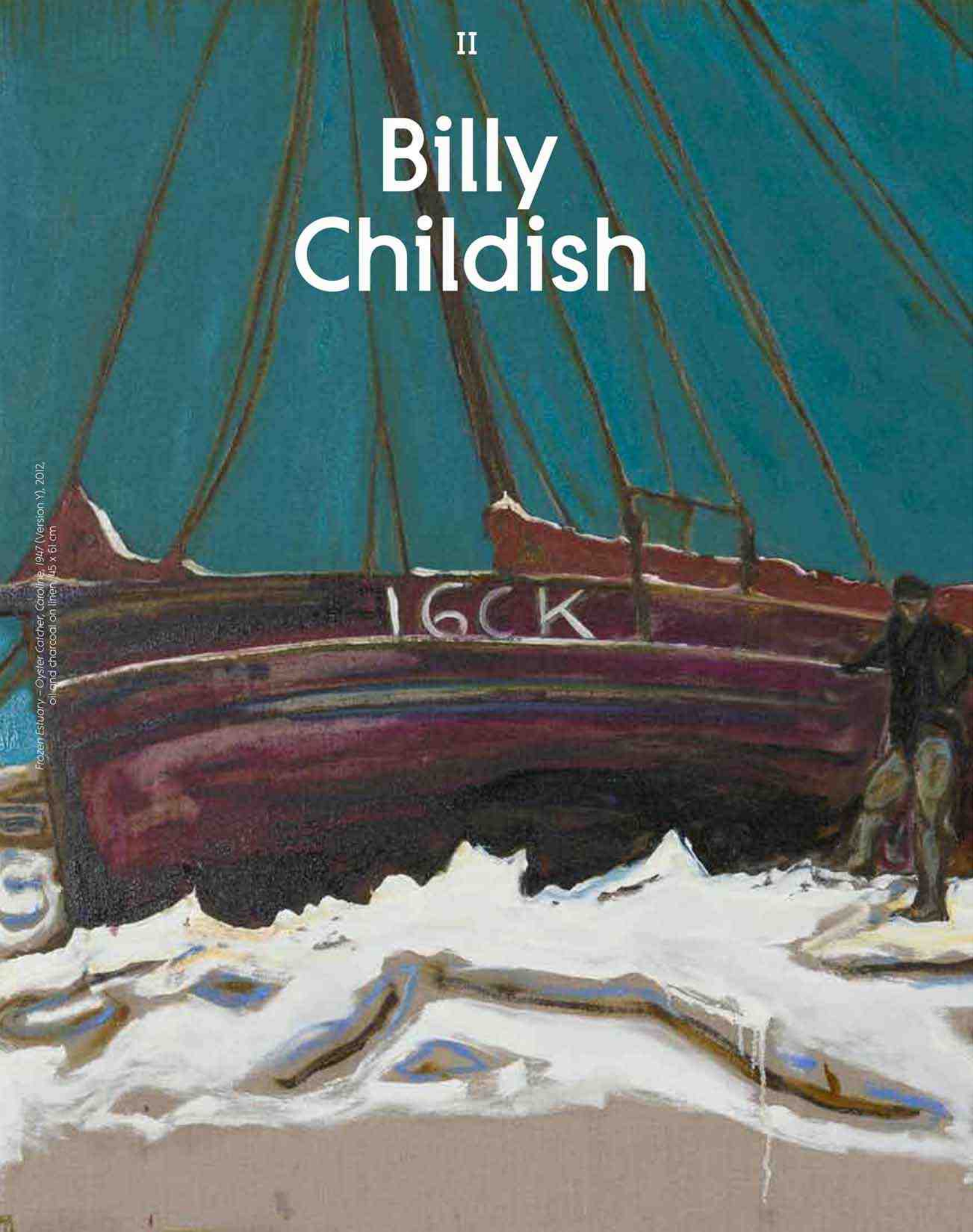
II

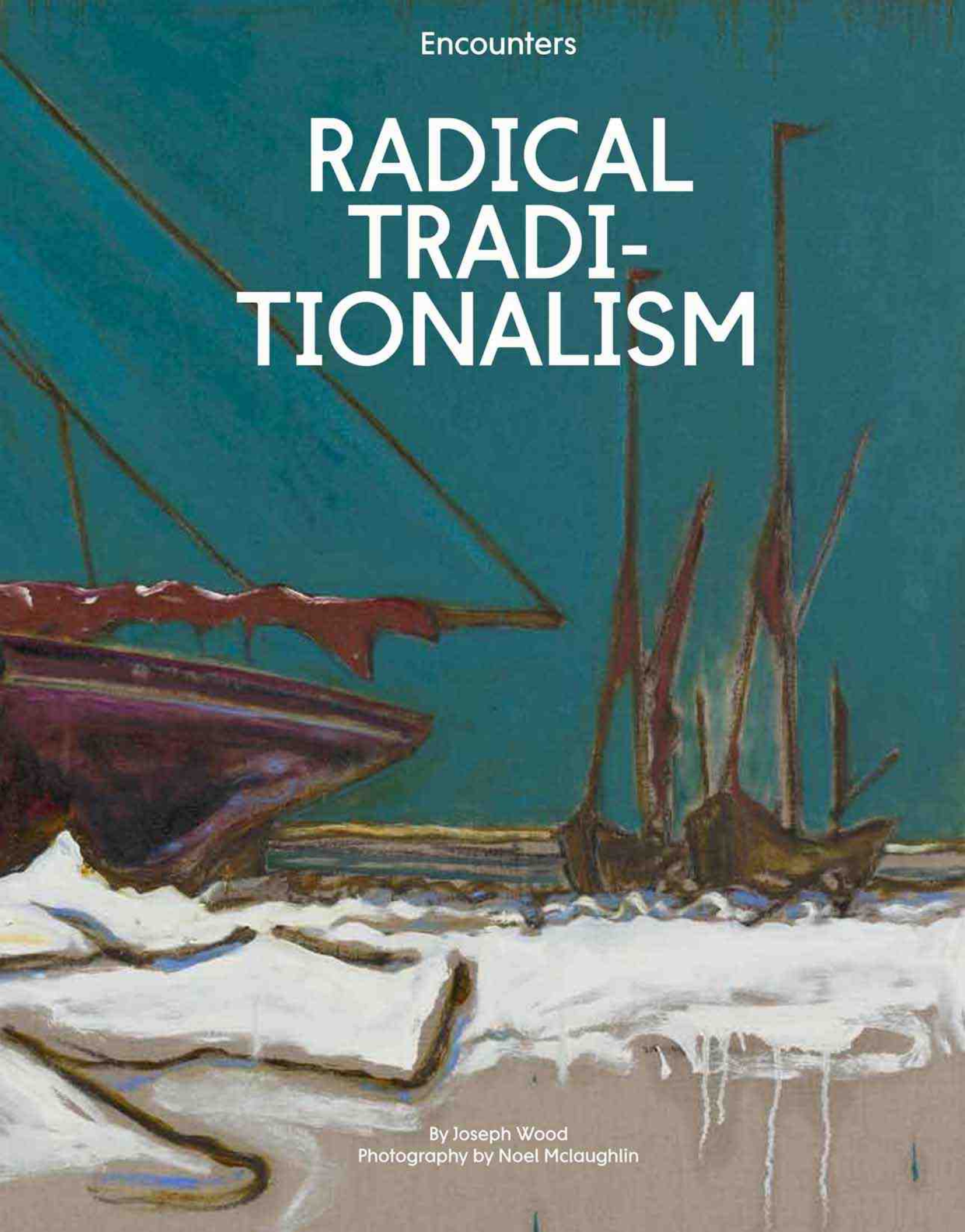
Billy Childish



Frozen Estuary – Oyster Catcher, Caroline, 1947 (Version Y), 2012
oil and charcoal on linen, 45 x 61 cm

Encounters

RADICAL TRADI-TIONALISM



By Joseph Wood
Photography by Noel Mclaughlin

Having recently taken the decision to publicly curb (somewhat) his controversial opinions, and now enjoying representation from major galleries, Billy Childish is finally getting the attention he deserves. While working away at a painting, this former Stuckist and outspoken critic of the YBAs talks to Joseph Wood about his work and his long-overdue 'overnight success' in the London art world. Candid? You must be kidding…

An emblematic London figure (thought maybe we should say rather an emblematic *anti-London* establishment figure), Childish has recently returned as artist in residence at the Chatham dockyards where he once served as an apprentice stonemason. I take a tour of the current exhibition before being led up to a large studio situated in the old ropery. Here, large paintings are stacked against every wall; realization of the sheer enormity of the artist's output is both instant and overwhelming. After studying his latest canvas, I ask Childish if he is painting a cat or a wolf. Through his signature moustache he tells me it's a dog, with Charles Bukowski lying in front of it.

