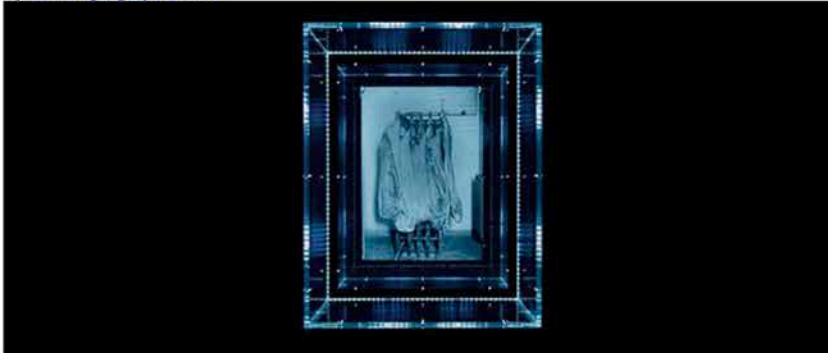




[Photography, Photography Reviews](#) January 8, 2016

REVIEW: *In Camera*: an exhibition by Mat Collishaw

by [Photography Editor](#)



In Camera by Mat Collishaw

As you step away from the endless shelves filled with books and into The Gallery in the iconic Library of Birmingham, you are plunged into darkness. Bright lights flash, sporadically throughout the room, illuminating images in suspended glass cases around the room, all depicting crime scenes from the archives of Birmingham City Police Force during the 1930's and 1940's.

The Library of Birmingham and GRAIN proudly present a new body of work by artist Mat Collishaw supported by the Arts Council of England. *In Camera* repurposes abandoned images once used as evidence to enquire into the changing nature of crime, photography, and the world around us.

By blocking out all natural light and using intermittent flashing lights, suspense and a sense of unease is created within the space. All the images are of crime scenes, from burglaries to murders. Walking around the space you have no idea where the next light flash is coming from, it's exciting and makes a change from walking around the edge of a well lit whitewashed room.

Collishaw has printed the negatives using phosphorescent ink, meaning that when exposed to light, the image becomes clear then gradually fades with time, representing the temporary use the photograph once had as evidence. Standing on one side of the space, seeing a flash bulb expose an image, and racing to see what you can see in the image is a pretty similar experience to crime investigation. Time is crucial and soon enough evidence can become useless. Questions are brought to the forefront about how useful photography is as evidence. With no case notes or witnesses, how much can the public seeing these images work out about the crimes committed.

Mat Collishaw's *In Camera* presents an exciting look back in Birmingham's history, and offers an exciting new way to look at photography, going right back to its beginnings and utilising the basics. Head to the Library of Birmingham before January 10th 2016 to check out this exciting installation.

Mat Collishaw “Black Mirror” at Galleria Borghese, Rome

December 28~2014



Galleria Borghese, a museum of worldwide renown, fuses contemporary art with its historic collection in an ambitious new exhibition by Mat Collishaw. “Black Mirror” is comprised of four works that respond to Galleria Borghese’s existing collection.

Three paintings by Caravaggio (*Madonna and Child with St. Anne – Dei Palafrenieri*, *David with the Head of Goliath*, *Saint Jerome Writing*) appear and disappear behind the surfaces of large mirrors framed in black Murano glass. The figures are animated to appear as though posing for the painting; breathing, blinking and shifting their weight in front of us. Everyday people caught in the process of being transformed into religious icons, trapped like spectres in an indeterminate space between the real world and the realm of the painting.

The Massacre of the Innocents by Ippolito Scarsella is referenced by a fourth work on the ground floor of the museum. Here the depiction of frenzied violence is exaggerated and restaged in the compelling form of a three dimensional zoetrope—a contemporary version of a victorian optical toy. The zoetrope enhances this cornucopia of savagery with multiple characters in a heaving mass of kaleidoscopic brutality. Playing out horrific acts, they too are forever trapped in a frenzied purgatory of interminable violence.

Curated by Anna Coliva and Valentina Ciarallo.

Mat Collishaw: il dialogo (mortifero) con l'arte del passato

Galleria 1/9 Unosunove, Roma - fino al 30 settembre 2014. La morte nel regno vegetale (le piante che bruciano), animale (le farfalle che spirano) e umano (l'ultima cena dei condannati a morte). Le tre declinazione di Mat Collishaw prima della personale alla Galleria Borghese.

Scritto da [Calogero Pirrera](#) | giovedì, 31 luglio 2014



Mat Collishaw, installation view at 1/9 Gallery, Rome

Mat Collishaw (Nottingham, 1966), uno dei più rappresentativi fra gli ex Young British Artist, presenterà a settembre una personale alla Galleria Borghese, dove realizzerà interventi site specific che dialogheranno con i dipinti di Caravaggio. Per anticipare questo importante evento, la galleria romana presenta una sua personale con grandi fotografie, selezionate dall'artista, tratte da tre importanti serie: *Burning Flowers*, *Insecticide* e *Last Meal on Death Row*.

Quello di Collishaw è un dialogo sempre aperto con l'arte del passato, nel caso specifico con l'arte occidentale, dalla quale mutua una particolare estetica tesa a emozionare lo spettatore. In bilico tra sublime e macabro, esattamente come davanti a un dipinto secentesco, lo spettatore vede la bellezza delle farfalle mentre muoiono e quella dei fiori che bruciano, proprio lo stesso contrasto che si percepisce davanti all'estasi di un santo mentre spira. Così come le nature morte di *Last Meal on Death Row*, al di là del loro significato antropologico (sono gli ultimi cibi consumati da condannati a morte), possono trasmettere lo stesso monito di una natura morta seicentesca: *memento mori*.

Calogero Pirrera

Roma // fino al 30 settembre 2014

Mat Collishaw

1/9 UNOSUNOVE

Via degli Specchi 20

06 97613696

gallery@unosunove.com

www.unosunove.com

Paula Rego, Tracey Emin and Mat Collishaw: Suffer the little children A show of contemporary artists' work inspired by 18th century setting c Foundling Museum is brilliantly disturbing



(Francesco Guidicini)

Waldemar Januszczak

I cannot think of many more emotive English words than “foundling”. The image it provokes immediately, of sobbing babies left on grubby doorsteps, or a frightened child in Haiti staring up at us through tearful eyes, presses buttons that connect us to the most primitive bits of the human condition. At the beginning of our story, we are meant to look after children, not abandon them.

