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# Shooting his family, other animals

It was a restless model who inadvertently made British artist and zoophile Richard Billingham put down the paintbrush and pick up the camera, writes Corrie Perkin

**I**N the final decade of the 20th century, a new movement exploded onto the international contemporary art scene. Almost overnight, dealers, curators and collectors were clamouring for a piece of the Next Big Thing.

The NBT was, in fact, the YBAs, or Young British Artists, as their great patron, advertising millionaire and collector Charles Saatchi, encouraged them to be known.

"The British art world is cock-a-hoop," wrote writer and political activist John Molyneux in his review of Saatchi's 1997 group show *Sensation*, held at the Royal Academy. "It is convinced that in what has become known as Young British Art it has found the answer to its dreams.

"Young, new, energetic, dynamic, cocky, cockney, rebellious (but not too rebellious, not Marxist or communist or anything old-fashioned like that) sexy, successful, scandalous (in just the way that attracts the media and draws the crowds) and above all profitable and British ..."

Exhibiting beside Damien Hirst, Marcus Harvey, Tracey Emin, the Chapman Brothers, Rachel Whiteread and others was Richard Billingham, a softly-spoken, dusty-haired former art student from the English Midlands. In Melbourne for a survey exhibition of his work, Billingham says his most lasting memory of *Sensation* was the opening night party.

"All these other young British artists were there. To be honest, I was just trying to spot the famous people in the crowd," he says. *Sensation* was not the first YBA group show, yet is considered a great cultural moment by some art historians. "We didn't know that at the time," he adds.

Richard Billingham: *People, Places, Animals*, which opens at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art on Thursday, is the artist's first opportunity to show the breadth of his oeuvre at once. Featuring photographs and video art, the exhibition reveals the catalysts for Billingham's creativity: his respect for animals, his interest with the environment, and his parents, Ray and Liz, who have since died.

Billingham was born in 1970 in the small town of Cradley Heath in Birmingham's outskirts. Known as "the Black Country" because of its role as a producer of steel, iron and coal, the area, says Billingham, "was a pretty grim place to grow up.

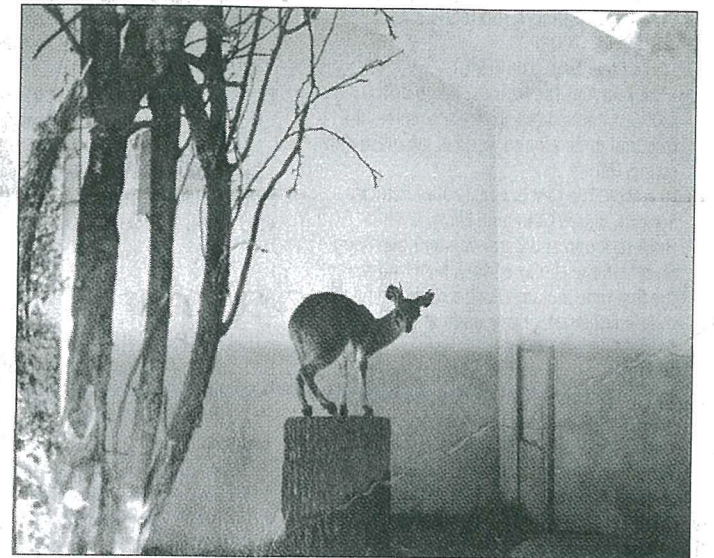
"Cradley Heath is the sort of place you drive through to get somewhere else. But I come from there and I have done all this work (based) on the place. I'm quite attached to it."

When Billingham was 10, his father, a machinist at a local plant, was made redundant. "He didn't do too much after that," recalls the son. "He used to say, 'I'm just going to lie on my back and be dumb', and that's what he did, more or less."

Ray Billingham was 20 years Liz's senior, and his job options were limited. Within weeks the couple had spent the redundancy money, the house had been sold to a conman for £2500, and the family moved to a tiny



**Beasts in his belfry:** Richard Billingham with a frame from his video *Zoo*; a fascination with animals sustained him through a 'dirt poor' childhood



**Captive love:** *Doe*, from Billingham's *Zoo* series



**Son's model:** Billingham's father in *Ray Under Blanket*

**'His images didn't just evolve the genre; they smashed their way through to another kind of verite encounter'**

Juliana Engberg, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art director

council flat in an estate tower. "Dirt poor" is how Billingham remembers this period.

