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## CHILDISH AS HE WANTS TO BE

### by Ben Davis

Billy Childish, Mar. 5-Apr. 17, 2010, at White Columns, 320 West 13th Street, New York, N.Y. 10014

I am a casual **Billy Childish** fan, not a Billy Childish super-fan. Childish (b. 1954) is a cult artist in the true sense of the term -- beloved by a small, dedicated crew who adores everything he does, and largely ignored beyond that. He's probably better known in the U.K. than the U.S., and appropriately, Matthew Higgs has organized dueling shows on either side of the Atlantic that reflect this relative status. In London, the Institute of Contemporary Art offers a wide-ranging show of music, writings and art. In New York, White Columns has a small show of his recent, baffling paintings.

Childish is a man of many talents and is tremendously productive. In his commitment to life as a semi-improvised, multi-faceted creative carnival, he might be considered to be something like a British **Martin Kippenberger**. He is probably best known for his music, as founder of Hangman Records, and participant in dozens of bands going back to the halcyon days of punk's birth. He favors a stripped-down, bluesy sound (the White Stripes are just the most recent to take inspiration from him -- though, true to form, Childish couldn't stop himself from insulting Jack White, **touching off** a very public war of words). In literature, Childish has put out voluminous books of poetry, of a corrosively personal bent, as well as several autobiographical novels. He is inspired, he says, by the disheveled Beat confessionals of Charles Bukowski, an author he first read when his friend, the painter **Peter Doig**, lent him a collection of short stories while they were at St. Martin's together.

As for visual art, Childish caught some **attention** last year with "Art Hate Week" in the U.K., an initiative that had him teaming up with Steve Lowe and **Jimmy Cauty** to produce graphics denouncing the vacuity of the British art world, calling for demonstrations against the art establishment, and producing posters that got in your face with Nazi imagery, grafting Swastikas onto Childish's signature gallows motif (a silhouette of a scaffolding with a hanging noose has long served as the logo for Hangman Records, and other Childish endeavors). Seamlessly wedding punk and Dada impulses, Childish even produced a 7-inch vinyl single, *God Save Marcel Duchamp*, for "Art Hate Week." It was, of course, blank. The "Art Hate" initiative perfectly captured the kind of firebombing, willful nihilism that Billy Childish brings to pretty much everything he does.

Now and always, however, Childish will likely be best remembered in the visual arts as co-founder, with Charles Thomson, of the anti-avant-garde movement known as Stuckism, in 1999 (the name derives from a poem by Childish). The Stuckists, of course, are known as much for their regular picketing of the Turner Prize and broadsides against the Young British Artists as for their championing of figurative painting. Childish, incidentally, insists that the significance of the movement lies in the fact that Stuckism is an "international movement," against the "jingoism" of Young *British*



**Billy Childish**  
*Young Walser*  
 2009  
 White Columns



**Billy Childish**  
*Holding Hat and Brolli*  
 2009  
 White Columns



**Billy Childish**  
*His Hat Rolled Clean Away 3*  
 2008  
 White Columns

Art. Never one to identify with orthodoxy, however, Childish dissociated himself from Stuckism in 2001.

The 12 recent paintings at White Columns, all from 2008 or 2009, are nowhere near as charged with outrageous attitude as the "Art Hate" graphics. In fact, they are strikingly. . . placid. Childish has adopted a muddy, Expressionist-inspired form of painting. The works are of classical proportions. He often leaves bits of canvas exposed, giving the works a semi-finished look. A number of the White Columns paintings are from a recent series focusing on the life of Swiss modernist writer Robert Walser (1878-1956), a famous loner whose proto-Kafkaian 1908 novel *Institute Benjamenta* was an inspiration for Childish's own literary output. One of Childish's paintings, *Young Walser*, depicts the writer with his head cocked, his face a sickly green, his jacket a clownish yellow, in a style that apes **Edvard Munch** and **Emil Nolde** (the painting is based on the photo of Walser currently used to illustrate his Wikipedia [entry](#)). Another painting shows Walser on one of his walks through the countryside -- he was a famous hiker -- a small figure within a landscape of swirling, poisonous colors. Still another renders a photo of Walser dead, collapsed in the snow during one of his walks, his top hat cast out of reach at the lower left corner, the snow around his corpse a messy, half-finished slop of brush strokes.

As obscure as this subject matter is, the other works at White Columns take up themes that are, if anything, even less punk-rock: Still-lives of flower pots, focusing on arrangements of orange, red and pink blossoms, executed in a casual but fussy style. The name of this series is "Flowers in Buddha Pot." A press release tells us that they depict bouquets in vases made by Childish's mother. A final painting, *Medway Steamtug*, shows a riverboat floating beneath a bone white sky, some cheerful ferns glimpsed in the foreground. In all of his paintings, a painted glyph of Childish's noose symbol stands as his signature, in a bottom corner.

