

Mat Collishaw

25 September — 10 January 2016



Exhibition guide

Mat Collishaw is fascinated by the darker side of human nature. He has never shied away from difficult or challenging subject matter and ideas that deal with death, destruction and decay are revealed as beautiful, hypnotic and compelling. In Collishaw's world, seduction meets repulsion, the shocking becomes alluring, the beautiful becomes squalid and desire meets pain. As an artist, he is especially aware of the power of the image to manipulate and he draws his inspiration from a range of sources such as the media, popular culture, nature, mythology, the slick vernacular of advertising, the rich seams of art history and the proliferation of images available on the internet.

This major survey exhibition brings together sculpture, film, photography and installation and testifies to the richness and breadth of Collishaw's practice. It also provides an opportunity to explore some of the overriding themes and preoccupations within his work.

Gallery 1

On display in Gallery 1 is the largest group of works from the *Insecticide* series that has ever been shown together in a public gallery. Begun in 2006, Collishaw has continued to return to this compelling series. Some of the earliest works included a broader range of insects and were produced on a smaller scale, often with a *trompe l'oeil* framing device, echoing the form of a daguerreotype, an early form of photography often used for commemorating the dead. Gradually Collishaw gravitated towards the exclusive representation of butterflies and moths, positioned against an inky black ground and presented in a square format on a significantly larger scale. Each of the compositions contains an explosion of vivid and intense colour coupled with rich and evocative textural variations. They are undeniably seductive and alluring, yet the images they contain are of butterflies; squashed, smudged and smeared for our delectation and magnified significantly so that we can revel in every detail. The butterfly, a powerful symbol of beauty and fragility, is placed between two panes of glass and the image is then scanned at high resolution. This image is then subject to further digital manipulation, as if an additional phase of transformation occurs following the cycle of egg, caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly – broken only by death. The process of capturing the

butterfly in a way that combines beauty with brutality, echoes the way in which organisms are prepared for study under a microscope. Here we are also reminded of the popular Victorian pursuit of lepidoptery where butterflies were captured in nets, collected, ordered and classified. Traditionally they were presented on boards with pins driven through their delicate torsos, collectors marvelling at their beauty and relishing their presumed authority over nature.

An earlier series of photographs, *Catching Fairies* (1996), places Collishaw himself in the role of catcher and collector. Wading through an East End canal, Collishaw can be seen brandishing his net in pursuit of an array of tiny fairies, which flutter and hover teasingly around their potential captor. A significant source of inspiration for these works was the story of the *Cottingley Fairies*. In 1917, 10-year-old Frances Griffiths and 16-year-old Elsie Wright produced photographs of themselves, seemingly in the company of fairies and gnomes, in their garden in Cottingley. The photographs came to the attention of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, who had recently lost his son. He publicly endorsed the photographs as evidence of the existence of fairies which subsequently discredited his reputation. The validity of the photographs was a focus for impassioned debate and

Mat Collishaw, *Catching Fairies 1*, 1996, C-type photograph, 45cm x 65cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



is in many ways characteristic of the struggles of the post-Darwinian era to reconcile the forces of science and superstition. The tale of the *Cottingley Fairies* is also indicative of our desire for faith or belief in an existence that defies the rational. Importantly, it is emblematic of the potential trickery of photography as a medium, something that is a recurrent preoccupation in Collishaw's work.

The Venal Muse (2012) is a series of six sculptural works. At first sight, a range of exotic flowers are encased in vitrines, preserved like rare specimens in museological displays. Closer inspection reveals the flowers to be made of painted resin, their petals riddled with syphilitic sores and pustules. The earth in which they are planted, which should be offering

nourishment, appears inadequate and toxic. Charles Baudelaire's book of poetry *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) is a clear reference. Baudelaire's controversial literature reflected on decadence and eroticism and was scorned by many of his contemporaries. Collishaw also cites the influence of Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal* (1949), a voyage of self-discovery, transcending moral laws. Whilst imprisoned, many of Genet's lovers were covered in wounds and scars but instead of finding these repulsive, he regarded them as emblems of achievement. However, it is the contemporary references behind these works that are the most pervasive; each individual work is named after a British waste management company. Collishaw reflects on the excessive

Mat Collishaw, *The Venal Muse, Augean*, 2012, Enamel paint, glass, resin, steel, wood, 162cm x 52cm x 52cm. Courtesy the artist and Blain|Southern



production and consumption of today's society and the challenges of waste disposal. Gradually we are poisoning the earth, the oceans and our environment yet we prefer to maximise our experiences of the moment rather than preserving the planet for generations to come. The diseased and decaying plants also hint at the spectre of genetic modification and where this route might lead in the future.