'But it can be whatever,' he adds.

The interview is awkward and halting, largely due to my fascination with his decision to continue painting throughout the conversation. Contending with Childish's measured movements between the four corners of his latest canvas and his broken dialogue with Bukowski, I found myself often stumbling for my next question as I began to engage with the evolving painting.

— *Your return to this historic dockyard as artist in residence is in stark contrast to that of apprentice stonemason.*
I grew up with people that were engaged with painting. My older brother was keen on painting and there was a small studio at the top of the house which my father painted in. I just copied everyone else. I was very slow to read and write, I didn't really get a handle on it until I was about 14; it was art that always interested me.

— *You weren't accepted for an interview at your local art school. What was the subsequent path that led to a place at Central Saint Martins College of Art?*
The work was already there as I had always been drawing and had continued to draw throughout my time in the dockyard. My brother was in London studying at the Slade School of Fine Art, and as I wasn't allowed to go to the local art school I applied to this other place that I'd heard of. I was accepted, for a short time.

— *Can you talk about working and drawing in the dockyard?*
It was always a 'skive', very slow and lazy. It always had a very dead energy, nothing like the energy that you can feel in the room today. I was an apprentice and the chap I was being taught by was ill a lot of the time, that's why I used to have the time to draw. I didn't mind it, it was just a bit boring, I had to get up early and I wasn't really being taught. I suppose what it comes down to is that I didn't really want to work.

My father left home when I was young and there was no other option except to work things out. I grew up listening to all the music in the sixties – The Kinks, The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix – and then punk came along. It was something that

Girl in Snow with Tree (Scout)(Version X), 2012, oil and charcoal on linen, 244 x 183 cm

I could associate with and liked immediately. It was the idea you were 'allowed' to do it. It meant I could be included.

— *There seems to be a real synchronicity between the way you create music and the way you create art.*
The fun is doing it and I treat it all as a bit of a game. When you're playing a game as a child, you know it's a game, and you want the outcome to be good and to enjoy it. You have a vague mandate, but the mandate is to enjoy doing the thing you're doing. You have to believe in the game but that's the difference between kids and grown-ups. You see, a lot of grown-ups believe they are what they do: a solicitor or a painter or some kind of big shot. A kid knows they're playing.

— *Is this why you often reference the amateur and the professional in interviews?*
I think I just realized that the amateur is always going to beat the professional. An amateur will make a breakthrough because they are not worried about their position, as they don't really have one. Really you are tricking yourself. The English are very obtuse and will mock me when I say that kind of stuff. They don't really get stuff, they don't get art or creativity and they don't like or trust it. I suppose a lot of people don't, but the British are very down on creativity. They like a simulated experience of creativity. We have more of a goal-orientated creativity, which still has a lot of talented people involved, but they have sold themselves short. It becomes about style and the showing-off of abilities. It doesn't matter how we win, but we must win. This is about as low an attitude as you can get. I can't stand the competitiveness; when the English win, they are insufferable.

— *I find it strange that you say that about competing.*
I'm a competitive person so that's maybe why I don't like competitiveness. Just because we're all capable of greed doesn't mean you should celebrate that greed, it means you're aware of it and you try to moderate your behaviour to be a decent human being, and not glorify it by being an arsehole.

— *Still on the subject of the British mentality, how do you feel about tradition and how does it flow into your paintings?*
Tradition is freedom. The reason I like tradition is that it is form and structure. It does not have to be worshipped or loved in itself, but it's a vehicle and can be used as a tool. I would say I'm a radical traditionalist because anyone who thinks they created themselves or any part of what they do is an idiot. There is nothing that belongs to you and nothing that you create because everything has come from somewhere else. Tradition often entails an element of respect and order. It used to be a tradition not to overtake on the inside. The fact that everyone does it now doesn't make it better, it makes it worse, but everyone thinks it's cool to be a cunt.

