

We are conditioned to believe that an ideal home consists of warm welcomes, wisdom, and comfort. The mother figure is often thought to be regarded as a source of nurture and support, while the father figure is regarded as a source of power and influence. However, this standard of family is rarely fully experienced in reality. Our perception of this matter has been shaped by values that are pushed by the commodification of our senses, hopes, and dreams of the perfect home and family. Unfortunately, this wayward dreamscape of the household is problematic for most. The type of home a person lives in influences the chances that they are living in poverty. It appears that single people and lone parents are more likely to be living in hardship. However, when all of the other variables are controlled, the strength of this association weakens considerably. This suggests that it is not the household type per se that influences the odds of poverty, but factors which are associated with different types of households, such as employment differences.<sup>1</sup>

Susan Sontag states in her book *On Photography* that “through photographs, each family constructs a portrait chronicle of itself.”<sup>2</sup> In the examination of ten photographs from Richard Billingham’s series “Ray’s A Laugh,” specifically through formal analysis, one can see how impoverished families live differently. Through breaking the conventions of stereotypical family photographs, Billingham’s series presents the notions of poverty, deficiency, and finally the collapse of the family home.

Photographer and painter Richard Billingham grew up in a cramped, high-rise tenement apartment with his mother, father, and brother in Birmingham, England. His father, Ray, an unemployed, chronic alcoholic, often slept the whole day through, while Elizabeth, Billingham’s overweight and heavily tattooed mother, filled her home with porcelain dolls and jigsaw puzzles, while housing ten cats and three dogs.<sup>3</sup> Since Billingham can remember, his father Ray had always been an alcoholic. However this worsened when he was laid off from his factory job in 1980 and tried to drink his way through his boredom. In an interview with Gordon MacDonald, Billingham discloses that it was just him and Ray living in the flat. By 1990, his mother Elizabeth left due to Ray’s incessant drinking and lived in a neighboring tower block. He would

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Burrows, “How the Other Half Lives: An Relationship between Poverty and Home-ownership in Britain,” *Urban Studies* 40, no.7 (2003), 1232.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Cotton, Jeffrey Ladd, and Richard Billingham, *Richard Billingham: Ray’s a Laugh: Books on Books*. Series 18 (Errata Editions, 2014).

see his father Ray in the same scene every day; in his bedroom, lying on the bed or sitting on the edge of the bed, looking in the mirror and drinking. Billingham continues in the interview that, the first time he went back to the flat, after leaving for university, he found Ray wasn't living there any more. The home was empty and he was living in the new flat with Elizabeth in another tower block. Perhaps they reconciled, or he could not support himself alone and needed Elizabeth as his caretaker. The flat was decorated differently from the home that he grew up in. In his words, "it was more opulent and there were cats and dogs and small animals in cages everywhere. It was a raucous."<sup>4</sup> There is a sense of loss of the childhood home, and the safety that it once had. Having grown up, and continuing to exist in a troublesome environment such as this, it is not difficult to understand why Billingham's family is the catalyst to his work.

The theme of deficiency and addiction materializes in "Ray's A Laugh" through the images of his father. Billingham states "Ray stopped in his room almost constantly, drinking and sleeping. If he went outside he became ill. He drank to get to sleep. He had a friend from a neighboring tower block, who was also an alcoholic, who came around to make strong home-brew for him. This was much cheaper than 'buying' alcohol and meant that Ray didn't have to venture outside to the off license. He kept the home-brew bucket by the side of his bed for convenience and drank from a plastic jug that he would dip into the brew. It tasted as bad as it looked but it must have nourished him somehow because he otherwise never ate."<sup>5</sup>

In *Ray Falling, 1996* (Figure 1), Billingham shows his father, literally, but also symbolically, falling into his addiction and failure as a father and provider. The viewer is situated in Billingham's home, possibly their living room. The walls are covered with a green striped wallpaper and beige curtains hang over a window to the right. The recliner that Ray attempts to stand up from looks to be felted with a type of pattern that is reminiscent of a grassland. On top lies a crocheted blanket, and mismatched pillows. The floor is carpeted in a garish, off-putting pattern that pains the eyes. Furthermore, the carpet looks as though it has not been cleaned in weeks, with crumbs and dirt scattered throughout. To the left of Ray's sneakers, one sees what looks to be a cigarette butt. In Ray's failed attempt in standing up from his drunken stupor, and perhaps to get another drink, he begins to fall forward. The viewer can imagine the rest of the scene, where Ray most likely falls into their media console, which is to

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Macdonald, "Richard Billingham," *Photoworks*, (2007), 20.

