

Artist Billy Childish comes of age

Once known mainly for his relationship with artist Tracey Emin, Billy Childish, co-founder of the Stuckist movement – and a man of many names – has finally come into his own, writes Fionnuala McHugh

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Childish in his studio. Photo by Fionnuala McHugh

Billy Childish is a musician, a poet, a novelist, a photographer and a painter.

Unless you're familiar with the independent British music scene of the late 1970s and early 80s, however, you almost certainly won't have heard of him. Until recently, he tended to be defined via his relationship with a rather better-known British artist called Tracey Emin, with whom he'd had a relationship in the 80s. If his name was known to the general public at all, it was because it had been stitched, along with many others, on to a tent in her seminal opus *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963 – 1995*.

One exasperated day, Emin yelled at Childish, "Your paintings are stuck. You are stuck, stuck, stuck!" As a result of this observation, the Stuckist art movement was formed in 1999 (whereupon the friendship with Emin foundered for about a decade). The Stuckists were against conceptual art of which embroidered tents, rotting sharks, blaspheming elephant dung, etc were only the most obvious examples.

A core belief of the Stuckists was that "artists who don't paint aren't artists", and although Childish left the movement a couple of years later, this is the way he continues to think. The first thing people say about him is that he's an eccentric; but in the art world of 2014, perhaps the most truly eccentric thing about him is that he's a traditionalist.



Billy Childish in front of one of his artworks. Photo: Rikard Osterlund

Still, he's now having "a moment". In recent years, he's been shown in Berlin and Los Angeles. On March 27, Lehmann Maupin opened a Childish exhibition in Hong Kong, which follows one it held in its New York gallery last spring. As it happens, I saw the New York show. I'd never heard of Billy Childish (and thought the name was offputtingly terrible), and was only in the gallery by chance, but his large oil paintings – mostly of figures set within the Kentish landscape of water and sky where he's spent his entire 54 years – were compelling enough to prompt a tour of the show, twice. They weren't installations, they weren't videos, they weren't putrefying. They appeared to be the vigorous artistic result of a British mind-meld between Munch and Van Gogh.

When I mention this to Childish a couple of weeks ago, in his studio, he smiles and twiddles his moustache in a pleased manner. Although he likes to insist he doesn't require validation on his journey, it's obviously pleasant to encounter a thumbs-up at this stage on the road.

"The only reason I'm here is because I took no notice of everyone who told me I was doing the wrong thing," he says.

His Stuckist co-founder, Charles Thomson, once said that he'd read a piece in The Observer newspaper on Emin and deduced that "she seemed to have transformed herself into a variant of Billy". Now Billy is increasingly being recognised for being Billy. Or, as he likes to put it, "You're not in charge of your own destiny. But if a roasted pigeon flies into your mouth at the age of 50, you think, 'That's jammy'."

His studio is in the old naval dockyard in Chatham, about an hour's train journey southeast of central London. Chatham is where Charles Dickens was born and the town has a Dickens World tourism "experience"; and soon, you start to feel that a similarly quaint flavour permeates the World of Childish. The taxi driver at the station, for instance, launches into a monologue as if primed: "Have you seen him? The way he dresses?"

Oooh, Billy's a character all right, he books a cab every day, comes down on a kid's scooter, puts it in the back. See, he's got this perceptive mind, looking here, looking there, you know what these creative people are like, that's probably why he can't drive ..." Instructions on how to reach his space are equally picturesque ("get dropped off at the Victorian Ropery, go up the metal stairs next to the Shipping Bookshop, knock on the first-floor window ..."). The Ropery is a dark edifice where maritime ropes are still made for export, where menacing Victorian machinery stands around in the shadows and where a nearby door bangs throughout the interview.

"Ghosts," says Childish, matter-of-factly. "I don't like coming here at night. This particular building is known for it, the fellows who work here have experienced them."