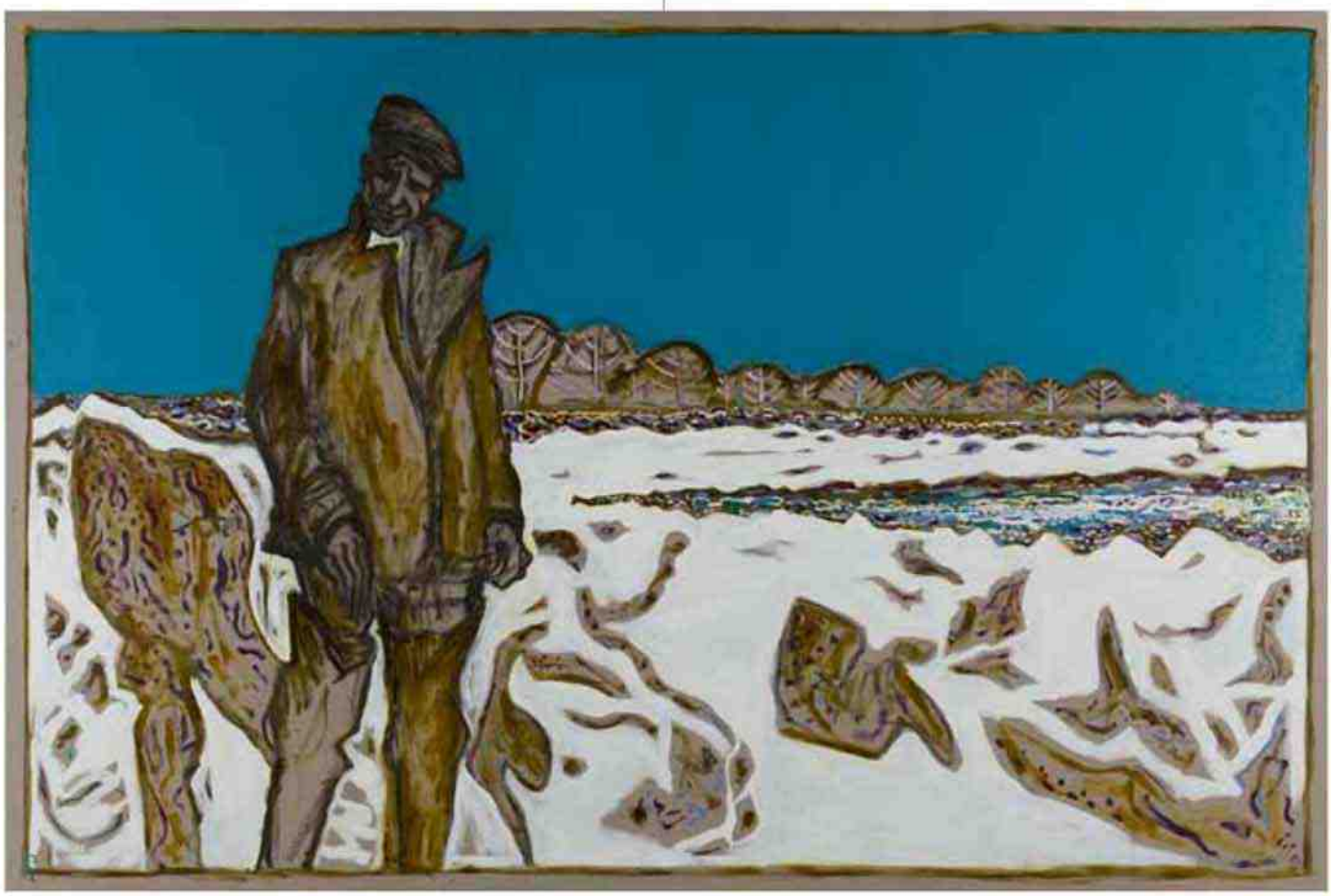
In painting you should honour the position and tradition you're in and the people that you admire. Don't try and hide it and pretend that you invented yourself and deny the truth of what you have been given.