Gallery 2

Last Meal on Death Row, Texas: Paul Nuncio (2011) consists of thirteen photographic works created in the manner of 17th century Flemish still life painting. Traditionally the still life genre carries associations of domesticity and intimacy yet these *vanitas* paintings

Mat Collishaw, *Last Meal on Death Row, Texas: Paul Nuncio*, 2011, C-type photograph, 64cm x 48cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



were often loaded with symbolism and frequently acted as *memento mori*, reminders of the transience of life and the inevitability of death. For this series of works, Collishaw researched the meals chosen by prisoners on death row in Texas prior to execution. There remains a tradition in US prisons which allows a prisoner awaiting death a last moment of free will in choosing whatever they would like to eat or drink; a rather ironic gesture considering that legalised murder will follow. Each of the prisoners has been individually named and their last meal carefully re-constructed and captured in meticulous detail. The mood of the works is sombre and reverential and in some ways they serve as individual portraits and a memorial for the dead. The series plays with our morbid curiosity to learn of

Mat Collishaw, *For your eyes only*, 2010, Hard drive, LCD screen, steel, surveillance mirror, wood, 95cm x 210cm x 21cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



the details behind these executions. The idea of the last meal and the number of photographs in the series also relate to the story of the *Last Supper*, the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples prior to his crucifixion. Collishaw adeptly applies the weight of art history and religion to encourage us to reflect on complex and emotive contemporary issues.

Gallery 3

For your eyes only (2010) is a highly complex work presented in the form of an altarpiece triptych. The title immediately casts the viewer in the role of voyeur as we watch the dancer twisting and gyrating around her pole, occasional flashes of light illuminating the audience who watch

from the opposite side. Slowed right down, the body is caught in positions that would otherwise be impossible to hold, evoking grace and elegance as well as tortuous pain. Additionally, the slowed down soundtrack creates a dark and sinister accompaniment. The work appears loaded with references to religion, art history and popular culture; from the dancing silhouette in the popular TV programme *Tales of the Unexpected*; the women that feature as objects of our hero's desire in the Bond films; and perhaps most significantly, to depictions of Christ on the Cross. Francis Bacon's paintings of the Crucifixion are a clear influence for Collishaw; each of Bacon's intensely expressive paintings on the theme is presented in the triptych format and the palette

Mat Collishaw, *Auto-Immolation*, 2010, Hard drive, LCD screen, steel, surveillance mirror, wood, 300cm x 114cm x 52cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



is dominated by reds, oranges and blacks. His pained and tortuous beings were inspired by images of animals on hooks in the slaughterhouse. Whilst the image of Christ on the Cross is a central icon of the Christian faith, it is at the same time a brutal image of a slow and painful execution and a powerful representation of violence and suffering.

Auto-Immolation (2010) also presents a moving image within a sculptural framework reminiscent of church architecture. A beautiful red orchid is licked with blue flames; the moving image is compelling and hypnotic. At first the orchid appears to flourish, despite the fire yet gradually, it is destroyed. The work could be seen as a contemporary *memento mori*,

a potent reminder of the fading of beauty and the inevitability of death.

The works *Children of a Lesser God* (2007) and *Single Nights* (2007) were both created when the artist's studio was in Bethnal Green, East London, prior to the move to his current studio in Camberwell. For both these works, the East End community provided the inspiration.