So it does not surprise me that, in 1739, a Foundling Hospital was established in London for the “maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children”, or that its stated objective was “to prevent the frequent murders of poor miserable children at their birth”. London in the mid-18th century was a rat warren of abandonment. What surprises me is that it took so long for the institution to be needed. And that art played such a remarkable role within it from the start.

Not only was the Foundling Hospital the first British home for abandoned children, it was also our first public art gallery. The founder, Thomas Coram, one of the giants of British social history, hit upon the futuristic idea of putting paintings into his orphanage so that fashionable, art-loving Londoners, turning up to see the latest Hogarths, would find themselves exposed as well to the terrible lot of our abandoned babies.

Art continues to be an excellent lure at the Foundling Hospital. Reopened in 2004 as the Foundling Museum, this rousing little place leaves the actual social work to the functional-looking institution next door while it displays the finest surviving rooms from the old hospital. Outside, there’s a bronze statue of Thomas Coram, based on a portrait by Hogarth. And if you look closely at the railings behind Coram’s statue, you will see a tiny white mitten impaled on one of the spears, as if picked up from the pavement by a kindly passer-by. In fact, the mitten, too, is a sculpture, by Tracey Emin.

The museum has asked three contemporary artists to interact with its collection and to make art inspired by the notion of “a foundling”. The result is one of the most successful acts of commissioning I have witnessed from a historic institution. The chosen three — Emin, Paula Rego, Mat Collishaw — are artists of the top drawer, and the subject has, in all their cases, stimulated vivid responses. Seeing the new bits of art interact with what is already there — some of Hogarth’s finest painting, evocative 18th-century interiors, Gainsborough’s earliest landscape — is an education and a thrill.

Arts & books



Mat Collishaw *Insecticide 24*, 2008. C-type photographic print, 6x6ft

Looking for life after Hirst

With conceptual art collapsing under the weight of its own stupidity, what comes next? When I met artist Mat Collishaw, writes *Ben Lewis*, I caught a glimpse of another possible future

It's all to play for, as far as the history of art in our times goes. An era of cultural as well as economic excess is drawing to a close. The principles that inspired artistic production are soon likely to follow into the dustbin of history those principles by which our economies were run, carrying with them the reputations of some of the most successful artists of our times. Out will go the idea that near identical conceptual works of art can be mass produced by factory-studios until demand is exhausted; out will go the idea that high production values—shininess, the quality of fabrication—are enough to define the art of our time; out will go the idea that art can criticise greed and stupidity by imitating it. Modernism, it seems, has finally succumbed to the decadent super-sized clichés of some conceptual artists.

It's at moments like these that new directions in art emerge, and overlooked artists from the recent past are re-appraised; and I have recently spotted what seem to be a few green shoots of artistic recovery. Last year at the Haunch of Venison gallery, I came across an extraordinary kinetic sculpture by the British artist Mat Collishaw as part of his solo show "Shooting Stars." It was a zoetrope: an object of great technical complexity and historical resonance, based on the 19th-century precursor of the animated sequence, a rotating drum with a set of pictures inside. Glimpsed through slits, these form a moving image when spun. Collishaw's zoetrope, however, was three dimensional, inspired by one made by Pixar which he had seen in the Science Museum. It had 180 figures and rotated under a strobe light. He had spent nine months designing it. As it picked up speed, you could see scenes of sexual activity featuring a minotaur, the three Graces, a she-wolf and a cherub. It looked like a 19th-

century engraving of a bacchanal, but more pornographic.

I was intrigued by its dissonances and synchronicities. The images were slight considering the effort it had taken to create, and it was odd to see such an old-fashioned ensemble of figures brought to life by such contemporary technology. But there was also a strange harmony between subject and technology: both were hedonist, the one a purely visual pleasure, the other a sexual one. The zoetrope sat in my mind—an unforgettable work. Then, this March, I came across another Collishaw at the Haunch of Venison's "Mythologies" show: a triptych of photographs of massively enlarged arrangements of the wings and crushed body parts of butterflies and moths, over a metre in height (one of which is pictured, left). Thanks to Damien Hirst I have become prejudiced against the use of butterflies in art, but this work was different. It looked like a dusty slide from the drawers of a 19th-century botanist which, with its intense colours, combinations of different patterns and crumbling textures, had somehow become a remarkable photographic version of abstract painting.

So I went to see Mat Collishaw, who lives and works in a large, unmodernised warehouse in north-east London. I parked my car in a covered interior courtyard piled high with old books and bits of 19th-century junk shop furniture, ascended an old iron staircase and found myself in a bright white space with a thin metal roof. One of the butterfly photographs was propped against the wall, and Collishaw took me over to his computer to show me how he made them: "I arrange the colourful wings and parts of these insects on glass, squash them flat, and put them under the scanner. There's a lot of trial and error involved, because the bits slip around

the glass." He clicked on the screen; dozens of different butterfly arrangements popped up, "Then I chop them up and move them around in Photoshop." Nineteenth-century science had met 21st-century technology—and the result was art.

Born in 1966, Collishaw grew up in Nottingham, one of four sons in a religious family. His parents were Christadelphians, a tiny Christian sect numbering no more than 55,000 across the world. Collishaw grew up reading the Bible for two hours a night and going to church twice a week. He exhibited a skill in drawing from an early age; after toying with the idea of going into the army or being a musician, he found his way to Goldsmiths art college in the mid-1980s, where he studied with Hirst, Emin, Sarah Lucas and assorted other YBAs, under Michael Craig Martin. Collishaw exhibited in and helped install the "Freeze" exhibition, curated by Hirst in 1988.

On the wall behind Collishaw's computer screen full of crushed butterflies was an array of gruesome photographs of wounds. He drew my attention to one of a man with his penis bitten off. "The man had been dead in his flat for a few days and his dog just got hungry. A man with his cock bitten off is always going to be some kind of enigma." As I know from experience, artists—even the smart ones—like to talk tough. But it was with these images of wounds that Collishaw first made his name in the 1990s. At "Freeze," he showed "Bullet Hole," which is still his best-known work—a large photograph, taken from a pathology textbook, of the back of someone's head with a gruesome bullet wound.

