



RICHARD BILLINGHAM

× Richard Billingham:
People, Places, Animals
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
111 Sturt Street
Southbank Victoria 3006
20 December 2007 – 24 February 2008
www.accaonline.org.au



3

¹ / RAY'S A LAUGH: UNTITLED, 1990.
² / RAY'S A LAUGH: UNTITLED, 1993.
³ / BLACK COUNTRY: UNTITLED, 2003.
⁴ / RAY'S A LAUGH: UNTITLED, 1995.
⁵ / RAY'S A LAUGH: UNTITLED, 1994.
⁶ / RAY'S A LAUGH: UNTITLED, 1995.
⁷ / ZOOS: BABOONS 1, 2005.

Before *Big Brother* made it commonplace to intrude on domestic reality, Richard Billingham invaded his parents' house with a pocket camera. If an era before prime-time dysfunction sounds too distant to conjure, at least try and imagine being unable to leave the *Big Brother* den; forever trapped but with only one quarter of the floor space, twice the junk, an alcoholic partner and even dimmer wattage. And, of course, no hope of prize money.

This claustrophobic environment formed the basis of Billingham's West Midlands childhood, before he escaped to art school. He returned to capture home life in a series of stills called *Ray's a Laugh*, shot between 1990 and 1996, and then videoed this perpetual drama in 1997, of which *Fishtank* is the tragic, animated result.

The Billingham retrospective at ACCA – People, Places, Animals – pivots around this video: humans to one side, animals to the other. Screened in a back wedge of the cavernous ACCA, the claustrophobia of the cramped Billingham flat is achieved. While the gallery's clangorous acoustics often make it hard to hear the soundtrack, *Fishtank* nevertheless becomes quickly engrossing as we catch the thread of what seems a mutually dependent pattern of gleefully spiteful bickering and torment. Being an alcoholic, Billingham's father Ray is equal parts cheer and belligerence. His wife Liz is a full-figured harpie with Medusa-like hair. Each lives day-to-day, like Nanook – but without a sense of purpose, other than to escape through drink or jigsaw puzzles or television. And, like most trapped creatures, they eventually turn on themselves. The title comes from the fish that Ray keeps, but it may as well refer to the apartment. In a poignant moment we see Ray staring out blankly through the glass of his own cage, and indeed the vitrines displaying *Ray's a Laugh* reinforce this connection.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of both *Fishtank* and *Ray's a Laugh* is their candour. Even though the artist is shooting his own family

they seem completely oblivious to him. And it's not as if the camera is static and concealed like *Big Brother's*. Particularly with *Fishtank*, the tight shots and odd (often annoyingly self-conscious) twisting camera movements denote a negotiation of the cramped space and its lumpen characters. Of course, Billingham's work begs the questions: is it right to set one's family up for criticism? And can one be an intruder in one's own family? After all, it's also Billingham's life.

To be fair, it's not all the kitchen-sink realism with plug-ugly people that has become a stock part of British repertory. The very nature of the warts-and-all approach, which has become so commonplace in reality television, is to capture the most mundane yet intimate acts, like sleeping or passing out. And it's in these unguarded moments that we see their real humanity: her collecting, his drinking, their love of pets. To offer tragedy we need chiaroscuro.

In *Fishtank* we see Billingham's mother in family snaps on the wall when she was young, before (we presume) domesticity and family life ground her into the unflattering grotesque we see in much of the film. For better or worse – and we are never sure on which side Billingham falls – it's this impression that wins out. A photo from *Ray's a Laugh* depicts Billingham's mother as an odalisque, which in one respect elevates her to a notion of art-historical beauty, while simultaneously questioning her role within that history as a female slave or concubine. Other images reveal her love of tattoos, kitsch, pattern, masks and adornment, bringing her representation into even more contentious art-historical terrain. Indeed, for me Liz becomes the more interesting character, despite Ray's taking the title. It would try anyone's patience to endure a daily diet of Ray stumbling, mumbling or calcifying in his chair.

If the exhibition pivots on a cycle of drunkenness and domestic hell on a forty-six-minute endless loop, we enter as we are meant to go on –

except the images of lost hope and wasted lives at the beginning of the show are to do with wild animals. Billingham's most recent work, the Zoo series, is a somewhat obvious but still affecting series of videos and photographs taken from zoos around the world. In closely cropped images of caged animals that reiterate their claustrophobic entrapment, we see scenes of a polar bear walking repeatedly in and out of a cave, a gorilla nodding catatonically and a giraffe fixatedly licking the walls. To these dreadful scenes is added one still image so sad as to appear almost laughable, or worthy of a child's tale: the camel that lost its humps. But whether it's the issue of neglect or the greater issue of keeping animals confined, activists have long been challenging the ethics of the hunter's guilty pleasure through their own documentary campaigns. While Billingham's grainy, snapshot photographs and videos retain the activist's doco-authenticity, I couldn't help wondering what was new about it.

We glimpse a more formalist approach further on, with Billingham's Black Country series. These well-lit nocturnal landscapes around his old neighbourhood of Cradley Heath – knocked-down houses and overgrown empty lots – have a sense of foreboding about them that completes Billingham's bleak world view. Indeed, it's as an installation that Billingham's work gains its power. It is not so much a homage to catatonia as an elegy for the living dead. Everyone in Billingham's collection looks zombified. Even his formal landscapes contain a cemetery. And we too, of course, have joined his procession, doomed by Billingham to walk among them.

But perhaps there's optimism in the faint hope of escape or rescue. While his family may not have a chance at pop culture's prizes, their son Richard does. Shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 2001, Billingham is now one of Britain's bright hopes. And, possibly, his family's too. Yet as Billingham knows, we are all animals and many of us are destined to be left behind and forgotten. RAY EDGAR