Single Nights is a series of photographs of single mothers with their children. There are obvious references to the potent religious icon of the Madonna and Child. Collishaw has also harnessed the influence of French Baroque painter Georges de la Tour who was renowned for painting scenes

Mat Collishaw, *Single Nights, Naima*, 2007, C-type photograph, 183cm x 140cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



that were lit by candlelight and his chiaroscuro techniques (strong contrasts between light and dark). Like his predecessor, Caravaggio, de la Tour populated his mostly religious paintings with people from the immediate community; representing carpenters, card-sharps and musicians. Collishaw employs the visual language of de la Tour to present serene and heroic images of the mother and child, resilient in the face of hardship, the emphasis on the beauty of the bond between them.

The initial inspiration for *Children of a Lesser God* came from the young children that populated the East End streets, some appearing almost feral. Collishaw has looked to the mythological tale of Romulus and Remus to create this work. Romulus and Remus were the mythical founders of Rome who were taken by their

Mat Collishaw, *Children of a Lesser God*, 2007, Transparency, acrylic, LED lights, steel, 210cm x 200cm x 9cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



father to the river Tiber and left to die. However, they were found by a she-wolf who cared for them and protected them from other animals. Collishaw's contemporary urban interpretation of the tale shows two naked babies on a battered sofa, one relaxing contentedly whilst the other appears to suckle on the animal's teats. The wolves are replaced by large dogs; one snarls aggressively whilst the suckling dog appears to have recently killed a bird whose blood and feathers are strewn across the floor. This is a dark, violent and unsettling scene but one in which the dogs are clearly feeding the children and keeping them safe, suggesting it is possible for a child to be nurtured and protected even in the unlikeliest of environments.

The everyday is also the subject of *Whispering Weeds* (2011). The artist has in effect animated Albrecht Durer's

Mat Collishaw, *Whispering Weeds*, 2011, Fan, hard drive, LCD screen, wooden frame, 30cm x 26cm x 6cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



watercolour painting *The Large Piece of Turf* (1503) by introducing a soft breeze to this celebrated work. The painting is widely regarded as a masterpiece of realism; every blade of grass and every variation of colour, tone and texture meticulously rendered; every species of vegetation specifically identified. What also seems remarkable about this painting is the modesty of the subject matter. Collishaw further emphasises the reference to the everyday and the unremarkable by titling the work *Whispering Weeds*. Weeds are as much part of nature as all vegetation yet their classification implies undesirability and inferiority to other kinds of flowers and plants.

The earliest of all the works in this exhibition, *Narcissus* (1990) is a self portrait of the artist lying in mud in an urban landscape, looking down at his murky reflection in a puddle. There

is an undeniable nod towards the recumbent young man that appears on the cover of The Smith's record, *This Charming Man* (1983), a still shot taken from Jean Cocteau's 1950 film, *Orphée*. Despite the distinctly unglamorous environment, we are reminded of contemporary model shots in today's magazines. The myth of Narcissus takes many forms and has been explored by many artists and writers yet the abiding element of the story is that Narcissus is so absorbed in his own beauty when looking at his own reflection that he cannot tear himself away from the water's edge and subsequently dies. Collishaw offers a contemporary twist to the tale that condemns excessive vanity.

Gallery 4

Deliverance (2008) is a powerful installation which critically engages

Mat Collishaw, *Deliverance*, 2008, 45 gobos, 3 moving head projectors, phosphorescent paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



with press and media coverage of distressing and traumatic events. In September 2004, gunmen occupied School Number One in Beslan in North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. The worlds press de-camped to Beslan with their TV vans and cameras and relayed live footage of developments to a global audience. As those captured emerged from the building, terrified, wounded or carrying the dead, they were met by a barrage of flash lamps. 1,100 hostages were taken at the school and 777 of these were children. At least 385 were killed.

For this installation, Collishaw has drawn on press images of the disaster victims and re-staged these using volunteers. The images are projected onto walls coated with phosphorescent paint where they linger like ghosts before disappearing again. Poses that echo the Pietà and the Crucifixion add a further layer of gravity. The

harshness of the light, the revolving and clicking of projectors and the rhythm of the changing images evoke both the assault of a machine gun and the frenzied flashes of news cameras.