Collishaw, however, soon left the gore-fest behind to head into more interesting historical territory. As he puts it, "When I got the umpteenth invitation in the post to take part in a group show called 'Gore ▶

and Gothic,' I knew it was time to stop." Still, there are several ways in which Collishaw might seem an odd candidate to pick as a flag-bearer for the future. He has been pursuing the same themes and making similar kinds of work since the 1990s: a fusion of decadent symbolism and modern video and projection technology. His inspiration and imagery has many similarities with Damien Hirst's—butterflies, Victorian science and pseudo-science, pathology books. His attraction to popular source material, too, was part of the YBA rebellion against abstraction. Sarah Lucas turned to fried eggs and cigarettes, Tracey Emin to sewn quilts, and Collishaw to photographs of wounds.

But there are two ways in which Collishaw diverges from his peers. First, he never secured major gallery representation in the 1990s, and consequently sank somewhat from view for many years. Second, his work is both more historically precise and more philosophically resonant than his peers'—delving deep into the details and footnotes of past science rather than its generic forms. For example, one of Collishaw's early sculptures, "Antique" (1994), was inspired by Joseph Wright of Derby's

painting "An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump." In this picture, which hangs in the National Gallery, a scientist demonstrates a vacuum by extracting air from a flask containing a cockatoo. Collishaw reconstructs the flask on a wooden support, and projects a moving image of a bird onto it: a visual exploration of Barthes's thesis that photography is a kind of "death."

Similarly, in his 2008 "Shooting Stars" show, Collishaw took Arnold Böcklin's symbolist painting "Island of the Dead"—one of the most hackneyed and reproduced paintings of all time—and made a video in which the sun rises and falls across the island. It was a complicated work to realise, requiring the construction of a virtual 3D model of the island. You see the light of the rising sun play across the rocks in the foreground, and cast ever deepening shadows as it moves round. "I am interested in pictorial problems and illusions," he explains. "The challenges you are faced with when you make a two-dimensional representation of a real thing, and the conundrums and paradoxes you get into when you do it. That image was about death—that place you go to after your life. In the same way as the scene painted on the canvas, it is an

inaccessible place. By rotating the sun round the isle, I made a flawed attempt to gain access to this place."

Even if it forgoes the shininess of many of the billionaire's baubles that have passed for art in the last ten years, the art of the future will still need to be alluring. That's one of the things Collishaw has got right. His works look spectacular. But they also touch on the difficult theme of the essence of images—something of great importance in our multichannel, virtual, image-flooded culture—and the question of what power images have to seduce us, being independent both of reality and what they show.

If a new direction in contemporary art is taking shape here, it's not yet clear what its final form will be. But Collishaw's ability to inject his creations with a true, troubling sense of life is treading new and important ground. As he explains, looking back at the cavorting, angry sexuality of the figures in his three-dimensional zoetrope, "If there is any way to sum it up, it's that once you animate things they will get up to no good. As soon as you give something a life, it is going to have a dark side. As soon as God animated Adam, he started misbehaving." *Ben Lewis presents BBC's Art Safari*

arts

A shock-jock's deliverance

Mat Collishaw has always used extreme tactics but now he's found tenderness in cruelty, says **RACHEL CAMPBELL-JOHNSTON**

Mat Collishaw should be a familiar name. He grew up as a card-carrying member of the Goldsmiths gang. He passed all the milestones that put the rest of them on the map. He took part in *Freeze*, cropped up again for *Sensation*, was collected by Charles Saatchi and still collaborates with Damien Hirst. For heaven's sake, he even went out with Tracey Emin for five years. And didn't another old boyfriend pretty much start an entire art movement on the strength of that?

So why isn't Collishaw more famous? Why am I visiting him in a rented flat when his mates are buying up rural mansions?

The Emin tag didn't help. The first time that she stayed at his house, Collishaw tells me, was after the Turner Prize ceremony in 1997. They were having a party, and she couldn't stop moaning that she had lost out on the £500 she would have got if she had turned up on some television show. "Everyone kept telling her to shut up," Collishaw says, "and then the next morning Gillian Wearing phoned and said: 'Oh, my God! Have you seen the papers?'" It turns out that Emin had stumbled by the television studio after all. She had been so spectacularly drunk that she couldn't remember it, but the rest of the country certainly could.

"It was that drunken appearance that kick-started her career," Collishaw says. And he got caught up in its cogs. He became known — though he wasn't aware of it at the time — as the boyfriend of Britain's most self-obsessed artist. "She was a

bit of an egomaniac," he admits laconically, and he tells me a story to make his point.

When he heard that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Centre, he texted Emin, who was in a salon having some beauty treatment. They had an SMS conversation that went something like this:

Collishaw: "The face of the world as we know it has changed."

Emin: "I know. It's so tragic."

Emin (20 minutes later): "The second one's gone now."

Emin (three minutes later): "It makes me sick. I f***ing hate them."

In the afternoon, when Collishaw met Emin, he was surprised that she seemed unperturbed. And then it emerged that she hadn't been talking about the terrorist attack. She had been mourning the pair of eyebrows that a reckless beautician had drastically overplucked.

But all that was over a long time ago. Collishaw has been through an entire marriage and its failure since.

And he is making new work. Next week he launches a piece called *Deliverance* with the Spring Projects gallery. In June it will be on show again as part of a much bigger show with Haunch of Venison, the major London gallery that has just signed him up. The artist, it seems, is being given another chance at success.

Deliverance takes its inspiration from the Beslan school siege in which gunmen took children hostage. He shows pictures of people, dirty, half-naked, crying and holding each other as they walk away from the barrel of a gun and into the

barrel of a camera. These pictures are so individual, tender and human and yet they are timelessly haunting. They echo such universal classics as the Pietà or the little girl burnt by napalm.

Collishaw projects them on to a phosphorescent surface that retains the fading after-image long after the projector has swivelled its robotic head onwards to focus on a new site. A world of ghostly memory mingles with a startlingly vivid present.

These pictures, Collishaw says, are about the moral questionability of the media that offer viewers the adrenaline fix that we want from a scene of disaster, exploiting the sufferers so that we can feed our addiction to spectacular visuals. In the forthcoming Haunch of *Venison* show there will also be images from Victorian child pornography. They

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Offensive images give you an instant fix, but I want pictures to last longer than that

are as luridly fascinating as they are heart-rending.