"In the fridge there was no food, there'd be a block of fat and a loaf of bread." It sounds like a Monty Python sketch, I remark, and Billingham laughs. "We were pretty desperate, yeah," he says.

Two things sustained him during those years. The first was a fascination with animals, prompted by the purchase of a book on British mammals for 3p. "I read it and read it again, and got very interested in animals."

At the same time he developed a talent for drawing. "All you need is a piece of paper and a pencil," he says, adding that he spent hours drawing cars and motorbikes, firstly, then later, animals.

He attended a local government school and did well academically. His A-Level subjects

included chemistry, physics and biology, but he was determined to go to art school after graduating. He applied to 16 schools and was rejected by all of them. "It was really depressing to get rejected by the lot," he says, "but I was quite snobbish as a teenager and I'd applied to all the good art schools. I suppose I was pretty fussy."

Billingham applied — and was finally accepted — for a foundation year at the Bournville College of Art. During this time he started taking photographs of his father to use for practice painting portraits.

His inspiration was the British impressionist, Walter Sickert. "I wanted to make some of those paintings like Sickert. I liked the nudes on the bed with the light coming in. And I also liked them because they were about everyday life."

Ray Billingham became his son's model. "It wasn't too hard to get him to lie on the bed — that's what he was doing most of the day," Billingham recalls. "I'd do these very quick paintings and he'd pose for about 15 or 20 minutes, but then he'd start to fidget or ask for a drink. That's when I decided to take photos so I could paint the details without him moving."

Eventually, Billingham realised the photographs were, in fact, the art. Unable to afford colour printing, he borrowed the college's darkroom with its old black-and-white developer. Some of these early works are included in the new exhibition.

From 1991 to 1994 Billingham studied art at Sunderland University, then in 1995 had his first exhibition, at Anthony Reynolds's London gallery (Reynolds is still his dealer, and was responsible for flagging Billingham's work to Saatchi).

In her exhibition essay, ACCA director Juliana Engberg says Billingham's first exhibition came like a "bolt out of the blue".

"Displayed in a line were scrungy photographs — poorly lit, blurry, oddly framed,

made from crappy film stock ... of scenes from a family life that cut through a century of posed studio portrait groups," she writes.

"The series, now known as *Ray's a Laugh* entered visual culture at a time when the aesthetics of the everyday were in process of demolishing the contrived directorial mode of photo-making."

She adds: "Billingham's images didn't just evolve the genre; they smashed their way through to another kind of verite encounter."

*Ray's a Laugh* was published as a book in 1996 and Billingham's career took off. Commissions followed, then the *Sensation* exhibition, which toured internationally. In 2001, he was shortlisted for one of contemporary art's great honours, the Turner Prize.

Photographing landscapes is also an important part of his work. His 2003 *Black Country* series — also in the ACCA show — are described by Engberg as "like hauntings of place."

"Using light and colour in a dense wash, which, in turn, forces verticals and grids into high contrast against dark uncertain shapes and sky," she writes, "Billingham constructs

an eerie atmosphere full of apprehension."

In 2006, Billingham premiered another bold series of video works and photographs: this time, the subject is zoos and the animals in them. For two years, he traveled the world's zoological gardens. The animals — his childhood love — and the architecture and enclosures fascinated him.

"When shown together, the works turn the exhibition space into a zoo of sorts, underlying the way cultures of display are everywhere to be found within modern and contemporary societies," writes British art academic Rikki Hansen in the catalogue.

After the Melbourne exhibition opening Billingham, who now lives in Brighton, will return home in time to spend Christmas with his wife and 19-month-old son.

No guessing, then, the subject of his current photographic fascination. "I've been photographing the baby quite a lot, yeah," he says with a smile.

Richard Billingham: *People, Places, Animals* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art from Thursday until February 24.