Whilst the morality of the media is called into question, we are also challenged to consider our own reactions to scenes of terror and suffering. Our bodies experience a biological response to scenes of danger, stimulating adrenaline and making us feel more alive. However, just as they do in the installation, our memories of atrocities through news coverage are immediately vivid but continue to fade.

Floor 4

All Things Fall (2014) is the latest in a series of zoetropes by the artist. The zoetrope, its name derived from the Greek *zoe trapos* meaning wheel of

Mat Collishaw, *All Things Fall*, 2014, Steel, aluminium, plaster, resin, LED lights, motor, 200cm x 200cm x 200cm. Courtesy of the artist and Blain|Southern



life, is a device dating back to the 1860s used to create the illusion of a moving image. Collishaw characteristically combines both old and new technologies to create the work, with over 300 figures designed in computer software and then 3D printed as models in resin. The subject is the *Massacre of the Innocents*, the biblical tale of King Herod's act of infanticide in order to protect his throne. This dramatic story has been interpreted by many celebrated artists such as Rubens, Reni, Giotto and Tintoretto.

The circular sculpture rotates at speeds so fast that when combined with a stroboscopic light, the static scenes become suddenly animated, the eye struggling to focus on one point. It is constantly urged to move on and explore the multiple bodies in various states of movement and contortion. This is partly why

Collishaw approaches the subject matter in the form of a zoetrope as this proto-cinematic optical illusion engages and seduces the viewer before they fully realise they are complicit in a scene of genocide. Its visual similarities to the form of a carousel allude to leisure and entertainment yet the cyclic narrative suggests a frenzied orgy of violence.

Mat Collishaw creates stunning visual imagery, which draws us in, only to expose the learned codes of behaviour and veils of illusion which mediate the act of looking. Whether we are looking at media images of atrocities from across the globe, works of art or slick advertising campaigns, Collishaw encourages us not just to look, but to see.

Deborah Robinson
Head of Exhibitions

The New Art Gallery Walsall

The Gallery, The Library of Birmingham

Concurrent with his exhibition in Walsall, Collishaw presents an exhibition of new work, *In Camera* (2015), commissioned by GRAIN and the Library of Birmingham and inspired by the Library's internationally renowned photography collections.

In Camera is a phrase loaded with meanings. It refers to a technique of photographing a subject without resorting to post-production as well as acting as a legal term for a trial that is hidden from public view.

For the installation, Collishaw has drawn on twelve crime scenes negatives made for Birmingham City Police Force in relation to crimes committed in the city in the 1930s and 40s. Extracted from their original context, the images become emotionally charged, arousing our natural curiosity over the nature of the crimes and their perpetrators. The images are presented in a series of illuminated vitrines made visible by intermittent flashes of light. The artist challenges us to consider the medium of photography, its role as witness and the ways in which images are interpreted.

Mat Collishaw (b. 1966) is a key figure in the important generation of British artists that emerged from Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s. He participated in *Freeze* (1988) and since his first solo exhibition in the 1990s has exhibited widely internationally.

Recent solo exhibitions include: *Black Mirror*, Galleria Borghese, Rome (2014); Bass Museum of Art, Florida (2013); Pino Pascali Museum Foundation, Bari (2013); *Mat Collishaw: Afterimage*, Arter, Istanbul (2013); and *Magical Lantern* at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2010). Recent group exhibitions include: *How to Construct a Time Machine*, MK Gallery, Milton Keynes (2015); *Corporeality and Sexuality*, Votive Church, Vienna (2014); *GLASSTRESSS: White Light/White Heat: Contemporary Artists and Glass*, collateral event of 55th Venice Biennale, Venice (2013); *About Caravaggio* (curated by Anna Imponente), Museo Tuscolano – Scuderie Aidobrandini, Frascati, Rome (2012); *720**, as part of Ron Arad's *Curtain Call Project*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (2012); *Made in Britain: Contemporary Art from the British Council Collection*, Benaki Museum, Athens (2012); *Out of Focus: Photography*, Saatchi Gallery, London; *Otherworldly – Optical Delusions and Small Realities*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York (2012); and the 12th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul (2011).

Collishaw's work is in several public collections including: Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; Museum of Old and New Art, New South Wales and Tate, London.

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