

## Darkstar



The unsettler - Mat Collishaw, outside his Hackney studio, takes photography to disturbing levels

Guy Kennaway

12:01AM BST 01 Jul 2007

**With their blood, strangeness and sharks, the Young Turks of the 1980s pushed British art to the edge. But Mat Collishaw liked it so much he stayed there. Britart's best-kept secret tells Guy Kennaway why he'd sooner chase fairies than fame**

By rights, Mat Collishaw should be a household name. One of the Goldsmiths generation that brought us BritArt, Collishaw virtually kick-started the whole thing with his photograph of a bullet hole in a head, the lead piece in the now mythical Freeze show curated by Damien Hirst nearly 20 years ago.

Hirst was still a student and Freeze was the moment when the gentle tea party that was British art was gatecrashed by the upstarts who, with their global reach (and diamond skull), can now

claim to be the most significant group of British artists ever.

Collishaw has since shown with numerous galleries around the world and pursued a lucrative sideline photographing advertising campaigns for companies such as Neiman Marcus and Agent Provocateur.

His reputation among his peers is formidable. Yet his name doesn't trip off the tongue like those of his contemporaries: Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Gary Hume, Sarah Lucas, Marc Quinn or Sam Taylor-Wood.

Now, with shows in London and Zurich, and the publication of a retrospective of his work, this could all be about to change, and his place among the pantheon of Young British Artists secured.

I've arranged to meet Collishaw at his Hackney apartment at 9.30am. Having known him for eight years, I realise he's more likely to be heading towards a bed than away from one, so I'm not overly optimistic as I ring the bell.

Nineteen attempts later, Collishaw, looking every inch the swarthy hero with his enviable physique, wide, full lips and three-day stubble, arrives at the door. 'You should've rung more than once,' he says. 'I nearly didn't hear you.'

The 1970s is a decade that clearly inspires Collishaw, who is never one to bother with the top three buttons of a shirt, and whose uncompromising maleness, cheesy medallion and huge collar make him the secret love child of D.H. Lawrence and the suit in Saturday Night Fever.

While he rustles up a mug of the coldest coffee I've ever been served, I nose around the duplex apartment.

There's a pile of invitations on the table with a Vivienne Westwood event on the top, another from Versace, and beside it one to Tracey Emin's Venice Biennale show.

Mat was Tracey's lover for five-and-a-half years from 1997, and is still her close friend and confidant. There's a patina of dust over the mild domestic chaos - possibly the result of the recent departure of his wife, an art director whom he was married to for 18 months.

Collishaw's sitting-room is dominated by one of his photographs, of a garlanded country maiden. The image seems wholesome and healthy until you notice the menacing black bull beside her. I ask him about the now iconic bullet wound that started it all.

'In the early days I was just concerned with commanding imagery, hence Bullet,' Collishaw says. 'I wanted to punish the viewer - it was a way of getting their attention. But also I wanted to

supply content that had a high level of ... what's the word ... images that demand a high level of social responsibility. Not things that you could look at in a lazy or uncommitted way.'

This gave rise to a sequence of work - much of which can be seen in the new book - featuring, among other things, disabled children, women using sanitary towels, bestiality and bondage.

'People started writing about how offensive it was,' he complains, managing to sound surprised and hurt. 'It wasn't my aim at all. Purely offensive images give you an immediate fix,' he mimes injecting his arm, 'but then that's it. I want people to remember my images for three years, 10 years, a lifetime.'

After Freeze, the next group show of the BritArt pack was called Modern Medicine. Collishaw exhibited a triptych of pornographic images of a bound girl on a crucifix.

It predictably caused a stir - and he could no doubt have continued to carve out a lucrative career as a shock artist.

'We were asked to do a group show called Gorefest III. I refused. By then it had just become a cliché. To make a cliché of human misfortune was a bit rich even for me,' he smiles.

