INSPIRATION From confronting video images to gentle washes of colour, the images that emerge out of personal pain tell us much about life and the journey beyond darkness, writes **Andrew Stephens**.

The art of trauma

RICHARD BILLINGHAM IS screening a short video he made about his father, Ray, an alcoholic. It is hard to watch, even though nothing much happens. In it, Ray lies under the bedcovers in a stupor, unable to get up for his first drink. As the saying goes, one drink is too many, and a thousand not enough — a traumatic truth for Ray and his family.

Billingham junior, whose photographs and video art have met international acclaim, appears to have weathered reasonably well the trauma of living in an alcoholic home, much of it in a council flat. He grew up in England's West Midlands and his accent is so parochial that when he announces the film's title, I hear the words *Rain Bird*, which seems strangely poetic for such bleak subject matter.

But as we watch, it is soon clear that the video is actually called *Ray in Bed* — like its content, grittily realist.

Some artists use personal trauma or tragedy in their work to make a dramatic, sometimes shocking impact. Others use it less self-consciously as a natural matter of course, of which there are some obvious examples: Vincent Van Gogh famously painted his moods and mutilation (the severed ear) in self-portraits, while Edvard Munch vividly illustrated his screaming existential angst and vampirish, sexual anxieties in his expressionist paintings.

There are many more artists whose work pivots on trauma, such as Louise Bourgeois, who has made a long and productive career out of the distressingly significant events of her childhood, seeing her work as a form of therapy. And Joseph Beuys epically transformed his tumultuous experiences during World War II into an enduring body of work. On the more contemporary scene, artists as diverse as Tracey Emin, Marina Abramovic, Doris Salcedo, Anselm Kiefer, Gillian Wearing and Janine Antoni have all dealt with the traumatic in affecting, deeply felt ways.

The list of those whose art trades on personal calamity seems so endless, in fact, that it might even be argued that almost *all* of the most powerful visual art in the 20th and early 21st centuries has sprung from some sort of trauma, whether it be centred on the self (breakdown, alienation, suicidal tendencies, illness, abuse) or on the collective (wars, the Holocaust, cultural shifts, nuclear dread, global terrorism).

But possibly it is the personal that seems to hit home hardest when we look at art, perhaps because we can all identify with intimately wounding events, regardless of specific subject matter. Everyone, after all, suffers.

Associate professor Jill Bennett, director of the University of New South Wales' Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics, has written that while a substantial critical literature has emerged looking at literary work about trauma, a comparable attempt has not been made with regard to the visual arts — a gap that her own research work seeks to redress.

And it is a rich field of investigation, whether it be the bold photography of the well-known Billingham, or the work of established local artists, such as the abstract prints of Jane Hall, who is in an upcoming show at MARS, or the unsettling video performances of Catherine Bell, whose work was recently on display at the Monash Art and Design Faculty Gallery.

While some viewers might consider their work to mainly be a form of psychotherapy, Juliana Engberg, director of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (where Billingham's solo exhibition is on, and where Bell has shown in the past), has other thoughts. Engberg writes in

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Confronting: A performance still from Catherine Bell's *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel*.
PICTURE: CHRISTIAN CAPURRO

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her catalogue of how Billingham's work uses its traumatic circumstances as a springboard for other considerations.

For example, his photographs, she writes, not only portray individuals in a set of circumstances — in this case, his impoverished, dysfunctional family in a council flat — but also "more importantly, (they) reconsider the pictorial tradition of portraiture", they encourage discussion and they allow viewers to situate the trauma in a range of aesthetic, political, social and entertaining contexts.

For Billingham, the idea that he might just be engaging in some sort of simple, transformative therapy by making his challenging work doesn't interest him: he grew up with Ray for a dad and he took pictures of him. "We had an understanding," says Billingham, regarding the photographs.

There is a lot of powerful imagery of Ray in Billingham's show, all of it either photos or video. In one room, there are glass cabinets full of simple snapshots (the series is called *Ray's a Laugh*) showing the terrible effects of untreated alcoholism on wizened Ray and, as a consequence, his obese, tattooed wife, Liz. Richard and his younger brother are on the sidelines, mostly out of view. Watching.

Here is Ray in one snap, crashed out dead drunk on the floor, or looking into the mirror and talking to himself, pissed. Or slumped on the couch, or trying to climb off the floor by clutching the bed. And here is Liz, who didn't touch drink, about to punch him good and proper during a rage.

"You watch *Shameless* and see them all getting on," says Billingham. "It's not like that, that's just bullshit."