— *Do you have a clear idea about what you want to achieve when you step into the studio?*
I usually have an inclination. When you're a kid, you say to your mum: 'I don't know what to paint.' You have similar conversations with yourself. A great place to start is often close to home; as I said it's the same with writing and music. The closer you start to where you are and what you're experiencing, the truer it will be. As I move through the process I start dragging in subjects that are further away and less ego-bound. It feels less comfortable for me, but you have to allow for growth. I'm sort of the opposite of Peter Doig. Peter said he would never do anything as crass as go somewhere to look for something to paint. That's all I do. I'm really interested in finding things to paint. Everything is drawn and will have a different energy to the reference. I just take it as a starting point. I mean, if you look at that [*he gestures toward a large canvas depicting a tightrope walker on an almost iridescent blue background, an encrusted belt of white paint blobs forming a Milky Way below her feet*], the reason that's got a Milky Way floating across it is because I added it after seeing dust mites on the computer screen, they were crawling over the image. It's about not really looking for ideas but being open to ideas.

— *How do you feel when you paint?*
I feel very much like a kid playing with a lollipop in the gutter, digging up mud. Very absorbed in what I'm doing with very little concern. Very occasionally I want to dominate the thing and make it do what I want, but that's when there's a problem.

— *Do you have to censor this?*
Yes, in a sense. For commercial reasons the galleries are very much in charge of what's available, I allow people to put a limit on the perception of what I do. I don't get involved in any of that because if you let the market dominate everything then we would all be lost. All I worry about is my bit, the painting. But that is definitely a consideration. I'm on the other side of 50 and I understand it's 99 per cent perception, 1 per cent reality.

People always ask me how long it takes to make a painting and I say it takes 35 years and a few hours



Man with Shadow, 2012, oil and charcoal on linen, 183 x 274.5 cm

— How long will you work on a painting?
I produce a couple of paintings a week. People always ask me how long it takes to make a painting and I say it takes 35 years and a few hours. I've learnt how to paint in a very particular way that I made up by looking at things that I thought looked good. It's not that it's mine, I just didn't have anyone telling me how to do it. We live in a fantastic modern age and as I'm a 'super-modern fella', I look at the information that's out there. Without my friends who came before me there would be nothing for me to do. This is why you celebrate the people.

— You talk about teaching yourself to paint. What did Saint Martins have to offer?
No one learns anything at art school. I certainly never saw anyone being taught anything, I think the last time people were being taught was in the fifties. I didn't want to get contaminated so I would work at home instead of the college. We were often at loggerheads as they tried to direct me towards fashions I didn't like. They want you to be a complete artist by the time you graduate. Ready to go out into the popular art world, to compete and win. They are told, almost immediately, that what they like should be invisible, which is a real shame.

Strangely, if you do something that you are not too worried about and mention your influences you can get into a situation where you're producing something that appears to be unique. I say 'appears' to be. I think it's instinctive, an unspoken rule to hide your influences for fear of being considered as a 'copier'. When visiting galleries in Korea, I felt there was less worry about these issues. Even if we're not hiding it we certainly don't celebrate it. We're in a new mode of winning and being cool at all costs.

— You're very damning of British art.
The British have never really had a positive aspect in their art. I think that British painting has always been shit. Art should be liberating, not worried autistic work that buries you, like some of the so-called great British painters.

— Where do you see yourself fitting into the art world?
I don't know where I fit in. I'm a British artist who refuses to be a British artist. I paint pictures; I'm not limiting myself through gender, religion, occupation or nationality. People will do that as fast as you like, they won't let me have that. They'll decide to box me in as much as they can so I'm not going to join in.

— You champion painting. Is it the most important part of your creative output?
Creatively, yeah, I like cooking, I like sex and I like shitting.

— I don't really know so much about the Stuckist movement...
Neither do I really.

— What was your involvement? [Note that 'Stuckism' as a term is said to have come out in response to an argument between Childish and his then girlfriend Tracey Emin, who is said to have accused him of being 'stuck! stuck! stuck!'] You seem opposed to being involved with any kind of movement.
Yeah, that's why I left. I was involved until the first exhibition and then I told Charles [Stuckist founder Charles Thomson] I wanted to leave. He asked me if I could pretend to be in it for as long as possible. It seemed to be founded around what I could bring to the group.

