



INDEPENDENT

My Secret Life: Billy Childish, artist, 50

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My parents were ... an aspirational Conservative son of an able seaman, who became a graphic designer and was arrested for drug smuggling, and the daughter of a dockyard worker who worked on the haberdashery counter at Lefevres department store in Gillingham, Kent.

The house/flat I grew up in ... was built on the site of an old shack which had been home to an ex-German POW, his drunken English wife and their two children. The wife eventually drank herself to death. It is cursed land and misery comes to any who live there.

When I was a child I wanted to be ... a red squirrel, a T Rex, or Vincent Van Gogh.

If I could change one thing about myself ... it would be my inability to pretend I like things I most defiantly do not.

You wouldn't know it but I'm very good at ... cooking and yoga.

You may not know it but I'm no good at ... spelling, maths, telling lies, sucking up to people or Hoovering.

At night I dream of ... devils, gods, friends, enemies, mermaids and redemption.

What I see when I look in the mirror ... is someone I know well but barely recognise.

My favourite item of clothing ... is a hat. A fur felt trilby, or a cap comforter knitted by mother, or a Great War Tam o'Shanter, or a 12-inch Basque beret, or a deerstalker. If you want to get ahead, get a hat!

I wish I'd never worn ... I'm a Sagittarian. Obviously I've never worn anything that I've been remotely ashamed of.

It's not fashionable but I like ... large moustaches, damp tweed and hobnail boots.

I drive/ride ... a rusty 1967 Volvo estate with a leaky windscreen and busted locks. My pushbike is a 1936 twin-tube BSA with 28-inch frame. I have to lean against buses at traffic lights as my feet can't touch the ground.

My house is ... a bit wonky as it got jogged by bombs when the Luftwaffe tried to take out Chatham station. It is smack-bang in the middle of the red-light district.

My favourite work of art ... 'The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb' by Hans Holbein [in the Kunstmuseum, Basel] and any collage by Kurt Schwitters.

My favourite building ... is a Nissen hut, or a windmill, or a couple of railway carriages in a big field. Or maybe all three in a wood with a 'Trespases will...' sign and some wood-elves.

A book that changed me ... Aged four, 'The House at Pooh Corner'; aged 10, 'Lust for Life' (a biography of Van Gogh); aged 15, the 'Tao Te Ching'; aged 20,

'Ask the Dust' by John Fante; aged 35, 'Institute Benjamenta' by Robert Walser; aged 40, 'The Brothers Karamazov' by Dostoevsky.

Movie heaven ... 'The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp'.

The last album I bought ... Prokofiev, 'Alexander Nevsky'.

My secret crush ... Aunt Sally from 'Worzel Gummidge'.

The person who really makes me laugh ... Oliver Hardy.

My greatest regret ... My father leaving home when I was seven and subsequently being sexually abused by a family friend.

The last time I cried ... was when our new baby daughter smiled at me last week.

My five-year plan ... is spiritual evolution and amusement.

My life in seven words ... Unbounded imagination, masturbation, dumb insolence, pain, laughter.

A life in brief

Born Steven Hamper on 1 December, 1959 in Chatham, Kent, Billy Childish is an artist, poet, film-maker, singer and guitarist. Expelled from St Martins School of Art, he became known for his confessional and often explicit work – which included details of his love life and childhood sexual abuse – and was a co-founder of the Stuckist movement. A former partner of Tracey Emin, he now lives in Kent with his wife Julie Winn and their baby daughter Scout. A major solo show, 'Billy Childish, Unknowable but Certain', opens at London's ICA on 17 February and runs until 18 April