*Medway Steamtug*, in its way, is the key to the whole thing. Asked by Richard Birkett to explain his riverboat paintings, Childish said that, "The boat, the *John H Amos*, is non-operational -- it was the last steam paddle tug built in the UK, and is under restoration. The significance is that the *John H Amos* was an anachronism when built, already out of date in 1930." He then goes on to say something about how this connects to him being a member of Greenpeace. The important thing is an attachment to anachronism is self-consciously the point of these paintings, and the head-scratchingly backward-looking impression they leave is thus their intended effect.

In case this sounds improbable, here is a long quote from Childish, from a handout accompanying the White Columns show, which details his art philosophy (Childish's willfully uncorrected orthography preserved): "In an early manifestoe I stated that in 1999 duchamp would have been forced to exhibit cearfully executed water colours to maintain relivence. And I belive picaso said in the 1920's that if ready made's ever beame a mainsteam contrivencef, the expression of art would be up the shoot. You could say that I have learned new ways of colleting and putting my views over, but always my views are close to the elimental needs of genuine expression and oragin."

Got that? For admirers, affection for Childish's art often seems inseparable from the way he (in Birkett's words) projects a "sense of immediacy, rather than production filtered through layers of semantic argument and counter-argument." But Childish is quite canny; his "genuine expression" is very consciously in dialogue with **Marcel Duchamp**, the super-dandyish ur-brainiac artist and godfather of conceptualism. Childish's practice is not pre-conceptual, but post-conceptual; it is itself a deliberate "counter-argument." His paintings at White Columns, funnily enough, become legible and enjoyable at



**Billy Childish**  
*Atlas*  
 2009  
 White Columns



**Billy Childish**  
*Behind a Rock (detail)*  
 2009  
 White Columns



**Billy Childish**  
*Flowers in Buddha Pot*  
 2009  
 White Columns

the exact moment when you can recognize in them some tropes -- genre pastiche, deliberate provocation, literary allusion, willed anachronism -- that are quite familiar from the super-mediated world of contemporary art.

People love Billy Childish's oddball, deliberately "amateurish" paintings -- his term, not mine -- because they are Billy Childish's paintings, attached to his unique sense of anti-cool. This is, in the end, not all that different the way that people connect with works by **Damien Hirst**, despite the strong sense of visual indifference that they project -- I always try to explain to baffled relatives asking about contemporary art that this is something like an esthetic of celebrity memorabilia. Childish, of course, was a famous early lover of **Tracey Emin** -- he once scribbled over love letters from her, and displayed them as art -- and Emin's bad-girl, confessional art was directly inspired by Childish. "To be brutally honest, she didn't learn," Childish claims in a *Guardian* video from last year. "I didn't teach her, she just copied me." (Emin denies the connection.) The founding of Stuckism coincided with Emin's 1999 nomination for the Turner Prize. Sensationalist, media-smart Brit-art and its snarling, atavistic antagonist spring from the same well.

The difference, if you had to articulate one, would be this: YBA-style art operates, these days, with a kind of double consciousness, what Slavoj Žižek, in his pop psychoanalytic way, would call a "fetishistic split": "I know very well that what I do is not actually transgressive, it is routine, what is expected of me by my fans and the media -- but we'll all pretend like it is transgressive nevertheless." The main trait of Childish, on the other hand, is that he takes his outsider status quite seriously, refusing to accept any sort of double consciousness about it. Transgression is an existential position for him, not a style: "it is certainly very important for me to be seen 'not to belong' and even if I do belong, to maintain a voice that doesn't agree with the gang." This disposition explains why, stylistically, Childish can whip back and forth from the **John Heartfield**-meets-**Jamie Reid** "Art Hate" graphics, with their blisteringly nihilistic political imagery, to paintings of his mum's flower vases -- a "derriere-garde" gesture if ever there was one. (The catch, of course, is that some "split consciousness" about one's art practice, some minimal acceptance of its inauthenticity, is actually the prerequisite for establishing some form of stable relation to it. In a media environment as rapacious as ours, any symbol invested with an authentic sense of "outsiderness" is liable to get appropriated. To maintain a sense of self, an artist who adopts a totally uncompromising posture is going to have to undermine his own art at the first intimation of acceptance, just in order to maintain a sense of self. And indeed, constant self-sabotage is actually a reasonably good description of Childish's MO.)

What, one asks, will an artist so compulsively contrarian do now that his work has received some modicum of mainstream acceptance? That curse is not going to go away; I predict Childish's cachet will only grow. But then again, maybe the perspective of permanent outsider-ness was itself getting a little boring, and the unexpected move for Billy Childish would be to accept some adulation with the dignity that he has earned.

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