Collishaw definitely knows how to create an impact. He did it quite literally with the work *Bullet Hole*, which became his signature piece: a gory picture of a gun-wound in the head which, originally shown at the

1988 *Freeze* exhibition, is now part of the Saatchi collection. Collishaw has a flare for the shock that can be a short-cut to fame. Pornography and the Crucifixion (and sometimes both together) have both served as visual fodder. He has a taste for perversion and vice.

It comes from his childhood, he says. Born in 1966, the second of four boys, he was brought up in Notting-

ham, but he was hardly a typical council-estate kid. After scraping through his day at school, he may have hung out on the wastelands with his mates, playing with air-guns and ogling porn mags; but at home he and his parents were ardent Christadelphians. Every Wednesday and twice on Sunday, Collishaw was attending the Bible study sessions of a sect that seemed to disapprove of pretty much everything, from female education (his mother had to study in secret) through religious imagery to television.

Collishaw, perhaps inevitably, became fascinated by the forbidden. Even Bruce Forsyth, when seen by a little boy with his nose pressed to the window, could accrue an aura. "I would peep through neighbours' curtains and watch him dancing on the TV in the corner and it would feel like his spirit was trapped in that little glowing box. I would spend hours making my own TV sets out of Weetabix boxes."

Collishaw eventually got into Goldsmiths on the strength of "a pile of scrappy life drawings". "It changed my life" he says. It offered him chances – including that of hanging out in the pool room and drinking with such ambitious contemporaries as Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas and Marc Quinn.

But he had got off to a false start. He was only 23 when his girlfriend gave birth to a son. While his Goldsmiths mates were all out making their mark, he was back home with bottles and nappies. Maybe he missed the boat. But it probably didn't help that he started making fairy pictures. The artistic climate in

the 1990s, he suggests, was all "blood and guts or steel and glass; it was either gory shock or that impersonal sculpture that you don't have to relate to". But he started making images inspired by the faked Cottingham fairies. However disturbing his little flowerbed scenarios of winged teenaged glue-sniffers, the Victorian aesthetic was hardly fashionable.

And yet Collishaw's work crops up again and again in group shows. It has an immediacy that seizes the attention. His pieces don't need a complicated conceptual support. They speak for themselves. "I've always put him at the very top," Damien Hirst tells me. "He understands how to connect to your soul and your heart... His work won't allow us to take anything for granted; he shines light into the darkness and finds beauty in the abyss."

Certainly, his video works – his butterflies fluttering in imprisoning jars; a projection of his own body, breathing and blinking, on to a cross; a picture of Ganymede being snatched by an eagle projected on to the smoke that emanates from a church font (the pagan imagery of abduction puffing up from a Christian instrument of induction) – stir disturbingly mismatched emotions.

Collishaw admits to making the most of attention-seeking tactics. "Enticing little bits of eye-candy or pieces of hardcore pornography – they both work in much the same way," he suggests. He might create a picture inside a kitsch little snow dome or exploit blatant images of bondage or bestiality. Whichever, the impact is instant. And there's always a twist.

"Images that are purely offensive give you an instant fix," Collishaw says, "but I want to make pictures that last longer than that. On the surface they shock or seduce you, but I want there to be undercurrents that make you wonder about other implications."

The cruel and the caring, the poetic and the morbid, the alluring and the repulsive all meet in Collishaw's work. No wonder our

responses get all tangled up. But let's hope that this time his path will remain clear.

Mat Collishaw's *Deliverance* will be on show at Spring Projects, NW5 (020-7428 7159), from April 11

