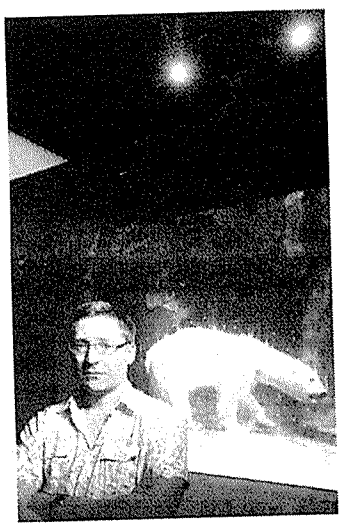
My family and other animals

Richard Billingham has left behind his English working class roots but not his wonder, writes **Megan Backhouse.**



PROBABLY it's just the glasses, the tidy hair and clean shave, but Richard Billingham looks nothing like his father. And you could never ever forget the sight of that scrawny, drunken dad passed out on the bathroom floor or with a TV dinner trickling down his top. It was more than 10 years ago now that we pored over the whole unruly bunch of Billinghams in their trinket-filled council flat in an English Midlands tower block.

There was tubby, tattooed mother Liz sprawled on the sofa with her pets and videos and young, pasty-faced brother Jason with his pasty-faced baby. It was Jason who spontaneously threw the cat for the now classic shot of that miserable creature hurtling through the air above father Ray's head (pictured).

But they're all classic shots now, having appeared in Billingham's 1996 book *Ray's a Laugh* and been exhibited widely, including Saatchi's notorious 1997 *Sensation* show with Damien Hirst and Co. A big part of the series' appeal is that, for all the lamentable deprivation, there is a tenderness to these pictures. They feel honest and unselfconscious.

Liz died suddenly three years ago. Ray died too, though not so unexpectedly, last year, and Jason rents another council flat not far from the one where his parents lived.

Billingham, who always knew education was a passport out, lives with his "missus" and baby Walter miles away in Brighton but right now he's in Melbourne to hang his first-ever survey, at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

He happily poses for *The Age* photographer in front of a massive video installation of a polar bear prowling around its zoo enclosure, but before we can start the interview he's determined to find the person in charge of hanging the show, which opens to the public tomorrow. He wants the bear down and a chimpanzee piece, which he thinks more monumental, up.

These *Zoo* works were taken over the past few years and, instead of all those dire goings-on at his parents' place, we get animals scratching, staring and otherwise killing time in cages.

When Billingham was young, David Attenborough was his hero and, once a year, his usually inactive mother would take him to the zoo. He still talks about how exciting it was, and he must have cut an unusual figure growing up in a poor, small town where, as he puts it, everyone had low expectations. When he visits there now and passes people he used to know, he says they just raise their eyebrows.

As a kid, he was the best drawer at school and got lots of attention for it (though not at home particularly) and always wanted to be an artist, which he imagined meant painting pub signs by day and sitting at an easel by night. "I didn't know that they fly you around the world and give you champagne."

Nor did his parents and, when Billingham took them to two of his exhibitions, he says they were more interested in staying in the posh hotel afterwards than looking at the art. "They didn't talk about the photographs much. My dad couldn't see that it was him that was depicted, he thought it was his brother. It was like he didn't know what he looked like or something."

Billingham was rejected from 16 art schools before securing a place at Sunderland University ("I really hated the area, it was even poorer than the place I came from") and he only started taking photographs as a reference for his paintings. He didn't think photography was fine art back then, and, even now, he says he would choose to see a painting show over a photography one: "It's more nourishing."

In earlier interviews he has spoken of still having the urge to paint, but now, at the age of 37, he's given up on the idea. "You might have to spend two months making a painting and there's more important things in life. Anyway, I am not that good a painter, I found out."

For all the posh hotels and the art-critic accolades, Billingham seems to have a genuinely uninflated view of himself. When the show is up and running, he's planning to walk around incognito with the public. "I have never had a survey show like this and I want to see what people think of it. I guess if I listen to the comments and I hear any negative things, I can do it better the next time."

His big fear was always that once he worked out the tricks of "snap-shot photography", the pictures would stop being interesting. While the candid family

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shots taken on an ordinary instant or disposable camera packed an innocent sort of punch, he worried that once he became too knowing he would just be repeating himself.

So Billingham, who has been represented by London's Anthony Reynolds since 1995, made a conscious decision to do very constructed landscapes to learn how to make an image that was premeditated in a way that photographing his mother hunched over her jigsaw with her tea and cigarettes wasn't.

These landscapes aren't in the ACCA survey, but his *Black Country* ones are, where, using a tripod, he has photographed all the ominous desolation of his childhood neighbourhood. They're more mysterious and studied than the family pictures, though there's a similar sense of melancholy.

More recently, he's tried photographing the streets around his Brighton home but he says it doesn't work, he doesn't have the same connection to the subject. Instead, he's started taking pictures of his 19-month-old son, who, I suggest, must have a very different childhood to his own.

"Yes, if he needs a new jacket, he gets a new jacket or new shoes, he doesn't want for anything," says Billingham.

He had 13 rolls of pictures of Walter back from the chemist the other day "and it was all crap. But sometimes I will have loads of good ones, you can never tell".

He attributes this getting-back-to-the-snapshot work to his mother. He started again with snaps of animals in zoos, which he is showing here alongside his more formal photographs of giraffes, chimpanzees and so on. "When my mum died I had the job of cleaning out the flat, nobody else was going to do it. It was all just junk. I had to throw nearly everything away, but I did keep the family albums and I noticed that she took these snapshots in zoos. She put them alongside the family ones and there was something very moving about that," he says.

"Even on the wall she had put some of these snapshots in frames they were very pathetic images but to her they must have looked magnificent. After I saw that, I thought this is another way to take pictures with throw-away cameras, even though I know how the flash is going to bounce. It's like I am imitating a snapshot and by imitating it I have found a way to do it again."

He's got his very first snapshots here with him on his lap, the ones he took of his family in the early 1990s and from which all his fame has stemmed. They're tatty around the edges, faded and sometimes paint spattered, and, his one concession to the fact that they are now considered "quite valuable", is to keep them in an archival box.

We're sitting outside drinking coffee and beer and it's hot and windy, but he pulls these photos out all the same and passes a great stack of them over the table. By the time the show opens they will be displayed in a glass cabinet through the centre of one of the gallery spaces but right now he doesn't seem to care how long they rest on my knee.

"Art is not the most important thing in life," he says, "There are other things . . . family, spending a couple of hours cooking a meal."

Richard Billingham: People, Places, Animals opens tomorrow at ACCA, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank. Until February 24.

LINK
▶ accaonline.org.au

Details of Billingham *1993*, m *Untitled* the artist show at A