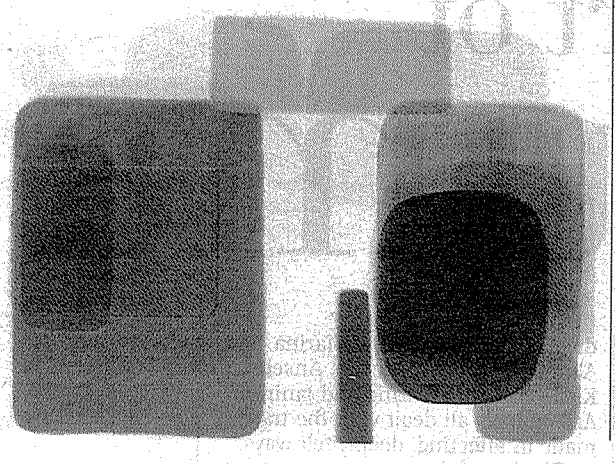
When we speak, Billingham is visiting Melbourne to set up the show and this is the first time he has seen all these photographs displayed together — Ray died a year ago, Liz three years ago. Some had never even been printed, the memories relegated to archived strips of negatives.

"He was an alcoholic and he was just lying on the bed all day," recalls Billingham. "And that was his life: he lay on the bed all day and drank to get to sleep and when he woke he'd drink to go to sleep again."

The five-minute *Ray in Bed* video is not showing at the exhibition, but visitors can watch all 47 minutes of *Fishtank*, featuring Ray and Liz and their domestic life. It has little relationship to reality TV or sensational voyeurism but everything to do with people trapped by their circumstances — and by the devastations of alcoholism. Like Billingham's short videos of anguished animals incarcerated in zoo cages, showing in the main room at ACCA, *Fishtank* is steeped in agony.

It is an amazing contrast to ponder the abstract, warm and gently emotional work of Melbourne painter and printmaker Jane Hall, whose recent work also focuses on parental relationships — in this case, the closure of that relationship because of death. Her prints of fields of colour are full of feeling, even though the casual viewer would have no idea that they are all about the death of the mother she loved and was close to.

Hall consciously set out to make work about the year-long journey they took together through a palliative care unit and a nursing home. Her mother died only last June and so the feelings are very present when we talk. As she tells me about the pale sea-green nightie her mother Margret showed her one day towards the end, the nightie she had worn on her wedding night, her grief swells. This is loss.



Above: Liz shakes her fist at Ray in Richard Billingham's *Untitled*, 1994. Below: Jane Hall's abstract work, *Failure to Die* was inspired by her mother's death. PICTURE: JOHN BRASH

And on the wall of her airy, light studio are some of the paintings that came out, works created with a depth of feeling and a sensitivity that's evident in the rich, translucent patches of colour — deep blues, warm pinks and even a small patch of that particular nightie sea-green.

"It's strange doing abstract work," reflects Hall, who describes her work as a "mapping of emotion" that is produced intuitively. "I didn't want anything pictured that you could see in the living world. I'm trying to give people an opportunity to be in the presence of a purity of emotion that happens when someone is dying."

That purity is captured in the lozenges of colour, marking an intensely emotional period as she watched this vital person — and the dying people in the wards around her — slowly wither. At first Margret seemed close to death, but then she "failed" to die, a fact that informed the title of one painting. "It was my mother, a pretty primal source of energy in your life," says Hall of the gradual death. "Observing and feeling — and I'm just like a sponge with that emotion."

Amazingly, the work she has poured so much feeling into is anything but gloomy. "It's not maudlin or tragic . . . but more about realising what life is. If you've got life: trying to express the joy of having it; appreciate it."

Catherine Bell, on the other hand, sees her work with trauma as making her into something of a cultural shaman, processing tragedy (personal and public) via extremely confronting performances, installations and videos. The Melbourne artist and lecturer in visual arts at Monash might almost be accused of *causing* trauma for her viewers, so visceral is some of her work. Some have been known to dry-retch, she says.

Bell tells me in particular about the squid-ink performance, which I have seen on video and found hideously compelling: a bleach-haired Bell, dressed in a pink felt suit, sucks the black ink from squids and regurgitates it over her chin and fibrous suit, plopping the carcasses onto the floor in front of her. It is repulsive, emotional and primal — and it is all about her father's death.

Bell was with him when he died, holding his hand. He had cancer. The last thing he told her was that he felt a salty liquid spilling out of his legs.

The squid performance, she says, is a type of re-enactment of that traumatic event, "a surreal disappearing act" for which the symbol was, curiously, the squid, which squirts ink to hide itself when threatened by the gaze of a predator. "My response, as a performance, was to erase myself," says Bell, whose recent doctorate (*Liminal gestures: ritualising the wound through performance and lived experience*) also grappled with the trauma issue. "It sounds macabre but it was actually a celebration of death and how it can be a release — not only for the person who's dying, but the family."

There is so much feeling being channelled into each of these artists' works — Billingham's alcoholic Ray in his cups, Hall's mother gradually letting go of her life, Bell's father in the dark, painful grip of cancer — that it is no wonder the results have so much intensity. And, however diversely expressed they may be, love can be seen in them all, too. Parents, after all, are the ones who give us our lives.

Richard Billingham: People, Places, Animals is at ACCA, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until February 24.
Jane Hall's work will be in *It Must Be Love* at MARS (Melbourne Art Rooms), 418 Bay Street, Port Melbourne, opening February 14.