<sup>5</sup> Saatchi Gallery, "Richard Billingham," Richard Billingham Artist's Profile, May 14, 2019. [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard\\_billingham.htm](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard_billingham.htm)

the right of the frame. On top of it sits a record player. The door of the console looks as if it has been broken off before and sits quietly against it. The photograph holds a poetic nature in speaking to Ray's alcoholism, but is also very forward in telling the viewer that this isn't the first time he's fallen, nor is it the last.



Figure 1: Richard Billingham, *Ray Falling*, 1996, Photograph, England

There is a humor that comes across in Billingham's images, which reveals itself in one of the artist's more outrageous photographs, *Untitled*, 1993-1995 (Figure 2). In this image the viewer sees Ray and one of their ten cats. The background is enveloped in the green striped wallpaper seen previously in (Figure 1), with Elizabeth's porcelain possessions hanging upon the wall. The cat, almost all white except for the large patch of black on its belly and head, is seen suspended in the air. Ray, to the left, has his hands thrown out with what looks to be an afflicted expression. One can assume that Ray has, in a fit of anger, thrown the cat. The face of the cat does not seem to look phased, as if this is a daily occurrence. The cat can easily be substituted as an extension of Billingham or his brother Jason. The decorum shown in this photograph speaks not only to Ray's illness as an alcoholic, but to the dysfunction that the rest of the family experiences within their impoverished space. With this exchange, the photograph alludes to something more sinister that the artist and his sibling experienced in their childhood.

A lowness can be seen and felt in “Ray’s A Laugh.” This poorness is then exaggerated by the use of the flash, which quickly displays the impoverishment of the Billingham’s home. In photographing close to the ground the artist shows us the poor condition of the home both physically and symbolically. In his photograph, *Untitled (Dog Licking Floor)*, 1995 (Figure 3),



Figure 2: Richard Billingham, *Untitled*, 1993-1995, Photograph, England

one can see the dirtiness of the floor, following up to the ankles of his overweight mother Elizabeth, who is seen wearing furry slippers. The floor, which looks as if it has not been cleaned in months, takes up the majority of the frame. One of the three dogs, pictured to the left, is licking said floor. Perhaps eating something dropped or left behind. To the right one sees what looks to be an empty soda bottle and other miscellaneous items tucked underneath whatever Elizabeth is standing in front of. The harshness of the flash presents everything an ideal home would be demanding to hide, the disheveled and unkempt.

Billingham’s decision to photograph at this angle strengthens his effort in showing the viewer what their poverty stricken home consists of. By bringing us down to the ground, the artist is symbolically presenting the foundation of poverty on this dirty, soiled floor.



Figure 3: Richard Billingham, *Untitled (Dog Licking Floor)*, 1995, Photograph, England

The critical lowness of Billingham's imagery is consistent within the series. In one of his more compelling images, *Ray Sitting on Bathroom Floor*, 1996 (Figure 4), we see his father sitting next to a toilet in a small bathroom with carpeted floors and a distasteful, decorative wallpaper. The photograph seems to have been taken not that long after *Ray Falling*, 1996, (Figure 1) judging from Ray's clothes, which are the same in both. His eyes are casted down, so that he looks to be in a state of self acceptance of his situation; an alcoholic, unemployed father with his son as witness to his addiction. His trouser zipper is undone and the dirty soles of his sneakers face the camera. The toilet seat looks to have been broken violently and there seems to be some indistinct bodily fluid dripping down the side; is it vomit, blood, both?<sup>6</sup> A third of the image is taken up by the wood panel door to the right, making Ray appear even smaller in an already cramped space. The image, which is jarring at first, expresses the literal lowness and resignation of Billingham's father. While at this angle the viewer can experience Ray's shame and humiliation in hitting rock bottom.