'In the Nineties, I found the Cottingham fairy book about the little girls who faked the photos of fairies, and thought this is the extreme opposite of a bondage girl lashed to a cross. I made a picture of myself up to my waist in a pond trying to catch fairies - it was a metaphor for being a photographer trying to capture the uncapturable. I also realised that the Victorian era was another way of getting to the darkness.'

The darkness, the menace, is always there with Collishaw, although it lurks behind changing images - sometimes children or flowers or a landscape.

But there's always something wrong: the flowers are diseased, the children look intoxicated, the landscape is somehow sickening.

The same darkness in Collishaw's work appears in his life: his consumption of booze, drugs and women makes Keith Richards look like Val Doonican.

Damien Hirst put it to me like this: 'We all have to go to the edge sometimes to see what it's like, to know that it's there. Mat's the kind of artist that sits at the bottom of the pit looking up at all those falling in.'

A couple of hours later we're on the way to Collishaw's studio, where he's having his photo taken for this piece.

Twenty blocks towards Hoxton we get out of a taxi in front of some industrial low rises. Collishaw leads us into a shabby building and we walk through a deserted studio with dangling brown paper patterns and mannequins bristling with pins.

'This is [fashion designer] Jonathan Saunders's studio,' he says. 'He's doing well for himself. Young models in here stripping off all day long.'

We go through a door in a partition and are suddenly in Matworld, where Victorian mahogany furniture and antique objets d'art nestle beside vintage porn and antique children's books.

There's an Edwardian bellows camera which, when he plugs it in, shows a little film he made a few years ago of a nest of baby birds stretching out their necks for food.

'They're trying to kill each other to get the worms,' he says with a resigned smile.

The Victorian aesthetic was clearly a way of getting free of the early BritArt obsession with the icy forensic pathology that is still so evident in Damien Hirst's work. Collishaw's use of children, many of whom he photographs naked in eerily ambiguous settings, is bold and highly provocative.

'I never saw images of kids in the art world,' he tells me. 'The sexuality of young boys wasn't in the discourse, so I tried to work them in.'

His own childhood was predictably quirky. Born in Nottinghamshire 42 years ago, Collishaw was raised as a Christadelphian: no church, no Christmas, no television.

'My parents said to me and my brother that Christmas was a pagan festival being disguised as Christianity,' he says.

'We had a tight little family, four boys, but normal family constraints were exacerbated by the religion - childhood misdemeanours carried the weight of being downright evil. I wouldn't have had it any other way because our parents loved us, but it was by no means idyllic.

' We had to struggle with maintaining that family balance while trying to get away with murder.'

I ask him if he has any press cuttings. He fumbles through the chaos of his desk and brings out a box file with one yellowing article inside it. At the White Cube gallery the artists have every single mention of themselves filed in an archive room that would put the Pentagon to shame.

When I ask why he doesn't have a proper archive himself, Collishaw evades the question, describing it as 'a gallery job.'

Does he think it might also be because he doesn't actually want to be famous or successful? 'I don't like self-promoters like Madonna or Robbie Williams. I prefer people you have to go out and find.'

'Self-promotion - I really find it quite vulgar.' Then he smiles. 'I'm obviously wrong. It works. I assumed that people felt the same. How wrong I was. People love being told the same thing.'

So what about Emin? 'Well, I enjoy PR genius. But you've got to be able to back it up with a good sentence, and she always can. The reason I got into art is because I'm a really bad communicator and cripplingly shy.'

He plucks a book from the shelf and hands it to me. 'This is much more interesting than cuttings about me. That' - he points at the faded cover of a 1970s medical textbook - 'is the bible of BritArt.'

It's called A Colour Atlas of Forensic Pathology, by G. Austen Gresham. I randomly open it on a page showing a corpse filled with maggots, then flick to a mutilated embryo, and then a stab wound.

'That book was stolen by Marcus Harvey [an artist] from Foyles and got into Damien's hands in the Goldsmiths bar. I got it off Damien.'

Looking more closely, I see that, inside its unpromising academic covers, the book contains the DNA of BritArt: formaldehyde, knives, naked bodies, blood, gore, mutations.

