

Mat Collishaw,  
self-portrait in  
his Camberwell  
studio, London.

## Dark Arts

One of the original Young British Artists, Mat Collishaw has never shied away from shock value. And, as **Alastair Smart** discovers, age has definitely not withered him.

Self-portrait by **MAT COLLISHAW**



**T**o visit the artist Mat Collishaw on a glorious, late summer's day in Camberwell, south-east London. I try ringing the bell, then knocking on the door, but no sound can be heard above the cacophony of building works taking place inside. Collishaw has bought a defunct 1930s pub and is in the final throes of converting it into a four-floor home and studio.

After a short while, presumably prompted by one of

his builders, he answers the door. Sporting three-day stubble and a black shirt open almost to the waist, Collishaw apologizes, in a voice hoarse from smoking, for keeping me waiting. As we negotiate the building chaos on our way upstairs to his apartment, I ask if all this construction reminds him of the show with which he and his fellow Young British Artists (YBAs) first made their name, the 'Freeze' exhibition in 1988. This was one of the seminal moments in British art, in which 16 art students from Goldsmiths took over a dingy, empty warehouse in London's Docklands. Spearheaded by Damien Hirst, the participants included now-familiar names Gary Hume, Michael Landy and Sarah Lucas.

'There was a real sense of wanting to make things

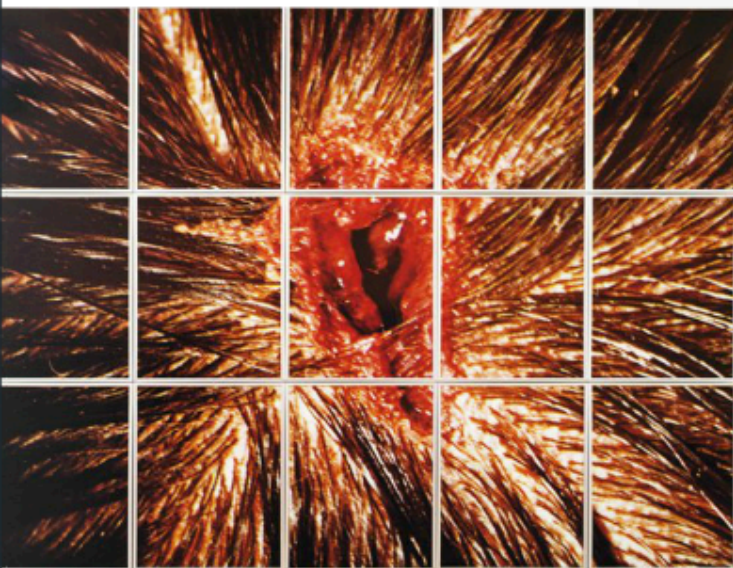
happen, of not sitting around college waiting for a gallery to find you, but of being proactive and getting our work out there,' Collishaw recalls.

'Freeze' was held in the summer holidays after the second year of Collishaw's Fine Arts degree and he remembers it being a particularly hands-on experience. 'We did everything ourselves, from finding the venue to designing the invitation cards. I personally



recall fixing lights, angle grinding radiators, and ripping up old carpet from concrete floors.' So well-built is Collishaw one can see why he took on the heftier tasks. The whole 'Freeze' operation encapsulated a bold, go-get-'em attitude with which the YBAs became associated.

Before long, the collector and gallery-owner Charles Saatchi visited the exhibition, cheque book at the ready, famously launching a whole new generation of British artists. Collishaw's work for 'Freeze', *Bullet Hole*, was perhaps the most emblematic. Sourced from a forensic pathology textbook, it's a blown-up photograph, divided into a grid of 15 light boxes, of a deep wound in the back of a man's head. There may, of course, be an iconographic reference in such imagery to the stigmata of Christ as depicted in the numerous paintings of the Passion, but YBA art was not best known for such subtlety. It was brash and in-yer-face, the stuff of headline-grabbing, tabloid-goaded shock-



From top: Collishaw's 'Last Meal on Death Row', Allen Lee Davies' (2012); 'Bullet Hole' (1988); Collishaw with (left to right) Dinos Chapman, Tiphaine Chapman and Polly Morgan at London Collections, 2013.

horror, all unmade beds and bisected cattle.