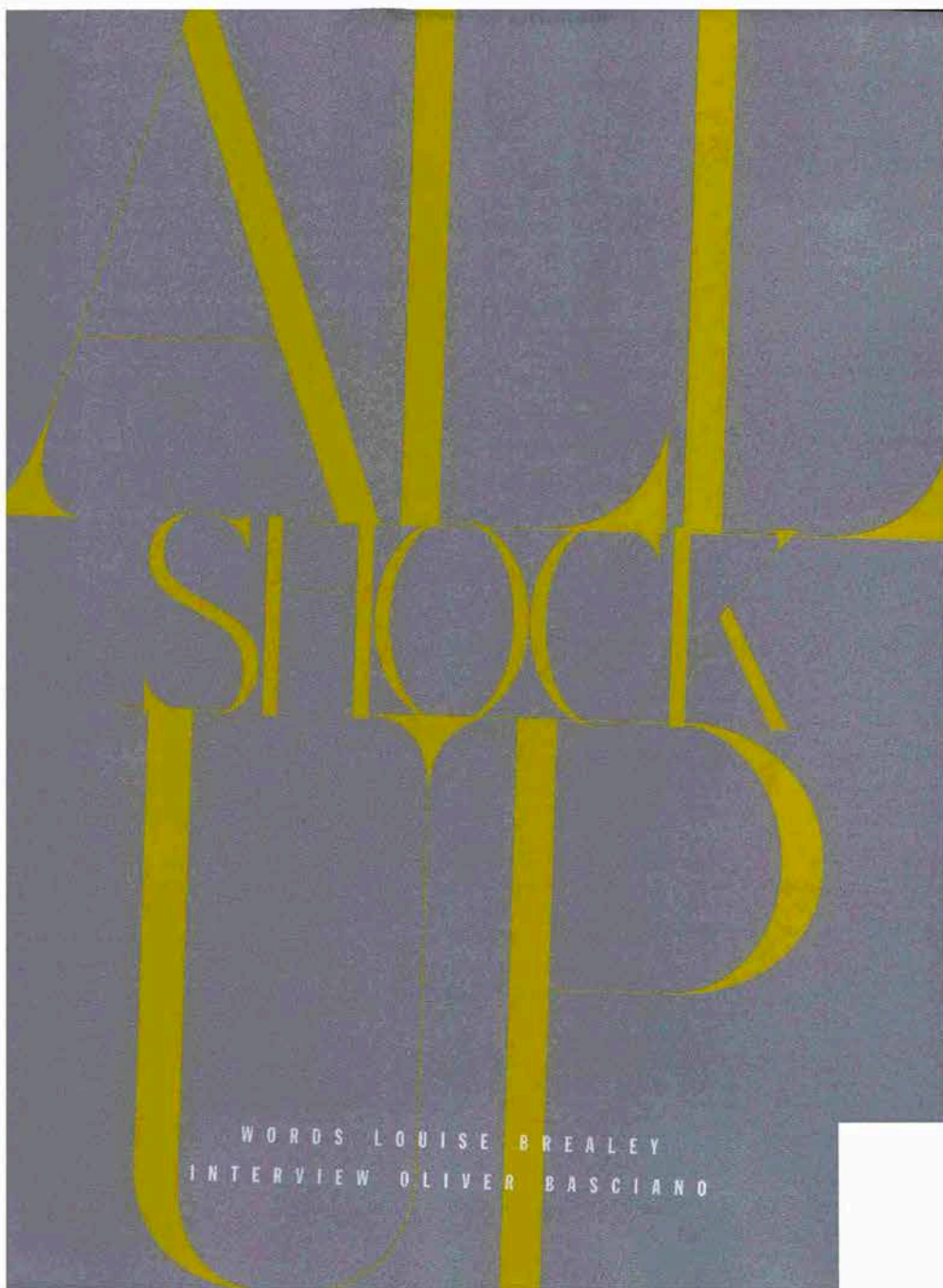


Correction

In two recent articles (Arts, Feb 27 and Mar 26) Mike Davis, co-editor of the book *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*, was misidentified as Mike Davies, an architect at Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners. The two men are unconnected. We regret the errors.



Mat Collishaw with, on the wall and *below*, images from his new installation, *Deliverance*, which goes on show at the Spring Projects gallery next week



MAT COLLISHAW

WAS AT THE EPICENTRE OF THE YOUNG BRITISH ARTIST EXPLOSION. WHILE HIS FORMER GOLDSMITHS CLASSMATE DAMIEN HIRST AND HIS EX-GIRLFRIEND TRACEY EMIN REVEL IN THEIR SUPERSTAR STATUS, COLLISHAW IS STILL UPSETTING PUNTERS WITH IMAGES OF SYPHILITIC CHILD PROSTITUTES AND WOMEN BEING MOUNTED BY A MINOTAUR.

“ I W O U L D N ’ T C A L L M Y S E L F A
R E B E L . B U T I ’ M F R O M N O T T I N G H A M
S O T H E R E I S A B I T O F R O B I N H O O D
I N M E . ” H E T E L L S W O N D E R L A N D

MAT COLLISHAW was born in 1966 into a family of devout Christadelphians – a small sect who believe that the Bible is error-free and that TV and female education are the work of the devil. At 19 he left Jesus and the East Midlands behind him to do an art foundation course at Trent Poly. He then won a place to study fine art at London’s Goldsmiths College, where he was approached by a bolshie 23-year-old fellow student called Damien Hirst and invited to exhibit at *Freeze*, a show in a Docklands warehouse. Collishaw and 14 other Goldsmiths students – including Gary Hume and Sarah Lucas – accepted, and on opening night in July 1988, mere anarchy was loosed on a stagnant art world. The YBA revolution had begun. Collishaw’s contribution, *Bullet Hole* – a massive close-up freeze-frame of a head wound – inspired the show’s name. A dealer offered him less for the piece than it cost to make. “I said I’d rather let it rot in the car park - which is exactly what it did.” A decade later, Charles Saatchi bought a remake for his now infamous *Sensation* show. In 1990, while his YBA peers were relentlessly self-promoting – “God knows what they were up to every night but they obviously did something right” – he was at home with newborn son Alex. Over the past two decades, Collishaw has continued to produce thrilling and often confrontational pieces which disturb, provoke and confound: portraits of half-naked Nazis; paintings of dogs fucking women; a video of a baby bathed in the same UV light used in public toilets to prevent junkies finding a vein; a mosaic of the Madonna’s face, cropped from a photograph of an Indian woman taken after her home was destroyed by a flood. His latest London exhibition, *Shooting Stars*, is no exception.

DOWN AN EAST London backstreet lined with warehouses, up a cold brick stairwell and into a large studio filled with beavering assistants at workbenches. A brittle flunky, accompanied by a boxer dog called Amber, approaches. "Are you here to see Jonathan?" Jonathan who? "Jonathan Saunders... the fashion designer?" she replies, her smile hardening slightly. "Er, no. Mat Collishaw." The flunky points out a doorway hidden at the back of the studio and scuttles off. Inside this considerably more modest space, a crude blonde wig and an elaborate birdcage hang from nails on the wall. At the far end behind stacks of frames, A4 files, books and old newspapers, 42-year-old Collishaw – long hair, rough beard, frank stare – is lolling on a sofa. He gets up. Introduces himself. His voice is gentle but resigned, as if he's had a late night. He hasn't. Collishaw engages with everything and has strong opinions; but he never becomes wildly animated. Matter of fact; laid-back; thoughtful. The occasional vowel betrays his Midlands roots.

OLIVER BASCIANO: Were your parents artistic?

MAT COLLISHAW: My dad is a good photographer but he never had the chance to pursue it because he had to work in a factory to feed us all. I'm the second of four boys. Because he was very religious, all his photos would be of beautiful sunsets with trees. I always wanted to put a fucking pylon in there with loads of wires.

OB: How did their religion affect you?

MC: Not having a TV made a big difference. At school everyone used TV references in their language, talking about kids' shows like *Tiswas* and shit. I was like, 'What the fuck are you talking about?' TV was a totally magic source of knowledge that I over-exaggerated. But I didn't feel too much like an outsider because my older brother would hit anyone who said that we were weird.

OB: Did it influence your work?

MC: I don't think so, but you never know with these things. I mean, religion uses iconography to manipulate people and I like to create images that are, without overselling myself, awe-inspiring. It's the same control.

OB: What made your class at Goldsmiths special?

MC: We were just a bunch of misfits, the losers who didn't fit in anywhere else. We weren't smug like students at other colleges, who were just 'lifestyle artists' drinking coffee and being enigmatic. I remember some students from Falmouth College coming to see us and that's when I started to get an idea of what we were really like. One of them showed us a wooden sculpture they'd pegged together using dowelling. My classmate Angela Bulloch said, 'Why not just use a fucking screw?' We weren't arty-farty. *Freeze* was simply a case of 'we have a gallery to fill, let's make something'. We had a nice impatience to us.

