

a hotel and was then driven across the city to his home. Despite its tedium, the film sustains a mesmerising image, recalling the iconography of sleeping poets (Langland, or Scipio's Dream). The halcyon was a mythical bird which was believed to nest on the sea and caused calms during its days of brooding about the equinox. The car so often used in movies as another 'camera' is here the lens onto a continuously receding phantom. *Not Driving Fast On Empty Freeways*, but cruising blindly along obscure nocturnal avenues, symbols of unanswerable questions as to the coming and going of identity.

Like oil painting, metaphysical invocation in art has waned over the century since Gauguin's *Whence Come We? What Are We? Whence Go We?*. Phenomenology and video are preferred, as windows onto absence/presence and intersubjectivity, whose mysteries we experience with the impress of a secular, negative theogony. Psychoanalysis finds Gauguin's melancholy *Oceania* in everyday elusiveness, here or not, there or not, somewhere before, beside, and lost again. The value of new media is to represent this equivocality in potential; their reflexive manipulation releases symbolic 'images within images', as Gauguin sought, from hitherto unregistered zones. Each of the four here use contemporary media to reach a poetics of the 'imminent ineffable'. Of them, Burgin's *Love Stories #2* is most attenuated but poignant recasting of the triad Where? Who? Whence?. Its spatiotemporal and audiovisual dispersion relays its theme: identity evasive and adrift in *Some Cities* (Burgin's recent book). Across the wall is inscribed: DRIVING FAST ON EMPTY FREEWAYS. Before it are three video screens, each showing about four minutes in slow motion, then fading to red, blue, green. In the centre, we view a hotel corridor, empty but for a cleaner who emerges, makes his way towards the camera and moves on beyond view. The left shows a busy midtown intersection. As the traffic lights change, a woman crosses the road towards us, pauses among the crowd on the sidewalk, gazes with puzzled hesitation off camera, then walks off out of view in that direction (towards the centre). The right hand monitor shows a nearly symmetrical event, but in an anonymous suburb. She wanders in and out of view, apparently searching. With each phase, each monitor releases a barely audible woman's voice: 'I'm sorry, I was staring at you. I didn't mean to. You look so much like my father, when he was younger of course.' 'That's not me as I'd like to be. Why am I not like that?' 'I know that you remind me of her, and not even that very much. Couldn't you like me just the way I am?'

This is not the first time that Burgin has referenced Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, and, as the voices are clearly soundtrack, the montage is presumably meant to be recognised, thus implying a subject constructed of other representations set in a limbo of 'non-place'. Wandering from screen to screen, trying to catch the voices and piece together a meaning, the beholder reproduces the

searching woman on screen. This, since minimalism, is installation's value: the subject's space, time, and motile intentionality are engaged in a fuller apprehension than in contemplative beholding. ■

Brian Hatton is an architectural historian.

## ■ Richard Billingham

Anthony Reynolds Gallery London June 26 to August 3

There are at least three immediate reasons why Richard Billingham's debut photographs of his home life are so riveting, so uncommonly interesting and why they've received the broad media coverage they deserve. The first has got to be our shameless curiosity to witness (without any risk of contagion) the unsurprising, shocking consequences of poverty, abjection, violence and alcoholism. All the confusing details of an emotionally and economically unstable domestic life are crammed into these pictures with such candid accessibility that the mass of information presented alone guarantees our attention.

This might also explain why Billingham's project is somehow more successful in book form (*Ray's a Laugh*, published in April by Scala) than hung on a wall: it's just so much more comfortable to sit and stare than to stand and stare in a gallery. The second is probably Billingham's viewpoint as a painter rather than a photographer, and the works' original purpose as sources for paintings. His downright classical sense of monumental figures, of old-fashioned composition and invention, gives the chaos depicted a formal grounding which contributes to the work's instant readability. Really Billingham is manipulating two traditional pictorial genres: the portrait, in the reckless or forlorn gestures of his family members, and the still-life, which acts as a pause for melancholy or exhausted boredom. Finally, the third reason should probably be attributed to Liz Billingham – Richard Billingham's mother and the subject of many of these works – and her rampant sense of decoration; colliding patterns of wallpaper, fabrics, lace and trinkets effectively provide a lush background for either the despair or the ordinariness depicted. These suffocating interiors are not the accidental result of indifference or accumulation but, far more disturbingly, have been created on purpose, with some care even – a metaphor, somehow, for the politics in this country, wherein the 'accident' of poverty is soon unmasked as part of the plan.