Gendered representations of poverty have a harmful influence on impoverished men. The dominant constructions of masculinity can oppress men who do not conform. Dominant

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Hornby, "Life Goes On." *Modern Painters* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 32.

masculinities are usually associated with power, never equated with poverty. However, the male identity is to no small degree affirmed by proving that one is economically self-sufficient, and such proof is often given in the form of holding a job.<sup>7</sup> This societal construct forces men into a state of toxic masculinity where, if they are unable to be financially sufficient, they are no longer a real provider. This construct is dangerous and allows room for violence and a destructive state of mind. In the case of Billingham's father Ray, who has not worked since around 1980 when he was laid off from his factory job, he easily falls into this harmful construct amongst men in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Due to Ray no longer being economically self-sufficient, he is reduced to being less than a man who is not able to care for his family, which then forces him into this state of addiction. One that, through Billingham's imagery, he is clearly unable to pull himself out of.



Figure 4: Richard Billingham, *Ray Sitting on Bathroom Floor*, 1996, Photograph, England

There are moments in the series where a softness is present amongst the deficiency of the home. In *Liz Feeding Kitten*, 1996 (Figure 5), the spectator is placed above the subject, looking down. The viewer sees Billingham's mother Elizabeth feeding a kitten. There is a tenderness that can be felt within the photograph. It is one of the images where his mother feels calmer, gentler,

<sup>7</sup> Roni Strier, "Gendered Realities of Poverty: Men and Women's Views of Poverty in Jerusalem," *Social Service Review* 79, no. 2 (2005): 347.

<sup>8</sup> "Richard Billingham."

happier. However, Elizabeth's smile, though cheerful and content, shows the viewer her physical impoverishment with her front teeth slowly rotting. Because of Billingham's choice in photographing from above, the image feels much like a maternity ward photograph after giving birth and holding the baby for the first time. Elizabeth is thrilled to be feeding the kitten, perhaps reminiscing to when she was able to do the same for her sons, who are now all grown up.



Figure 5: Richard Billingham, *Liz Feeding Kitten*, 1996, Photograph, England

However, Billingham's decision in photographing Elizabeth this close up, from above with the flash, offers an almost vulgar and unflattering perspective of his mother, further expressing the indigence of their situation. The feminization of poverty exists as a worldwide issue, which ensnares generation after generation and creates an ongoing cycle of low self-esteem.<sup>9</sup> Susan Griffin, a feminist philosopher, states in her essay "Feminism and Motherhood" (1974), "the definition of motherhood in our culture is one in which the mother sacrifices herself to the child. She sacrifices her self. Her self is lost." Griffin continues, "when the children grow up and leave home, if the mother has sacrificed her self to them, she now loses it entirely. Her loss is

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<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Meza-Desplas, "Heaviness, Hardship, Heft: Gender-based Burdens in Images." *The International Journal of the Image* 9, no. 3 (2018): 39.

absolute”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this loss and low self esteem is the reasoning behind the abundance of animals in the home. The notion of still being able to care for something is in an effort to not lose herself completely, but also as a means for making up in failing with Ray and her sons.

The theme of ignorance emerges in the series through Elizabeth’s unconsciousness of the plight that surrounds her. This appears in moments where she is concerned with things she deems more significant, such as her puzzles. In the photograph *Liz Working on a Jigsaw Puzzle, 1996* (Figure 6), the viewer sees Elizabeth sitting over one of her jigsaw puzzles. She sits hunched over on the couch, fully immersed in her activity, the box of puzzle pieces in her lap. Along with the jigsaw pieces, Elizabeth's floral print dress and her tattoos come together in a riot of colors, pulling the viewer in. However, upon a closer look into the photograph, there is more that comes through. In front of Elizabeth, to the left of the frame sits her pack of cigarettes. To the far right, closest to the viewer, sits an ashtray. Nearby is a mug half filled with tea, or possibly coffee. All of these items sit on top of the puzzle, close to Elizabeth, so she does not need to get up and interrupt her task. In the upper right corner sits one of her dolls, tucked behind the pillow she sits next to. She is unphased to her son photographing her. The image conveys not only Elizabeth’s aloofness to their struggle, but also to her son.



