For a couple of years, Richard Billingham went in search of the strangeness of those days out when in rare breaks from the monotony of poverty, his mum took him by bus to Dudley Zoo. The oddness of those encounters with the exotic - gorillas and giraffes in the heart of the urban West Midlands - stayed with him. He became a tower block natural historian; David Attenborough was his hero.

His research for Zoo, involved touring zoos from Berlin to Buenos Aires taking photographs and videos. The images captured during this travelling are collected in a book 'Zoo' and have been extensively exhibited in the UK and abroad.

Once again, Billingham used what he knows to use best: his observative skills. He first shot to fame in 1996 with his photographs of his mum and dad, Liz and Ray, in their council flat in the Black Country. The images and videos captured during this travelling are collected in a book 'Zoo' and have been extensively exhibited in the UK and abroad.

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Zoo, focuses on the psychological space of the zoo enclosure as the series also captures the complexities of the viewing relationship between captive animals and their public audience. With this series, Billingham shows that he is as resolute in his photographs of his family as in his photographs of animals. Once again, his subjects are portrayed in a close but distanced manner aiming to avoid any sentimentality.

Like the colour-clashing riot of his family flat - his mother revelled in ornamentation - the monkeys and big cats are often subject to stylistic nightmares too. Sixties mosaic walls and harsh striplighting, parodies of greenness, incarcerate them just as surely out of time as in the wrong space. A rhino called Tsororo, whose name-plate explains his origins in Zimbabwe, stares out from behind three sets of bars in Frankfurt Zoo; a single tree trunk against a utilitarian tiled wall stands in for the jungle.

Some of the impetus for his looking seems to come from Francis Bacon's human menagerie of grotesques; the rest seems to arise out of the same feeling that prompted John Berger's classic observations on the animal gaze: 'With their parallel lives,' Berger wrote, 'animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species.

Why did you decide to turn to animals?
I’ve always been very interested in nature. Although I grew up in a tower block on a rough council estate I took a keen interest in natural history documentaries—especially David Attenborough’s—and I studied all the nature books in the local library.

I’ve always wanted animals to feature as the main subject in my work in some way. Zoo animals are neither domestic animals nor wild animals but something in between. If you see, for instance, a lone rhino in a zoo it operates more like a label for its species than a rhino in its natural habitat. Nor is it a tame animal like a pet or a farm animal, yet it is on display inside a pen as if to say ‘this is what a black rhino looks like’.

Over the years I have found it very difficult to take photographs of animals in the wild without them looking like images from National Geographic magazines. Making work about animals in zoos I have since found easier because systems of representation are already in place. There is opportunity for the work to be not just about the species you are photographing/videoing but our human relationship to it as well.

The photographic snap-shot language of the early work involving your family played a pivotal role in the audience’s perception of the series. For Zoo you also worked with video; why this medium?

Is Zoo more of a documentaristic work or a painterly one?

I spent nearly a year trying to take photographs of
animals in zoos. Originally I wanted to have the animal quite small within its pen but moving a bit. I thought if I photographed it with half a second or quarter of a second exposure the animal would be blurred slightly within its pen, rather like some of Francis Bacon’s paintings. However, they didn’t work and looked very slight. I found that by using a video camera and a tripod to keep it static, I could record the movement of the animal much better, especially repetitive movement. When you see an animal moving in a video, you look at the animal rather than the pen. When you see a still image of a pen with the animal as a blur, you don’t look at the blur but at the pen. So I found the videos worked much better for me to begin with. Video was a way to start the project, if you like. Some of the larger photographs in a gallery space echo the spectacle of a zoo animal as seen through a large plate glass window in a zoo. Western zoos rarely have bars now.

**John Berger’s ‘Why look at animals?’ essay initially opened the way for the multidisciplinary debate concerned with the role of the animal in contemporary culture, and was subsequently re-interpreted by a number of scholars.** What is your take on the essay?

I really like the John Berger essay, and it is inspirational. In the essay Berger talks about zoo animals being marginalized and often standing near the margins of their pens as though they’re incidental. Candida Hofer did a very good series of photographs on zoo animals where they were relatively small and looked incidental within
the photos. However, I wanted to make photographs where the animals were much less incidental and in fact controlled the image compositionally, but were not sentimental in any way. I wanted them to be solemn but still have dignity. Right at the end of Berger’s essay, you realize he’s using the idea of zoos to illustrate some Marxist ideology. But I like the emotion and the images the writing conjures up.

Filmed in zoos across the UK, Europe and South America, the project explores the impact of confined spaces on animal behaviour in acutely observed detail. By focusing on the psychological space of the zoo enclosure, the series also captures the complexities of the viewing relationship between captive animals and their public audience.

Zoo features both, rare and more commonplace animals; were there any selection criteria involved in the selection of animals to film?

There was no hierarchy to the way I chose the zoos that I worked in or the animals in those zoos. Around that time, I was doing a lot of travelling to various cities because of different shows I was having. Whenever there was a zoo in one of those cities, I would go to it to make work—staying an extra couple of days if need be. If I’d have chosen which zoos to go to, specifically to make work, I think would probably have chosen all the bad zoos where it would be easier to find shabby pens, real bars as opposed to glass fronts, and of course,
stereotypical behaviour. That would have been the wrong approach.

You once said: “I think zoos are a perfect metaphor for our relationship to the rest of nature and this is what I am investigating. I am doing it without sentimentality, anthropomorphism or making the animals look funny”.

What do you think Zoo ultimately exposes?

I had a survey show a few months ago in Melbourne with family work, landscape work, and zoo work all displayed alongside each other. I don’t think the zoo work exposes anything about zoos that we don’t already know, but I think it made sense of the other bodies of work on show there and vice versa.

One of the videos shows an elephant shaking its head restlessly from side to side in the same troubling motion. It is a motion that occurs for eight minutes in this film loop, and one that we suspect continues day in day out, for weeks, months, and years.

Is Zoo concerned with ethical and moral judgement of the captivity-condition?

If I was concerned with any ‘ethical and moral judgment of the captivity-condition,’ then the work would have been an illustration of this. I’m always careful not to be
judgmental when I'm making work because then the work could become earnest. The last thing viewers want is to be told what to think. Better if you show them 'how things are'. Then they can make up their own minds.

Are you interested in animal-rights?

To an extent, but I am not a fanatic.

What are you currently working on?

Landscape and family subjects.

English photographer and video artist, Billingham graduated from the University of Sunderland in 1994 and in the same year took part in his first group exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery, London. He came to prominence through his candid photography of his family in Cradley Heath, a body of work later added to and published in the acclaimed book Ray's A Laugh (1996). In 1997 Billingham was included in Saatchi's notorious Sensation show of young British artists, at the Royal Academy in London. Also in 1997, he won the Citigroup Photography Prize. He was shortlisted for the 2001 Turner Prize, for his solo show at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham. He now lives in Brighton, and travels widely. He also is a lecturer in Fine Art Photography at the University of Gloucestershire.

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