But the social commentary angle, in any case, is an especially thorny approach to Billingham's work, easily lapsing either into rhetoric or a kind of disdainful, bourgeois voyeurism. Billingham certainly belongs to a tradition of artists, writers and photographers who have documented reality without any commentary, relying on

An exhibition presented by Riverside Artists Group  
curated by Peter Kennard

3rd - 27th September 1996

Riverside Studios  
Crisp Road 7 London W6 9RL  
0181 741 2251

new Labour

Peter Brooke-Ball G. Calvert Stephen Carter  
Brian Deighton Rod Judkins C. Morey de Morand  
Leonore Robinson Susan Short Marisa Rueda Stephen Williams

with financial assistance from London Arts Board



**Richard Billingham**  
*Untitled 1995*



the impact of unadorned squalor to effect strong political accusation – from Charles Dickens to Dorothea Lange to Martin Parr. But, more to the point, Billingham is mostly an autobiographer; the confidence and familiarity with which he handles his subject matter are reiterated in dozens of photos which could almost be mistaken for neo-realist film stills, a cinematic genre similarly dependent on real-life experience. And like a good film director, Richard Billingham is not only a skilled image-maker but an eminent story-teller as well.

These pictures are so resonant with clues and atmosphere that all remaining questions seem thoroughly satisfied with the tiniest bit of additional information. Twenty-five year-old Richard Billingham lives at home with his parents in their Midlands council flat, has been taking these pictures for the past six years, and gets his pictures developed at the local chemist. The three characters we soon come to recognise are Liz, the artist's chain-smoking, thunderous mum; father Ray, an unemployed, chronic alcoholic; and younger brother Jason, who was once taken into care – probably because social workers took one look at the flat and saw it as a source of ill health, not art. Also figuring prominently is an assortment of cats, dogs and pet mice who seem to seep into any gaps not otherwise given over to ashtrays, furniture and innumerable glasses or jugs of something really lethal-looking called homebrew. The family seems somehow inordinately affected by gravity: spilt gravy and loose crumbs, thrown pets, tilted wall decorations and, finally, even Ray himself are perpetually dropping to the floor or

slowly sinking, inevitably collapsing into the chaos which dominates the flat. We should be wary, however, of our willingness to assume so quickly that, with only a shread of background knowledge to guide us, we have a kind of omniscient foothold on what life in the Billingham household is really like. Why are we so at ease, for example, with being instantly on a first-name basis with this distant group of strangers? I am suspicious of our readiness to complete the narrative, to provide presumed answers as to why Ray's nose is bleeding, why Liz is sobbing, or why the couple is embracing in joyous abandon. I fear that our responses are generated by the worst sort of pre-conceptions, unfounded assumptions somehow confirmed by the pictures, and this would reduce such unforgettable work to something hardly eye-opening at all.

Roland Barthes once wrote that, for each of us, history is everything that occurred before we were born, and so for Richard Billingham history must be that span of events which came before the fighting, the drinking, the sudden eruptions of violence which periodically sweep over the flat. Billingham has said that this will be his last project centring on photos of his family, and one can't help but make yet another, clichéd assumption: that the artist desires to open the door (which, tellingly, never appears in any of these pictures) and step past the trauma of his home life. Or maybe he just wants to continue making really good pictures somewhere else. ■

**Gilda Williams** is an art critic and editor at Phaidon Press.

## EVEN DOROTHY CROSS

September 14 – 26 October  
*Organised by Arnolfini*

Last call for entries: 8th Mostyn Open Deadline: September 21st Prize: £6,000  
 What: 6 35mm slides How: send a stamped addressed envelope to get your form to:

## Oriel Mostyn

The Administrator, AM2, North Wales' Premier  
 Centre for the Visual Arts, 12 Vaughan Street,  
 Llandudno, LL30 1AB  
 Tel: +44 01492 870875 Fax: +44 01492 878869

Open Monday – Saturday 10.00–1.00 & 1.30–5.00