A good friend of Hirst's to this day, as well as the long-term lover of Tracey Emin (until 2003), Collishaw embraced the YBAs' hard-partying, heavy-drinking ethos wholeheartedly. In such a context, *Bullet Hole*, on the surface, seemed entirely typical. Yet, over time, his work revealed surprisingly hidden

depths, as well as disturbingly dark visions. His art has taken inspiration, variously, from Victorian child prostitution, suicidal Nazis, and mass starvation in Sudan.

'My idea of shocking has never been about vomiting on the street and making the front page of the papers,' says Collishaw. His attraction to the truly shocking is one reason he's not quite as well known to the public at large as his YBA peers.

Perhaps my favourite of his works – if favourite is the right word – is *Deliverance* (2008), a devastating photographic installation inspired by the Beslan school massacre in 2004. In a dark space, images of children running or being carried from a disaster are projected randomly around the walls, appearing abruptly with a



phosphorescent flash and then slowly fading like ghosts.

In part, this is Collishaw's contribution to a long, artistic tradition – from Caravaggio to Scorsese – of aestheticizing violence. Yet, it's also his way of highlighting how the modern media abets a morbid fascination with the suffering of others.

'In the 24-hour age of Internet and rolling news, one atrocity streams into our living rooms after another – and you start to ask yourself, "Am I engaging with this in genuine humanitarian concern for other people or like a Roman watching slaves being ripped apart in the Colosseum?"'

Not that Collishaw means this judgementally. 'I don't take a moral position. It's more an observation, really – in terms of the whole history of human existence, we've only very recently evolved into civilized people, and there's still a tension within us from our caveman instincts.'

Collishaw grew up in Nottingham where he was brought up by his Christadelphian



parents with the strict moral standards that this small Christian sect espoused. 'My parents loved us, but it was hardly idyllic,' says Collishaw – he used to sneak art books into the house from the library and read them illicitly at bedtime instead of the Bible. One doesn't have to be an expert Freudian to imagine a link between his repressed childhood and unfettered artistic vision.

On the day we meet, he seems very attached to his coffee cup. He's tired but, he insists, from over-work rather than

over-drinking. During 2013 Collishaw has had six solo shows around the world, from Istanbul to Miami. His best-received work has been *Last Meal on Death Row* (2010–12), a set of photographs inspired by the final meals of real Death Row inmates in Texas, set up in the manner of 17th-century Dutch still-life painting. In one, amidst deep shadow, a pink lobster rests on a glistening metal platter, surrounded by an appetizing assortment of shrimps and clams.

'I've always been fascinated by an artist like Caravaggio, who, out of very dark subject matter, managed to create works of great beauty,' Collishaw says. 'It's a potent cocktail,' and one that he has tried to emulate.

His travels have also recently

**WE'VE ONLY RECENTLY EVOLVED INTO CIVILIZED PEOPLE. THERE'S STILL TENSION WITHIN US FROM OUR CAVEMAN INSTINCTS.**

taken him to Azerbaijan, albeit for pleasure rather than work. 'I was curious to visit Baku, to experience the extraordinary coexistence of the modern with the medieval,' he says. 'Some buildings in the Old Town date from the 12th century, and they're still visible as you look at the Flame Towers, those shimmering 21st-century monuments to bling that celebrate the city's vast energy resources. I found the city fascinatingly surreal, a post-modern Mecca.'

Collishaw is 47 now, and the YBA days are a distant memory. The artists from those days are all still good friends, he says, though work and family commitments mean get-togethers are far less frequent. In the past few years, he's seen his old pals Hirst (*Tate Modern*, 2012), Emin (*Hayward*, 2011), Hume (*Tate Britain*, 2013) and Lucas (*Whitechapel*, 2013) garlanded with retrospectives at the UK's major public institutions. Is he expecting a call himself any time soon? 'Not really. It's not necessarily something I'd entirely welcome, either. Recognition on that level kind of means you've peaked, whereas I'm working hard on new projects. Always looking for fresh mountains to climb.' ■