Perhaps what the fellows have glimpsed, however, is Childish wandering around in the gloom, because he deliberately conveys the sense of another era. Today he's wearing a camouflage jacket ("I'm very keen on camouflage, I think the artist should be a moving target") and a black beret. If you took Salvador Dali, lengthened him (Childish is a skinny six-footer) and blended him with one of Rembrandt's self-portraits, you'd come close to achieving the effect. During the interview, he mentions that his father wore Edwardian suits (which I didn't entirely believe until he forwarded a photograph afterwards, and then I got his point. Dressing up and role play appear to be in the genes.) Needless to say, Childish – sometimes spelt Chyldish – isn't his actual name. He has a weakness for adopting various guises; he once claimed to have set up a bank account in the name of the German artist Kurt Schwitters, who died in 1948 and whom he says he loves because he was "naughty, traditional, ostracised and had a great sense of humour". (He also remarks, later, that he has some lines by Schwitters tattooed on his left buttock – "I don't bother with ideal/I eat the apple with the peel" – but it seems a good idea to accept this fact without visible proof.) His email identity is currently

William Claudius, in recognition of a long-held devotion to Robert Graves' book I, Claudius, and for much of his youth he called himself Gus Claudius.

He seems to have felt artistically hampered by his real name, which – and even Dickens might have hesitated to make this up – actually is Hamper; William Charlie Hamper is what's written in his passport.

In fact, he was already in his late teens when one of his friends nicknamed him Childish, after he began pretending to be mentally ill on trains.



Childish's father, John Hamper, in 1967.

“What’s the word for that, for being a total spaz?” he muses, over a cup of green tea. Tasteless? “No! John Lennon did it ... I had a real interest in mental health stuff. I was a porter in an asylum in Maidstone. I had a short back and sides haircut, and I realised a way for people not to pick on me was to draw lobotomy scars on my temples. People would avoid me!” He gives a big laugh, does a moustache-tip tweak and stares into space with a smile, remembering his younger self. He’s about halfway through several hours of entertaining conversation, during which his childhood memories glide along close to the surface. It’s highly unusual in a newspaper interview with an adult to discuss infants’ school (where he recalls a visual tussle with the shape of the number three) and to hear about adventures with named childhood friends (Keith, Ian) but, for Childish, the past isn’t another country: it’s the one you see in his landscapes, an unwavering, continuous presence. He’s the only member

of his family still living in Chatham. This is almost certainly what Emin meant when she said he was stuck. She flew away; he rooted.

The funny thing is it wasn't exactly a happy childhood.

Last year, he painted a portrait of his mother for a London group show to mark Mother's Day. He said at the time that he'd first drawn her when he was about nine, with a tear rolling down her cheek because his father had left them, yet again.

"Family and life supply everything," he'd stated then.

"Origin is the true original and there is nothing gimmicky about it ... it's always true and authentic, which is the only valuable currency in art."

Also when he was nine, Childish was sexually abused by a family friend on holiday. That he was drawing his mother's vulnerability around the same time is surely not a coincidence.

"Probably because of that, I had a lot of worries about vampires and werewolves," he says. "And I had to support adults who were emotionally under stress. My mother said we were under destruction from the forces of the world."

When he was 12, he was bullied by a neighbour.

"He was a housebreaker," he says. "He made me be the lookout."

The police finally came calling and Childish was on the verge of being sent to Borstal, the British institution for young offenders until (as with Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Fagin, the adventures of whom this episode slightly resembles) things managed to work themselves out.

There was always the countryside, however. When he talks about those Medway marshes with their forts, their prison hulks and mists, he's

conjuring up one of the most famous childhood landscapes in all of literature: the haunts of the young Dickens as described, to terrifying effect, in *Great Expectations*. He couldn't have known that connection as a child himself because he was dyslexic and didn't learn to read or write until he was 14, and although he now loves Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Knut Hamsun, Hans Fallada and Joseph Conrad, he has still never read any Dickens ("although I like the David Lean films"). It's as though he needs to gaze as far beyond the fence as possible in his choice of literature – and art – in order to stay creative within his own backyard.

