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Mat Collishaw is art's Mr Nasty



Macabre YBA: Mat Collishaw in his north London home

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In a mouldering artists' compound in North London, a doorbell says: Only ring for Mat Collishaw if you want Mat Collishaw.

Clearly, he's a man who will not be unnecessarily disturbed. Possibly because, having long been an interesting but liminal YBA, he's finally hitting his stride, winning recognition, now he's in his early forties, as an artist of strength and depth, the tortoise to Damien and Tracey's hares.

He's currently preparing for three international shows, working 17-hour days, I'm told.

He answers the door, husky, intense, and bleeding slightly at the neck (he has to shave daily from collarbones to cheekbones, he says, demonstrating his regrowth with a tidal-wave hand motion). He has the look (he won't like this) of a young Pete Postlethwaite and the smoulder (he might like this more) of fellow Nottinghamite DH Lawrence, or at least one of his sensitive, vital provincials. Appropriately enough for an artist who once made a portrait of himself gazing into a puddle (Narcissus, 1990), he has just had his teeth whitened and winces intermittently through the interview.

His studio is full of the usual artists' knick- knacks: decaying wooden throne; singing tree stump (he's fitted a record player inside it); a poster of Josef Fritzl, used as a dartboard; a couple of tatty dead birds. In fact, those belong to his girlfriend, he

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says. She's a taxidermist. Not London's most glamorous taxidermist, Polly Morgan? He gives a gruffly proud assent. What a mawkishly perfect coupling: Mr and Mrs Dead Things. He squashes moths; she stuffs squirrels.

He paints bestiality (Zoophilia, 2004); she preserves finches (passim, since 2005). She lays dead robins under bell jars (Testament, 2007, sold to Kate Moss); he freezes them inside blocks of ice. Clearly, they're meant for one another. They've been together about six months, he says. She used to be engaged to the sculptor Paul Fryer – an old mucker of Collishaw's – but if there's any awkwardness, no one's letting on.

Morgan and Fryer are still appearing in group shows together, with his name bigged up on her website. Collishaw chuckles as he shows me one of her stuffed birds, which is coming apart after a spot of feline vandalism. The kitten, Ivy, just went for them. Not only that but he went for all her favourite ones, the ones that looked more convincingly like live birds'

There isn't much of Collishaw's art around – it's off being fabricated' in Ashford – but on his computer is a new prototype for his latest creation, a 3-D carousel that, when spinning, shows cherubs behaving badly, smashing eggs and prodding snails, a fabulously twisted take on the Victorian zoetrope. The London Evening Standard's art critic Ben Lewis described it as unforgettable'; the Ukrainian art-collecting oligarch Victor Pinchuk owns one and so does Damien Hirst, Collishaw's friend and Goldsmiths contemporary.

Collishaw, now 43, is, in the words of the critic Julian Stallabrass, the nastiest' of the YBAs, which is quite a tag. True, his oeuvre has included studies of (take a deep breath): women using sanitary towels; dead Nazis after their last debauch; women having sex with zebras; schoolgirls passed out in the undergrowth surrounded by spent needles; creepy saintly children holding bouquets; and images of himself as an ogre catching small girl fairies in a butterfly net. Nastiest, am I?' he laughs. At least it's a superlative.

What I try to do in the pictures is to represent a moral dilemma I've felt' he says, picking his words carefully. Maybe it's a morally odious thing to look at, but you still like it anyway. It might be something on the internet that's utterly perverse and debased, but I'm still probably gonna want to look at it.' He doesn't come across as sinister so much as hyperaware of hypocrisies; the kind of person who rigorously patrols his own desires.

He was brought up a Christadelphian, a small, unworldly Christian sect that prohibits television and the education of women. His mother hid her books in his toybox, and secretly passed an Open University degree, a very quiet sort of rebellion. His father was a factory worker, whose life was basically stitched up from the age of 21 when my mother became pregnant for the first time. But he stuck to it, he was brilliant, a very committed father.' Matt was the second of four sons, two of whom are now DJs with a record shop on Brick Lane, the other a novelist still living up north.

Collishaw became gradually disillusioned with the faith (Why is the main emblem a man in agony?That's a bit twisted') and started experimenting with Buddhism: What a cliché.' He still feels in pursuit of spirituality, if that doesn't sound too pretentious'.

Art is the modern religion, isn't it? That's what you get from galleries – I don't think there's another place apart from a church where you're allowed to meditate about your place on earth, and think about questions deep and frivolous. Even anaemic 1970s minimalist sculptures give you pause to reflect, don't they? That's a metal box, so who am I?'

As a teen, he used to smuggle books of paintings into church. Nothing disrespectful – Abstract Expressionists like Franz Kline and Mark Rothko. As the hymns were going off, everyone aspiring to this divine, I'd be staring at these paintings and there was something in their emptiness that was a search for spirituality in the void.'

He also used to pass the hours sketching the back of the



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brethren and sisters' heads. His famous Bullet Hole (1988) is of the back of someone's head, gored with a wound. It was the work that put him on the map, his contribution to Damien Hirst's group show Freeze.