Figure 6: Richard Billingham, *Liz Working on a Jigsaw Puzzle, 1996*, Photograph, England

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<sup>10</sup> Moyra Davey, *Mother Reader: Essential Literature on Motherhood* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 37.



The photograph suggests her reversion to a childlike nature in an effort to avoid their situation. Billingham's choice in placing the viewer above the subject is perhaps as a means of society looking down on the family's poor situation, questioning why they continue to live under these circumstances.



Figure 7: Richard Billingham, *Untitled, 1994*, Photograph, England

There is an inherent and perverse fascination in seeing grown people fight. The attraction in this case is intensified by Elizabeth's obviously immense physical power. However, the pictures depicting violence, born out of alcoholism and depression surely, don't succeed in turning the series into a campaign about this.<sup>11</sup> In, *Untitled, 1994* (Figure 7) the artist photographs his parents in the beginning of a violent altercation. In the center of the image is Elizabeth, taking up nearly half of the frame due to her size. To the left of her is Ray, sitting powerless, and to the right of her is Jason, Billingham's younger brother. The background presents Elizabeth's collection of porcelain dolls, and to the far right is a stain on the wall. The photograph shows Elizabeth punching Ray, most likely due to an argument or from her being fed up with his incessant drinking. The image is arresting due to it clearly exhibiting domestic violence in the home, but also because it is Elizabeth who is assaulting Ray. In her book, *Men*

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<sup>11</sup> Hornby, "Life Goes On," 34.

*Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit declares that women can and do engage in intimate partner violence, however studies show that these acts typically do not result in significant injury or death.<sup>12</sup> Seeing this exchange of familiar power and violence is surprising, but also solidifies the complicated state and nature in the Billingham family.



Figure 8: Richard Billingham, *Ray and Liz Bleeding*, 1996, Photograph, England

The troublesome structure of Ray and Elizabeth's relationship is displayed throughout much of the series. In another image, *Ray and Liz Bleeding*, 1996, Billingham photographs his mother and father at rest after a violent argument (Figure 8). The match looks to have come to a draw between the two, however there is no confusion that the victor is Elizabeth, and will continue to be. Elizabeth is reclining on the couch towards Ray with her arm out holding a bloodied tissue. Ray sits next to her, with cuts or marks around his eyes, his hand out in a gestural manner. Perhaps she is offering up her tissue to him in a way of concern or reconciliation. In the far right corner of the frame one sees that another person is present, Billingham's younger brother Jason. The background shows what looks to be a shelving unit, or desk, filled with Elizabeth's porcelain trinkets. Behind this is a colorful wallpaper, filled with flowers and figures engaging in jesterlike activities. To the far upper right is a door that is

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<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 21.

heavily sullied. Next to Ray sits the vacuum cleaner. This is an ironic moment within the photograph that can easily symbolize his position in the home. He has lost his power and influence as the father figure. Ray is reduced to a stereotypical archetype of the woman in the household, one that passes their time of boredom with alcoholism.

According to Jung's theory, the patterning mother archetype generates or releases certain perceptions from the child's unconscious so that the child develops behaviors, feelings, and activities that form a "mother" pattern within the child's experience of reality. These images can be positive or negative depending upon how the child is mothered in reality and upon his or her cultural and social context.<sup>13</sup> Billingham's photographs show him and his brother Jason as witness' to Elizabeth's violent transgression towards Ray, who recoils in dismay. These instances of witness strengthen the fragmentations of a home living in poverty, while chipping away at the typical archetypes of the mother and father figures as sources of nurture and comfort, strength and support.