— 'Artists who don't paint aren't artists' [Stuckism's Original Manifesto, 1999] – would you still agree with this?
Well, it's a fun statement. If they aren't painting they're probably not very good, but then even if they are it doesn't mean they're good. If you really wanted to define it, you would have to say artists who don't draw aren't artists, but it's more fun to say painting.

At the very beginning of the Stuckists I said Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin will have to paint again, it's right at the front of it, there's no way that painting is dead. All these people will have to do it again because it's all there is. The other stuff is fluff, or cream, something that goes on top of the foundations. It can be intoxicating and fun but it can't sustain anything. You see how bad the drawing is. Damien can't paint or draw, because he hasn't put any effort in and if you don't give yourself to the tradition, then the tradition gives you nothing back.

— Do you feel that your involvement with the Stuckists had a negative impact on your standing in the art world?
For me it was negative, because I was associated with a movement that I disagreed with. I didn't like their work. I

I think I just realized that the amateur is always going to beat the professional

Helmet Diver (Leaping) 2011, oil and charcoal on linen, 305 x 183 cm

liked the manifestos, which I was primarily responsible for, but it meant that I was pushed further away from any acceptance into the art world. The Stuckist activities led to questions about where I was coming from, even though I was no longer a member and hadn't been for around ten years. They were trying to push me to say things about Tracey [Emin] and about art that I wouldn't do. I was being quoted as saying things that I hadn't said because they wanted a conflict. Charles [Thomson] wanted things in the popular press and for arguments to be aired. 'All publicity is bad publicity' was a vetoed manifesto of mine.

— So you're not interested in the idea of the artist as celebrity?
That's right. The problem is making things overly popular. I don't want to be in a ghetto. This was another reason for not liking the Stuckists. Anyone who consigns themselves to a ghetto is a fool. That's why I won't call myself an artist or a musician and I call myself an amateur.

Art is a thing for everybody now, and that's got a plus and a negative. The Tate's brilliant because it has got so many people going through it; that is the measure of how good it is. That's the measure of [Nicholas] Serota. He's won.

In my opinion museums are no longer centres of learning or contemplation. They are another kind of fun fair, which is okay if that's what people need. I couldn't look at art in a place like that because I'm overly sensitive, I don't like crowds and I get knackered. I don't go to places for the party.

— Don't you think it's important to have these differences in the contemporary art world?
I don't think it's important, I think it's inevitable. I have no problem with the differences and there is plenty of room for Conceptual Art. I'm a great fan of Dada. My problem with Conceptual Art in Britain is that it wasn't any good, there seemed to be very little concept in Conceptual Art. That was my feeling about it. Obviously not everyone agreed with me, though.

— You can't control perception. Did you find it frustrating to have people criticizing the work and opinions that you believed in?
It can be frustrating, but it doesn't bother me too much because things that aren't very good are continuously being 'bigged up' around you. People need to spend their disposable income on some sort of version of what they think creativity in life is about, and it's no news that people are pretty easily fooled. I'm confident, and that's why I've carried on and I just do what I want. It's not anything new to say that humans can back the wrong horse.

— It seems like you've made very little in terms of compromise and would be seen to have a very successful lifestyle and working practice.
Luckily I already had that. As far as outward success goes, I had what could be called my 'overnight success' two years ago with the ICA show. That led to Tim Neuger asking me to do a solo representation at Art Basel. He was the only one who actually saw what was going on and asked me to do something.

— Thirty-five years and then out of the blue...
The art world ignored me for forever and a day. I pissed people off royally because I wasn't editing myself correctly.

Man on Chairs (Feeling Orange), 2012, oil and charcoal on linen, 183 x 274.5 cm

— *Part of your charm?*
It's part of the problem. I've sunk myself so often that I'm now much more aware of not causing myself more problems than I need. I find it very hard to moderate myself. It's realizing that sometimes honesty isn't all it's cracked up to be. You can't go around being flippant or even 'jokey' because it's not allowed. The English don't have a sense of humour.

— *Do you feel more pressure with popularity?*
I don't run my mouth off in the same way, but I'm aware that's a decision I have made for myself, I know no one is controlling me. My opinions would ruin my career or any career I could have if I spoke openly and intelligently about them. People don't like intelligence and don't like succinct argument, least of all in artists. Love without truth lies, truth without love kills.