He'd arrived at Goldsmiths, along with now well-known names such as Sarah Lucas, Michael Landy and Gillian Wearing, and felt immediately at home among the other odd little personalities, from odd backgrounds, none of them particularly well-educated, very insightful and intelligent in some areas and very patchy in others'. Bullet Hole was a still taken from the Color Atlas of Forensic Pathology, a book that has been described as the YBA bible, having been passed between them, like macabre pornography, from Marcus Harvey to Damien Hirst to Collishaw, who now whips it off his shelf to show me.

Look how battered it is – because people try to look at it and then throw it across the room in disgust.' He gleefully flips through the stomach-churning pages. On my tape of the interview all I can hear, for a bit, is myself groaning while Mat narrates: That's a pilot who crashed on a runway, that's his head like bolognese and that's his eye, found somewhere else'

Bullet Hole was actually an ice-pick wound, but Collishaw was a lad in a hurry and didn't bother reading the caption. Besides, he was into JG Ballard at the time and wanted a modern-sounding injury. I wanted that slick 20th-century advertising lightbox appeal with cold violence behind it.' He agrees that it looks like a vagina, but to him it's also a camera, a rectangle with an aperture in the middle. So it's self-referential, mirrors the thing that's taking the picture of it.' He wouldn't expect people to notice this consciously, necessarily, just to feel it works for some reason beyond your knowledge'.

The dealer Maureen Paley tried to flog Bullet Hole for £500 at Freeze but, displayed across 15 lightboxes, it had cost Collishaw a grand to make, so he refused to sell (Freeze wasn't the bonanza people think it was') and went back to working in a pit in Docklands, laying cement for the foundations of one of the high-rise towers.

The 1990s were hard for him. He became a father at 23. Was his girlfriend an artist? No, she was a psychotic.' She was 11 years older than him, an art critic from Calabria, where they have lots of sun on their heads. She was an intellectual, a Freudian scholar and, being from Nottingham, I was very seduced. I thought she knew what she was doing but she was very fiery and there were years of trouble and a lot of time spent in court trying to get access to my son.' Now a teen, he lives with Collishaw, appearing politely to say hello.

Then Mat had a five-year relationship with Tracey Emin. He sure likes strong women. Yeah, that's the trouble. Generally I'm quite shy so I can't be with other shy people because it all reflects and amplifies. So it's better to be with a nutter because they don't ask for stuff, do they? They just talk. You buy yourself a bit of space. You don't even have to listen. And as long as you say "yeah" every five minutes, you're fine. They're entertaining until the nightmare begins.'

Was Tracey a muse? She was amusing.' Although it's said he broke her heart, leaving her when she was 39, they're now friends. She can be funny and sweet, and she was always up for a night out and then so was I.' He's entertaining about her egomania, roughly trying to remember a conversation they had at cross-purposes on 9/11. He texted her: The face of the world as we know it has changed.

She replied: I know. It's so tragic Twenty minutes later, he texted her again: The second one's gone now, too. She replied: I hate them for this. She was at the beautician's talking about her eyebrows being overzealously waxed; he was referring to the destruction of the Twin Towers.

He's watched so many of his peers become superstars – he woke up with Tracey the night after her ranting, boring' drunken appearance on TV – does he now want a piece of the glory? I think it's about time for a bit of that,' he smiles, before correcting himself.

He wants money. Money is the great enabler, buying time and top-quality materials and the luxury of being able to correct

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mistakes.' He doesn't want glory. It unnerves you and you start to believe in yourself too much and stop working hard because you assume it's just dripping off your fingers.' For all the nastiness in his work, I'm beginning to think Collishaw is a bit of a softie.

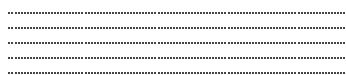
He was a vegetarian for 20 years in protest at Bernard Matthews. He clearly took fatherhood seriously, like his own father. And it turns out he doesn't even kill his own butterflies. I'd heard it said that his 1m-high prints of squashed butterflies depicted the actual moment of their death, but with a reluctant neeeugh' he admits that he doesn't hatch them at home. Though I do remember Damien used to do that in his bedroom,' he says, with wistful admiration.

Collishaw is one of the most introverted of the YBAs, with a taste for anonymous mischief. Of an evening, relaxing after a joint and a 17-hour day, he likes to indulge in a little Wikipedia vandalism, adding scabrous details to Russell Brand's entry (then he had another attack of herpes'). But isn't it always the quiet ones? You have to watch Mat Collishaw.

To celebrate the opening of Mat Collishaw's exhibition Hysteria at the Freud Museum next month, Haunch of Venison is offering ES readers his limited-edition print (in an edition of 100), Insecticide Photogravure, 2009, at a special price of £175 (normally £212.75). Call the gallery bookshop on 020 7495 5050 or visit 6 Burlington Gardens, W1, and quote ES Offer'.

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