OB: Do you still work like that?

MC: No. My process now is like moving a grain of sand from one side of the room to the other. After one trip you've got fuck all. After a second time you've still got nothing. But after 1000 trips across the room, a small pile is starting to form. If you keep adding to it you might get something significant, and that's amazing. Working makes me happy. It gives meaning to life. It's been that way since we were hunter-gatherers. Without work it's a desperate state of affairs.

OB: How do you get inspired?

MC: I never worry about it. It just builds up inside you. But my ideas come from reading more than anything else. I've got a shit memory so I never read any facts or anything. I read fiction – JG Ballard has always been a favourite. I'm sure fiction develops your imagination.

OB: A lot of your pieces contain graphic sex, bestiality, paedophilia, violence. Why?

MC: We're wired to respond to images like that. It gets us going, generates the adrenaline. It makes you feel totally alert and awake. When the news pumps out horrific images, it's the same thing: it's keeping us on our guard. People feel OK seeing these things. They're a good thing; we'd be worse off without them. We need images of humans in desperate situations in order to reflect.

OB: Were you reactionary when you started out?

MC: Definitely. Back in the mid-80s British art was so formal. We were young, we were skint and we were only interested in having sex, drinking and making a bit of art. Why should an abstract

sculpture be of interest to me at that age, living in an urban centre like south London, getting on the number 36 bus every day? I wanted my work to engage with the foibles of the human race. To get some emotion in there but in a way that was still conceptually vigorous. I wanted to have an effect on the audience that was aggressive and offensive. But within 18 months that was what people wanted. It was like, 'People ask for gore, so I'm going to give you gore?' I don't think so.

OB: So you started making photos of fairies...

MC: I wanted to annoy people. Fairies were deeply unfashionable at the time. But that was because they had been over-romanticised. People had forgotten fairies had a malevolent, morbid nature to them.

OB: Describe your new solo show, *Shooting Stars*...

MC: It's an installation. The space is in darkness and the walls are washed with day-glo paint. Archive images of Victorian child prostitutes on the streets of East End London appear like ghosts from a projector. These kids were totally disposable: their existence was to work the streets, catch syphilis and die. I wanted to bring them back to life again. There's a second piece called *Animal Nightlife*, which consists of a 3-D zoetrope that shows a Minotaur fucking a girl with a couple of old men peeping at them. There's a baby getting fucked in there too. It's about the obsession of looking at things.

OB: Are you bored of the YBA tag?

MC: I was always bored by it. It was just another media construct and a totally irrelevant way of summing people up. All our work was very different. The only cohesion was that we used to hang out together.

At the time 'Young British Artists' didn't really say very much. It wasn't like abstract impressionists or cubists. It just meant we were of a certain age and from a certain place.

OB: Do you see any of them socially?

MC: I go and see Damien in Mexico every year for a holiday. The others, not as much as we used to, but we're still in touch. We call or text and meet up when we're in the same town.

OB: You dated Tracey Emin between 1997 and 2002. How did that impact on your career?

MC: I don't think it was that positive really. The problem is that when you're sat next to Tracey it's like she's a 1000-watt halogen bulb and your personality is always going to be like a candle in

comparison. She's so bright, brash and loud that she'll dwarf anything around her. But it was fine with me... not a problem.

OB: Does it bother you that a lot of your YBA contemporaries are more successful than you?

MC: It doesn't bother me... but it bothers the bank when they're chasing me for money. Because I'm short of cash I spend 80 per cent of my time doing inane time-consuming things like getting on a bus to go and do something a minion could do if I could afford the set-up. I have to take two buses if I leave anything behind at home. I'd like a larger studio than this – basically I'm a sound barrier for Jonathan Saunders. But as long as I can get enough money to make the piece of work I want, then all's fine by me.

OB: Do you consider yourself part of the art establishment?

MC: Unfortunately not. Like I say, I don't have the bank account to warrant that!

OB: Would you like that sort of a bank account?

MC: Money helps but it also ties your hands because you've made something that is a desirable product and that creates an onus on you to carry on producing the same thing. That's not the case for me so I'm constantly looking for new ways to do things. It's given me drive and ambition. I haven't lost the will to push the boat out because I'm still not comfortable yet.

OB: Has pushing the boat out got you into trouble?

MC: It can still be difficult for me to get my work shown in galleries because of the content. I recently had to pull my child prostitute work from a New York show. The gallery lawyer decided they couldn't go ahead with it. My zebra fucking a woman piece (*The Old Fashioned Way*, 1992) caused a bit of trouble at this summer's Royal Academy Exhibition because a TV reporter did a spot on the lunchtime news with it very obviously in shot behind him.

OB: Would you call yourself a rebel?

MC: I come from Nottingham so there's a bit of Robin Hood in me. But rebel isn't a label that you'd want to put on yourself. That would give you the status of a self-appointed rebel like Billy Idol. There's a Johnny Cash line that goes, 'He never meant to be a rebel... The real ones never do.'

SHOOTING STARS RUNS UNTIL AUGUST 31. HAUNCHOFVENISON.COM

“ WE WERE YOUNG, SKINT AND ONLY
INTERESTED IN SEX. DRINKING
AND MAKING A BIT OF ART ”





Mat Collishaw's best shot 'My face isn't visible because I'm totally absorbed in looking at myself'

Back in 1990, I was walking, holding my son, who was then about six months old, through a building site in Finsbury Park in north London. I flew him down towards this little puddle on the ground and showed him his face in it, and as I did so his mother said: "Oh, he's like Narcissus!" It was such a bizarre observation to make in this filthy, degraded environment that I thought this might be a really good place to restage that myth. I was quite excited about it, in fact.

I got myself a camera and a tripod and went back the next day, hoping to God that everything would still be as it was. There had to be water in the puddle, with a tyre track going through it to deflate any idyllic ideas you might have about the scene. Luckily, everything was the same, so I pulled my sweatshirt off, set the tripod up and lay down in front of this puddle trying my best to look comfortable. What I got was me making a picture of myself, with the remote shutter in my hand to trigger the camera. The essential part of the portrait – my face – is actually not visible to

the viewer. My head is down and I'm totally absorbed in looking at myself.