Frozen Estuary and Other Paintings of the Divine Ordinary PART 2. Hoxton Arches, Arch 402, Cremer Street, London E2 8HD, 9–21 October 2012

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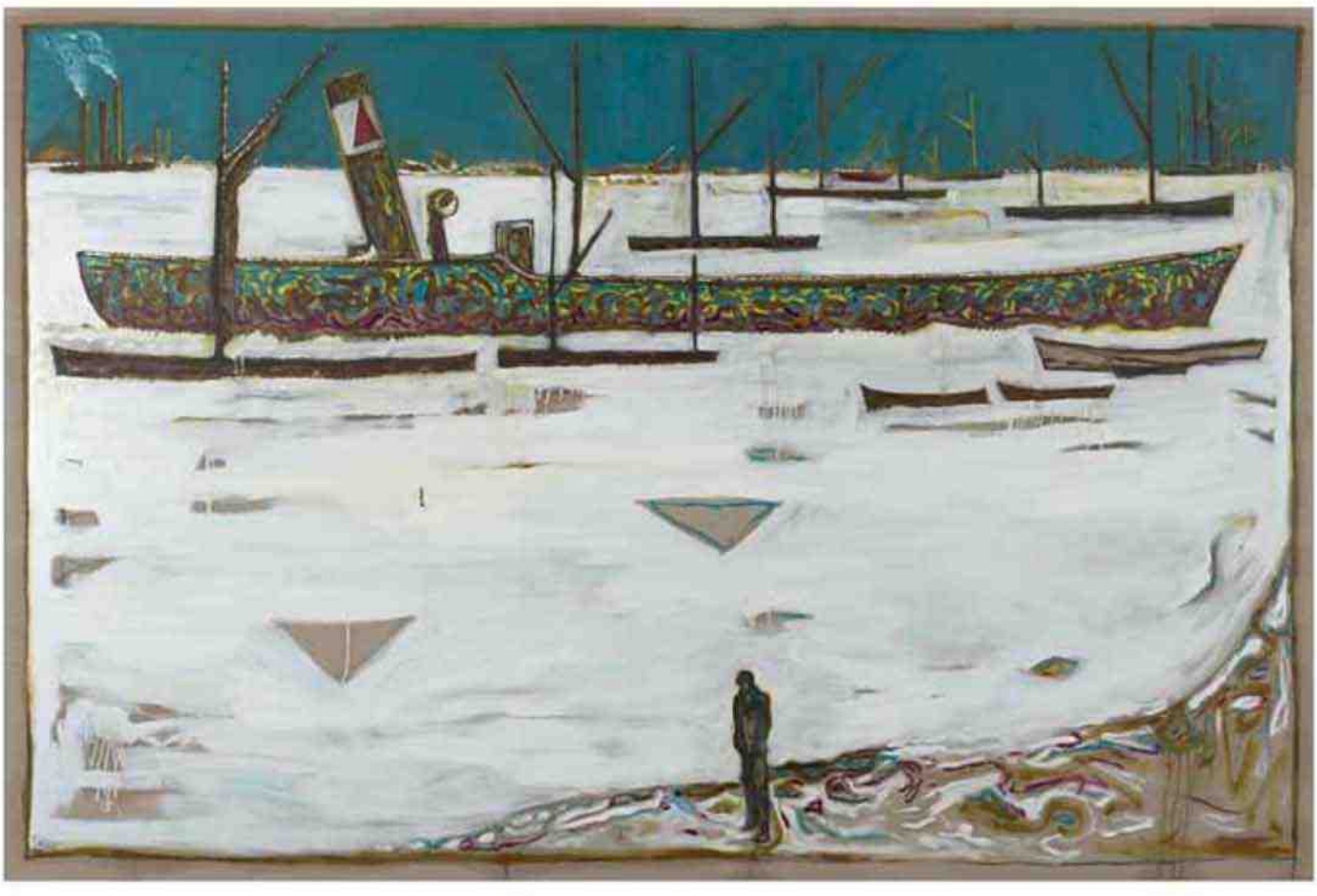

Frozen Estuary – Off Chatham, 1895 (Version Y), 2012, oil and charcoal on linen, 183 x 274.5 cm