Women living in poverty are historically portrayed through images that evoke prevalent social and gendered discourses. For instance, poor women are often depicted as welfare queens who are compulsive, addicted consumers of social services, and victims of male irresponsibility.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Elizabeth, who doesn't drink, but smokes too much and impulsively buys porcelain figurines, becomes the quasi victim of Ray's irresponsibility, and the caretaker of him and her sons. Through Billingham's photographs, she is seen as the more violent and physically sufficient over Ray, which pushes back on this construct of the woman in poverty. However, as stated previously, Elizabeth moves out due to Ray's addiction, but Ray moves in with her later as Billingham leaves for university. The feminization of poverty reinscribes a woman's identity as mother, wife, and caretaker.<sup>15</sup>

Billingham's imagery shows the notion of detachment in the home. *Ray and Liz Eating on the Couch, 1996*, (Figure 9) presents these feelings most especially. The scene shows Ray and Elizabeth sitting on a couch together. However, the distance between the two presents the indifference and fracture in their relationship and the home. To the left sits Ray, with a plate of

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<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Carey Ford, "Portrait of Our Lady: Mary, Piero, and the Great Mother Archetype." *Journal of Religion and Health* 43, no. 2 (2004): 98.

<sup>14</sup> Strier, "Gendered Realities of Poverty: Men and Women's Views of Poverty in Jerusalem," 347.

<sup>15</sup> Meza-Desplas, "Heaviness, Hardship, Heft: Gender-based Burdens in Images," 35.

food on his lap. His eyes are closed, perhaps savoring his dinner or attempting to keep it down. His grey ill-fitting shirt has a couple of stains on it, confirming his inability to sufficiently feed himself, or maintain a sense of cleanliness. Next to him is one of the three dogs and one of the ten cats. To the right sits Elizabeth wearing a tight, unflattering green dress, the straps falling off her shoulders. In front of her sits a TV tray table where she eats her dinner. Also on the TV tray table lies other miscellaneous objects; a wallet, small plant, and spray paint. An object that is most peculiar is what looks to be a paper underneath Elizabeth's plate. It is odd because it is stained or smeared with something that does not seem pleasant or acceptable.



Figure 9: Richard Billingham, *Ray and Liz Eating on the Couch*, 1996, Photograph, England

Her expression holds the emotions of disappointment, depression, and uncertainty of her future. Underneath them sits a white sheet, covering the couch, perhaps in an effort to protect the furniture from the pets, or from Ray. Behind them, peeking through in the background, is another loud wallpaper. Ray and Elizabeth are clearly unhappy with one another and their situation, but are unable to walk away from each other. The photograph expresses the grievances and resentment the couple holds towards one another in their impoverished state.

The walls of the Billingham home carry a narrative as striking as the photographs containing his father and mother. In an unexpected image, *Untitled*, 1995 (Figure 10), the viewer

is faced with a grey wall. The wall at first looks to be dull and boring, until the spectator notices how sullied it is. There is a long red stain flowing down the wall to the right. One can easily assume it to be blood. The viewer is then faced with three mass produced porcelain portraits of mannequin figures and a cat. Two of the wall pieces look crooked, as if they're going to fall to the floor at any moment. The cat wall piece is missing an ear, perhaps knocked off during a quarrel between Elizabeth and Ray. In the upper part of the frame, towards the right, one can see what looks like a square hole in the wall. The kitchyness of the wall pieces lend a sadness to the photograph. Their mass produced, cutesy appeal that Elizabeth is drawn to becomes lost to the stains on the walls, which hold the heavy memories of a family broken and distressed.