There are a few frames on the contact sheet where you can see a couple of old ladies in the background. They were coming back from the supermarket with shopping bags, and seemed to pause for about three frames just looking at me. But I had to get on with it. It was a dirty thing to be doing, and I felt silly doing it, but you do get a bit of adrenaline doing something like that, too. It's pathetic, really, when people are going out to Baghdad to get their images, and I can get that kind of kick off a building site in north London. But then the whole thing was about taking the piss out of myself.

Interview by Leo Benedictus. Deliverance, an exhibition of works by Mat Collishaw, is at Spring Projects, London NW5, until May 24. Details: springstudios.com



Curriculum vitae

Born: Nottingham, 1966

Studied: Fine art at Goldsmith's College

Inspirations: "Man Ray and the surrealist photographers – their idea of making an image not as a representation of something, but as something in itself."

High point: "Doing a photograph of a giant bullet-hole head wound, which came to be quite notorious. It was an image from a forensic pathology book. The printers told me I couldn't blow it up to 10ft by 8ft. But I persuaded them by putting the money down on the counter."

Low point: "Leaving huge numbers of negatives – many of them 3D negatives, which are quite complicated to take – in a hotel room in Baden-Baden."

Pet hate: "Photographers who fetishise their gear. Even talking about equipment sends me into deep depression, and straight to the bar."

Dream subject: "My next child."

MAT COLLISHAW

Gregor Muir

Gregor Muir: Around the back of one of your early sculptures entitled *In the Old Fashioned Way* (1992) there's a small mechanical figure that seems to be operating this automated scene of bestiality between a woman and a zebra. As though the subject matter weren't unnerving enough, it's the sight of this strange little figure somehow dictating events that makes the work all the more disturbing. Clearly, there's an oblique and unnerving dark side to your work, quite literally in this case. Throughout your career, you've appropriated all manner of disturbing images, be they pornographic images, images of suicide victims, a close-up of a head wound inflicted by an ice pick. Why are you drawn to such imagery?

Mat Collishaw: I'm interested in the way imagery hits me subliminally. Watching a porn video, I have to contend with the fact that I'm being stimulated by a black plastic box that contains a digitized ribbon. Whether I like it or not, there are mechanisms within us that are primed to respond to all kinds of visual material, leaving us with no real say over what we happen to find stimulating. The type of adverts to be found on television and in glossy magazines are visually designed to have a power over the mind before they can even be questioned. The dark side of my work primarily concerns the internal mechanisms of visual imagery and how these mechanisms address the mind.

GM: You've made many works that touch upon some very harrowing subjects. For example, *I'm Talking Love* (1992) is a slide loop which builds up to, then omits, the rape scene reenacted by Jodie Foster in *The Accused*. Why did you remove the rape scene?

MC: The projection is very much like a flick book animation whereby the suspension of disbelief allows your mind to invent what happens next, so there was no need to include the scene in any graphic detail. I also removed the rape scene because I'm not very keen on artworks that have a climax, so to speak. I like the way that nothing happens when you look at a painting or a photograph, like a trap waiting to spring.

GM: On many levels, your work seems to portray a conflict between good and evil, as well as forcing a moral dilemma. The duality of these concerns is reciprocated by your frequent compression of pleasing and disturbing imagery into one image. Take for instance the weaving together of grotesque skin disorders with exotic flowers in the *Flower* series.

MC: With the *Flower* pieces, I tried to make pictures not unlike those found in gardening manuals. Your immediate response to these images should be one of relative ease, not instant repulsion. However, somewhere down the line the contradiction between what has been brought together and how, should raise doubts. More than anything, I try to generate an air of indifference or an ambiguous tension toward the images that I use by accentuating and then mortifying their beauty. Another take on the *Flower* pieces which opens up the kind of complications I'm interested in, is that beneath the surface of formal beauty lies something festering and rotten. While I'm extremely impressed by sensorial beauty, what we sense as being beautiful is highly suspect. By setting out to achieve beauty or perfection, you immediately establish a hierarchy of taste. For instance, the idea of an Aryan race – beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed people roaming the earth – was once considered appealing. It's a dream a lot of people would probably



In the Old Fashioned Way Mat Collishaw

buy into because it's a simplification of the messy complicated world in which we live. Behind such a dream, however, lies the mechanics of the genetic engineer and the annihilation of millions of people. Nowadays, the situation is made more complex as people go about engineering other peoples' desires and tastes, constantly feeding them with ideals and visions which they can catch a hold of and think, "that's all right".

GM: Do you think that the mass-produced trinketry which often appears in your work is, by the cynical nature of creation, inherently ugly?

MC: I wouldn't make a judgement on that at all. On the whole, I'm completely seduced by mechanized beauty.

GM: In the mid-nineties you started to make work using images of London's homeless. You're quoted as saying that;

Beggars are like a little emblem of London. They become invisible in a way because they're around so much. It's the ambiguity of how they just become part of what's going on. One minute you're looking at them the next minute you're looking at the video wall in Top Shop which is telling you to do something else.¹

You're also quoted as saying that your work which involves images of homeless people is an attempt to make "a kind of pleasurable little souvenir of the crisis"². Are you in any position to make pleasurable little souvenirs out of peoples' abject misery?

MC: I believe I've got the right to pretty much do whatever I want, so long as you understand that what I'm interested in is not necessarily homeless people, or social or political issues. What I'm interested in is peoples' attitudes and the disguises that make things visible or invisible. For instance, we're at a point in time when you can buy Charles Dickens books from any high street store, with a still from a television drama on the cover that maps out poverty in a beautifully sentimental way. They've gone through all the trouble of getting the ragged trousers right and the scuff of dirt on a boy's cheek, all in an attempt to make the poverty seem charming. Seeing somebody endure a mild form of suffering seems to make people feel more human, which is a questionable emotion when you're not really able to engage with that person's suffering at all.

There's also a problem surrounding the documentation of poverty, not just in Oxford Street but from around the world. You get these photographers with the right kind of film, printing up images on the right kind of paper which end up looking technically fantastic. Poverty works so well on film because it entails all these grim little details – dirt and scummy little marks which are too real to be entertained in the flesh. As soon as these details are made distant as a documentation of poverty they become an absolute minefield of glorious detail you can indulge. Photographers such as Don McCullen – whom I admire – had a tendency to legitimize my seeing homeless people as subject-matter.

