L-13 in London; I'm presently recording two LPs — one with the Chatham Singers (blues/country), and one with the Musician's of the British Empire (R'n'B/punk). I'm also commencing a cycle of paintings for an exhibition in Chatham Dockyard (summer 2012). As a 16-year-old boy I worked in the old naval dockyard as an apprentice stonemason, before the yard was closed by Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. Chatham Dockyard was one of the largest Royal yards and had been active since Tudor times.

Your paintings on view at Lehmann Maupin include portraits of the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, the tribal leader Spotted Elk in death at Wounded Knee, and the German mountaineer Toni Kurz. What interests you about these figures? Do they have anything in common?

I like Sibelius because he was a crazy drunken boy and I can relate to that... Also his love of nature and his understanding that art can't match it: A goose honking is bigger than a symphony. Spotted Elk was killed at the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890 and photographed frozen in death, his fingers seeming to point to himself as if to accuse his enemies. Spotted Elk was considered a great man of peace. I think all of us who are honest can relate to this painful image of pathos. Of course Spotted Elk also relates to Sibelius's love affair before nature. Kurz is another lonely man on the end of a rope — he tragically died on his second attempt to climb the north face of the Eiger in 1936. All three of these men lived their lives doing what their natures required of them.

Your exhibition also pairs recent oil paintings with a survey of your music and literary projects. Is visual art best understood in the context of other media?

I don't think so. In this case the pairing is being done just to illustrate how unusual it is to be me. I have no strategy as to how one media will inform the other, apart from the fact that all my work is elemental. There is no ambition or remit, I just follow my nature and so work comes out that interests me and gives me joy. Nothing is manufactured to enhance another area, though of course it obviously does. So you could say that my painting and music are linked in the way that I paint "off the cuff" in the same way as I play a guitar solo. I'm finding out what it is going to be by doing

it — not rehearsing it in my bedroom so as I can impress people by wringing off the blues, but hacking at the strings to make the rust fly.

You are incredibly prolific in a variety of mediums, including painting, poetry, and music. Do you find certain concepts are easier to communicate in our medium than another?

Yes, ideas that need to be clear and perhaps pinpointed are usually best allowed in poetry and prose. Music is probably the most emotive, but painting is the least regulated of all three. Ham-fistedness is acceptable at the top of the painting world, but not at the top of the music industry or in the field of literature. You can't have a number one hit with a cassette recording, or a poetry prize for swearing, but Baselitz can paint badly upside down and get a round of applause.

As the co-founder of the Stuckists, you have been described at various points as a "cult figure" and "one of the most misunderstood figures on the British art scene." How would you characterize your place in the art world at large?

I've never set out to have a position so I have refused all manner of insults, accolades, ghettos. I would say that I'm a natural who belongs at the heart of things.

One of your organization's perennial targets has been the Turner Prize, which you see as too conceptually weighted. One a scale of one to ten, how objectionable is this year's shortlist? And who is the worst?

In fact I was invited to 'co-found' the Stuckists in 1999, then left in 2001 — so they are not, and never were, my organization. As to the Turner Prize, I have never seen any work at any of the shows and consequently have no idea who's on the short list. It is worth mentioning that the Turner Prize is not taken seriously by very few artists.

What do you think of the state of painting today? Any alarming developments?

Nothing has ever alarmed me in the tame world of art.

What's the last show that you saw?

I think it was Frida Kahlo at the Tate. Expensive to get in, prescribing what the viewer should think of the work, overcrowded and badly hung. Otherwise okay.

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

Kurt Schwitters at the Pompidou in Paris in the mid-1990s. I was surprised because although he was one of the great heroes of my youth, the show was so vast and comprehensive I got bored and liked it less. I suppose it should have been obvious to me that more would be less.

What's your favorite place to see art?

Someone's front room.

Do you make a living off your art?

From painting, yes. From music and poetry, no.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

That's tricky. Paint rags. Hog hair brushes, oil paint, canvas. A cup of tea. Me. Beethoven on the record player smashing his piano with hammers — take your pick.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

In my family, and a growing interest in the world of others: the brave human beings.

Do you collect anything?

I have a lots of hats and boots.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

I don't really do that, but I do swap. The last swap I did was for a Neal Jones painting.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

A portrait of my girlfriend when I was 18, I think.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

When I first visited the Munch Museum in Oslo in 1991 it was homely and easy with everything in touching distance and natural light. When I went back a few years ago it had been turned into a fortified discotheque.

What's your art-world pet peeve?

Timidity in the face of sex, money, and perceived power.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

I just get on my bike and head home and drink a green tea.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

No.

What's the last great book you read?

The drinker by Hans Fallada

What work of art do you wish you owned?

None

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

None

What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?

My friends at the L-13 Light industrial Workshop: Neal Jones, Pete Bennett, Harry Adams. Also Gavin Lockheart and Philip Absolon.

Who's your favorite living artist?

I studied at St. Martin's in the late '70s. My only friend there was Peter Doig (we liked the same music and painters). I like Peters more recent, slightly less comfortable paintings. Other than that I love myself and like Baselitz despite the gimmicks.

What are your hobbies?

Painting, poetry, and music.