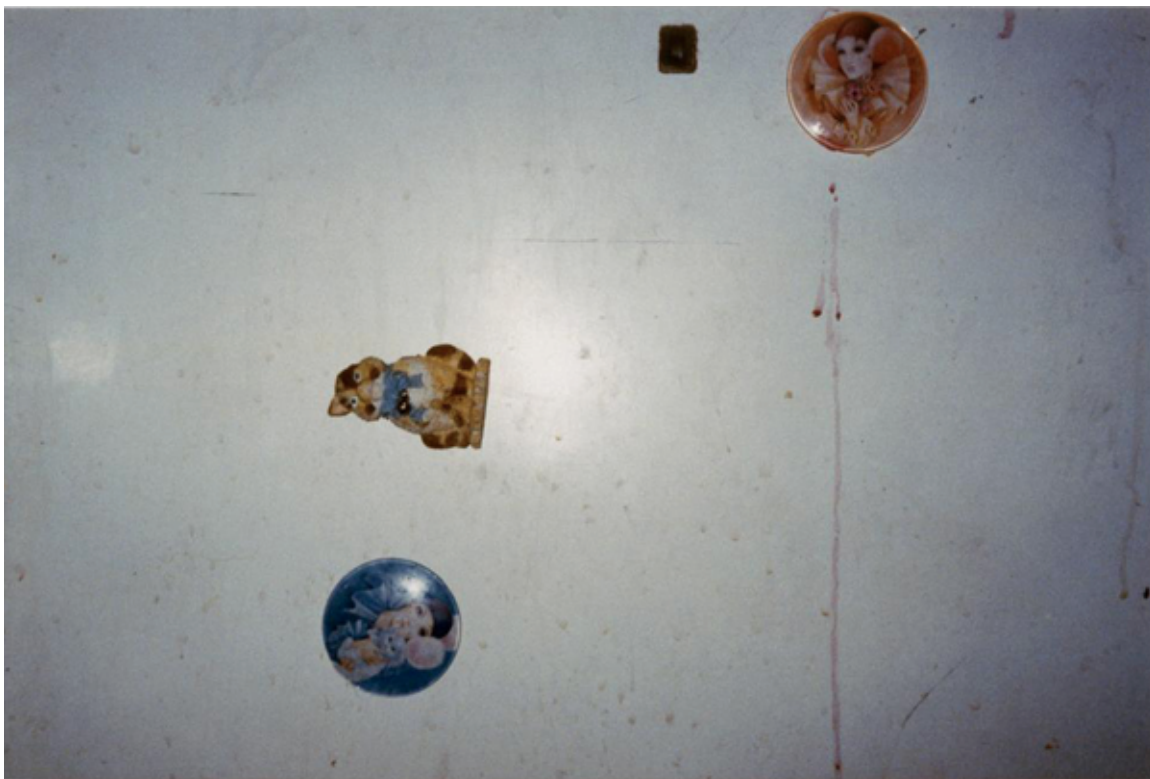


Figure 10: Richard Billingham, *Untitled*, 1995, Photograph, England

For most families, photographing these moments of addiction, violence, and dysfunction would never make their way into photo albums, let alone into the institutional white boxes of a gallery or museum for others to see. Anyone who has ever had parents, especially parents like Ray and Elizabeth, would wonder whether it is justifiable snapping these moments of distress<sup>16</sup> It is important for one to consider the rights and wrongs of these photographs. Is it okay to photograph these moments of violence and tragedy for others to view? Furthermore, is it okay

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<sup>16</sup> Hornby, "Life Goes On," 32.

for us as a society to continue to crave these images? Why is society seduced by images of others' impoverishment? Susan Sontag states in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that “shock has become a leading stimulation of consumption,” and as a society we wish to see something gruesome.<sup>17</sup> There is a self satisfaction in seeing others who are worse off. In the case of Billingham’s work, the spectator consumes the family scene and is seduced by their impoverishment. Through the series “Ray’s a Laugh,” our shameless curiosity in poverty is revealed.<sup>18</sup>

Billingham’s photographs act as social signifiers of poverty. Upon closer examination, the Billingham family becomes more ordinary. The spectator is given access to all occasions and moments in their life: their happiness, their sadness, and their boredom. Thus, it becomes difficult to maintain a distance from the Billingham’s. Like old acquaintances, they appear less strange and more ordinary.<sup>19</sup> There is the juxtaposition of the porcelain figurines, which are kitschy and point to traces of mass production. There is the disheveling of the home and chaos amongst the animals and Ray’s alcoholism. There is a lack of care that comes from desperation and apathy. The dirty floors and stained walls all become archetypes of the modern notions of poverty. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag expresses that “perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering are those who could do something to alleviate it, or learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs whether or not we mean to be.”<sup>20</sup> Though Richard Billingham is only documenting his family, the photographs resonate to a larger group of people, perhaps those living in similar conditions. We often see what a perfect family should contain and be, so it is striking to see a depiction of a family living impoverished. Billingham stated in regards to the series that “neither I nor they are shocked by its directness because we’re all well enough acquainted with having to live with poverty. After all, there are millions of other people in Britain living similarly.”<sup>21</sup>

Billingham’s series is often recognized as a representation of poverty and a critical social critique of a broken system. By dissolving the conventions of stereotypical family photographs,

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 23 & 96.