GM: Your use of materials from differing eras – such as contemporary video projectors and antique frames – appears to be concerned with setting up some form of historical constant. What do you hope to achieve by this?

MC: There's something really nice in the movie *Batman Returns* when they're trying to market some technological gadget but in a completely 19th Century, travelling salesman, kind of way. It reminds me of



Zoster of Supravicular Dermatomes
Mat Collishaw





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Tiger Lily Mat Collishaw
Butterflies and Flowers Mat Collishaw

those people who travelled the country selling quack medicine from a soap box. God knows what they had in those bottles, but if the sales pitch was right people would buy it. In those days, what you were buying into was a whole lot more dodgy. Magic lantern shows, cure-alls, freak shows, magic acts – it was all cloaked in the same way and about crowd pulling, stimulating peoples' appetite for more. Even though we think we've moved on from quack medicine the associated technology continues to work its spell on us in much the same way. For instance, a state of the art wide-screen television is just a magic lantern show that you can plug into the wall. The reason why I combine old photographic equipment with contemporary video projectors is to make you aware that technological gadgets, from whatever era, are all attempting to hypnotise.

GM: In an earlier conversation you told me that as a child you were forbidden to have a television set in your house. You used to get around this by constructing makeshift television sets out of cardboard boxes and the like. Furthermore, you watched television through your next door neighbour's window at night. Looking at works such as *Hollow Oak* (1995) – whereby a film of a tree is projected onto the plate glass of an antique camera – it seems to me that what you've made there is a form of reconstituted television set. Other examples of reworked television sets include *The Interminable Drifter* (1995) where you succeed in making television sets within television sets and *Enchanted Wardrobe* (1995) where a woodland photograph appears behind a surveillance mirror, suggesting the type of distancing that occurs when you watch television through a window.

MC: There's also *Antique* (1994) with a video projection of a canary inside a jar that also resembles a cathode ray tube. All I can think of is that I'm fuelled by things in my past which were suppressed or held at a distance which have generated some form of hunger to make my work. I'd love to make films and get into narrative, but it's enough for me to have a little bird hopping around on a screen. Just to do that, is magic enough.

GM: Is it fair to say that *Antique* was clearly inspired by Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment On A Bird In An Air Pump* (1767)?

20 **MC:** Which is such an unusual image in that the whole family is gathered around this one incident – the modern equivalent being television. In those days it was a circular gathering. Nowadays, everyone sits along one side of a wall, but the erotics of sadism involved in watching what's occurring inside the glass bell jar is exactly the same as watching *The Bill*. Whether it's about gathering round to watch a canary dying, or some fly on the wall documentary about crime, we're all just titillating ourselves with the sadistic.

GM: In 1998, you produced a series of images of unconscious schoolgirls in graveyards strewn with empty tubes of glue, crack pipes and beer bottles. Is your work depraved?

MC: I'd like to be able to say that I intended it to be scandalous, but this body of work was probably more about being sanctimonious and patronizing. Looking at these images, they're very sentimental about teenage drug abuse in the way the Victorians might like to sentimentalize sleeping nymphets.

GM: In 2000, you began to work on a series of images of dead Nazis in a bunker strewn with dead women and the spoils of war. Why do you think images of Nazis seem to form such an important part of the art world zeitgeist at the moment? By which I refer to Piotr Uklanski's images of famous actors playing Nazis and a work by Dinos & Jake Chapman entitled *Hell* (1998-2000).

MC: The Third Reich, to me, is a phenomenon that represents the absolute debasement of culture, yet at the same time, ironically, the key to its success was largely image-based. To avoid the abyss of uncertainty people seem to crave all the security they can get from images.

GM: Tell me about the work you're making for *Pandæmonium*.

MC: I'm hanging on a string here because I have no idea what it's about. I think the new work is like an attempt to reconstruct the Marie Celeste. Encountering the work should be like boarding a deserted ship where only a few objects remain; like a burning candle stub which can be brought to life through a process of projection, as though you were in a hyper attentive state.

When I was kid, I remember returning home in the evening to discover, in a corner of a room, loads of little silverfish which then proceeded to slither off under a cupboard. It was really grotesque, but at the same time fascinating and strangely disturbing to see signs of life under your furniture. In the new work I'm using these elegant picture frames to represent the furniture and they'll contain video projections which represent the 'alive' things. These are elements with which we all live, such as rain, fire, plants and insects. Elements that really require film or video technology to represent them because they're about very small, imperceptible movement. The type of movement which is uneventful and interminable.

GM: Tell me about the *Ultraviolet Baby* project (a large-scale projection of a baby under ultraviolet lights). What gave you the idea to film a blue baby?

MC: I found it absolutely fascinating that, while using a toilet in Zurich ten years ago, I noticed I was bathed in this ultraviolet light. The ultraviolet light makes it impossible for intravenous drug users to locate their veins. So now, when I'm in a baby change toilet in Oxford Street, I feel like I've entered a highly primitive zone where small babies have protective, glowing white nappies and ultraviolet skin. It's as though they were somehow protected by the aura of customer relations – safe under a glowing light, like little baby Jesus.



The Interminable Drifter (1995)
Mat Collishaw

MAT COLLISHAW lives and works in London. He took part in the exhibitions *Freeze* (1988) and *Modern Medicine* (1990) where he exhibited reworked images from medical textbooks and books on criminology. Since then, Collishaw has exhibited worldwide, presenting photographic works that combine antique and contemporary forms of moving image devices. His 1996 series of computer manipulated images of diseased flesh, reworked as the petals of exotic flowers, heralds the increasing use of digital imaging techniques culminating in Collishaw's solo show at the Lisson Gallery where he exhibited an animation of a night-club stripper morphed together from photographic stills.

Notes

This interview is based on conversations between 1997 and 2001.

1. 'The Mechanics Of Seduction', interview with Martin Herbert, *Dazed and Confused*, 1996 p.62
2. Mat Collishaw, catalogue produced by Galerie Analix, Geneva, 1993 p.49
"The idea of seeing such a serious issue as a kind of novelty, and making it vaguely humorous is perhaps the most direct way to deal with it."