Art school, at which he made several attempts, didn't agree with him. He'd been working as a stonemason in Chatham's dockyard while his brother, Nick, was at the Slade School of Fine Art. (He has a much younger halfbrother, Hugo Hamper-Potts, who is also an artist and musician.) On the strength of about 600 drawings from that time, Childish was accepted at London's Saint Martin's School of Art but he left halfway through his first term, when he encountered abstract art. He went back again in 1980 but it wasn't a match and he was expelled.

"People presumed I was pretending to be working class and stupid or that I was working class and stupid," he says.

"And I wouldn't go along with their orthodoxies. I'm always trying to make a case for tradition. People think that tradition is dictatorial and hamstringing creativity, but it's the opposite! Tradition is the only thing that gives freedom.

When I teach art, I say, 'Do the opposite of when I was at art school and you're on the right track.'" Meanwhile, his estranged father, who was a graphic designer, had gone to prison for drug smuggling and Childish couldn't get proper funds for another grant, so he decided to strike out with his own artistic endeavours.

He spent the next 14 years on the dole, collecting unemployment benefit. This is when he became best known for his music, in a variety of bands; he has a highly selective fan club including American film director Larry Clark and Jack White, of the band White Stripes. It was also when he encountered Emin, who was a fashion student at Medway College of Design. She has publicly acknowledged his influence on her transition into the art world; and he talks about her now in a cautious, off-the-record sort of way because they're back on speaking terms again and he doesn't want to cause problems.

Whatever you think of the Stuckist philosophy, he has managed to stay extraordinarily true to it even as the world is catching up with him. (The organisers of the British version of reality-television show *Celebrity Big Brother* came calling in 2006. He turned them down.) Every Sunday he goes round to his mother's house in Whitstable, 40 kilometres away, and paints there for three hours, and every Monday he paints in the Ropery for four hours.

He's still making music, although he prefers not to play live anymore, and he's currently writing a book – one of three he has on the go – about the British punk-rock scene.

His style, as you might expect, is vivid and compellingly immediate, with much erratic spelling. He gives me a copy of his work *The Stonemason* to read on the train back and when he signs it, he draws a little gallows alongside. That's his logo, and the name of his publishing imprint; he says it's a reference to the children's word-game called *Hangman*, but with *Childish*, names are never entirely simple.

Language, which gave him so many problems, and his visual creativity have undoubtedly saved him; perhaps the two most piercing words in his literary canon are in the title of his autobiography, with its photo of himself as a child on the front. It's called *My Fault*.

“You could ask me about the paintings,” he suggests amiably, as we sit in the Ropery. But his philosophy on that score is really fairly simple.

“They’re achieved by letting them be painted the way they want to be painted. Everyone agrees the least I do, the better.” And he offers an appropriate (in the context) thought: “Concepts are pretty ropey, aren’t they?” There’s a child in a red beret who’s featured in his recent work; this is Scout, his four-year-old daughter (named after the heroine of *To Kill a Mockingbird*) by his American wife, Julie, the bassist in his current band, the Musicians of the British Empire, or MBEs. He also has a son, Huddie (named after the blues musician Huddie Ledbetter), aged 14, by Kyra De Coninck, who is Flemish and used to be in his band *Thee Headcoatees*.

“I’ve heard it said that I must be a terrible, authoritarian, Victorian father,” he says. “But no one who’s seen me with my children thinks that. The thing I want from my children is to be polite and to communicate and to negotiate the world with ease.”

Later, when he’s driving me back to the station (in a car, not a scooter, and with perfect competence, contrary to the earlier theories of the taxi driver), he suddenly says, “I don’t do this Billy Childish thing all the time.” So who is he the rest of the time?

“I’m just myself. My wife was laughing at me the other day, and when I asked why, she said, ‘You’re so you.’”

“Edge of the Forest”, by Billy Childish, is on display at Lehmann Maupin (Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, tel: 2530 0025) until May 3.