<sup>18</sup> "Reinterpreting Unconventional Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham's 'Ray's a Laugh' Series"

<sup>19</sup> "Reinterpreting Unconventional Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham's 'Ray's a Laugh' Series"

<sup>20</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> "Richard Billingham."

which are often meant to memorialize happier times, the artist invites the viewer into their poverty stricken home. Billingham's series can be interpreted as an entertaining reality drama, satisfying a never-ending appetite for confessional revelations, considering the 1990s witnessing a rapid expansion of reality-television culture. However, Billingham's images can also be read as a political documentary, targeted to the upper middle-class audience and address the working-class poverty of 1990s Britain following the years of conservative government.<sup>22</sup> When the Labour Party won the 1997 election in the United Kingdom, one of its key goals was to end child poverty in a generation and to create a new welfare settlement that would meet the needs of twenty-first century Britain. The young artist's photographs of his childhood surroundings seemed to encapsulate the need for political change.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is important to note Billingham's opposition to all political and social interpretations. He insisted that his intention was to study the human figure in interior space, and that the photographs were merely his reference material for paintings.<sup>24</sup> Though his intentions are valid, Billingham must have been aware of his imagery and documentation in revealing his impoverished family. If Billingham's work encourages the spectator to consider one's relation to class and poverty, the spectator is giving the work deeper meaning than the artist originally intended. For Billingham the themes of boredom and addiction were more interesting to him, although he argues that he only realized this after finishing the series. Billingham explains, "after I did the family pictures, I soon realized that people liked the family pictures for reasons that I never intended. There are very few people, I think, that get beyond the subject matter and can identify the artist's intention. They just like to look at my mum's tattoos or the stains on the wallpaper or the dirty floor."<sup>25</sup> There is an effect of poverty in our culture that offers the viewer self satisfaction for not being "as bad" or more "put together" than the subjects in Billingham's work. Sontag states in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that, "the photographer's intentions do not

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<sup>22</sup> Amer4127. "Reinterpreting Unconventional Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham's 'Ray's a Laugh' Series" Accessed May 14, 2019.

<https://www.americansuburbx.com/2010/04/theory-reinterpreting-unconventional.html>.

<sup>23</sup> "Reinterpreting Unconventional Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham's 'Ray's a Laugh' Series"

<sup>24</sup> "Reinterpreting Unconventional Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham's 'Ray's a Laugh' Series"

<sup>25</sup> "Reinterpreting Unconventional Family Photographs: Returning to Richard Billingham's 'Ray's a Laugh' Series"

determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.”<sup>26</sup>

Richard Billingham’s series “Ray’s A Laugh” encapsulates the perception of poverty within the home. The work is personal, yet personable for the viewer. The photographs are complex, but clear in displaying the Billinghams plight. The series points out our society’s shameful fetization of poverty, while recognizing the subjects for who they are, human beings living at the bottom of society. Richard Billingham’s hopeless discovery is made through the accident of documenting the seemingly mundane. By photographing the haphazardness of his family, the viewer is seeking to find the traditional moments to make sense of the dysfunction. However, these moments do not present themselves in any traditional way. Nature and nurture are broken between the gender roles in what becomes an obvious example of enabling relationships. The mother cannot break from the oppression of poverty and in the end falls back to the role of caretaker, while still holding onto the masculine power, which has been lost due to the fathers addiction. The sense of acceptance to the objects of poverty and the rampant social and mental traumas keep the Billinghams from moving forward. Poverty, like alcoholism, is presented like a disease. Without help, the subjects are almost destined to fall back into their habit.

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<sup>26</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 39.



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