'At that time art was so concerned with form, boxes and colours and shapes,' Collishaw explains. 'Then we saw that.'

'This very book changed the course of art history,' I say, holding it in my hands.

'Yeah,' he says, 'give it back.'

I ask what Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas were like as students.

'A lot of their education was missing but they had something about them - spark,' he tells me.

'Damien nearly got chucked out. He and this other guy got caught setting light to a skip. The other guy got banned. Hirst somehow sneaked his way back in. As far as I know, they were equally culpable.'

Hirst went on to set up Freeze. Even then, Collishaw says, he had a flair for 'selling', a talent that

was well in evidence a couple of weeks ago, when the artist managed to sell a medicine chest entitled Lullaby Spring for just under £10 million.

'Damien found the warehouse and got permission and even got sponsorship from Olympia and York, the property developer,' Collishaw continues. 'Angus Fairhurst did the electrics; I painted the walls. On the night Freeze opened, my hands were shredded with cutting steel. I said, "F--- it, I'll go and have a beer." I sat in Docklands and watched a house burn down. Then people started vomiting with the drink. It's famous now, but the show actually made us unpopular at college. We became targets.

'They published a bulletin called anti-Freeze to humiliate us. Students came in their mummies' and daddies' cars and said it's too slick. They didn't want to get their hands dirty. And there was me in a hard hat brushing concrete. Soon after the show Damien started appearing in corridors with files and lists of contacts he was accumulating.'

The photographer tells him to sit down. He sprawls languidly on his chesterfield, clearly enjoying the posing.

So what made him choose Goldsmiths? 'I came down to look at all the art schools. At Goldsmiths everyone was sat around with their heads in their hands with blank canvases in front of them.

'Other colleges were phoney. At Goldsmiths the students were given no money: you were just told to get on with it. Get used to it. And there was no real programme, you had to invent it. It was kind of scary. The most hardcore option.'

In a taxi to Spitalfields, where we're meeting Tracey Emin, I ask what went wrong after art college. Why didn't he join White Cube, for example? Collishaw's response is swift: 'I didn't have an identifiable brand or product so they never asked.'

When I mention this to Jay Jopling, the owner of White Cube, he says, 'He's a good artist, Mat; he likes to fly under the radar.' Which suggests he's correctly identified Collishaw's ambivalence about success.

We leave the taxi and stride towards Emin, who is just back from her Biennale show in Venice and looks so glamorous at her café table that a pedestrianised precinct in Bishopsgate feels more like the Piazza San Marco.

They greet warmly, and bounce little remarks off each other with amusing ease.

I'm working out that one of the reasons Collishaw's career has not flourished as it should is that

his personal life is in constant turmoil.

By contrast, Emin looks as if she's in turmoil, but when you get to her house or her studio all you see is incredible order.

With Collishaw, the chaos has seeped into everything. His first solo show was with the prestigious agency Karsten Schubert but at the time he was locked in a custody battle over a child with a woman who, according to Collishaw, 'was sinking her teeth into my face while trying to strangle me to see if I'd wake up.'

The conflict has since been resolved: his son, Alex, is now 17 and lives with Collishaw.

Then there were the Tracey years. 'I met her when she was up a ladder in the shop she had with Sarah Lucas, hanging a T-shirt that said "Have you w---ed over me yet?" I thought that was a bit much,' he says.

'You hadn't, had you?' says Emin. The question seems to sum up their unconventional relationship. 'It was when I drank spirits,' she adds, as if that explains everything.

'She wouldn't leave me alone,' Collishaw tells me. 'She pushed matches and meowed under my door all night. In the morning I saw they were dead matches. She was trying to burn the place down. I remember the night of the Turner Prize fiasco: she met me in a bar and said "I should have been on TV but I missed it." We came out of the bar later and saw the papers. "Mad Tracey" all over the front pages. We realised she had been on TV. That was when it went mental for her.'

'He gave me Docket,' Emin says, looking lovingly at Collishaw. Docket is Emin's cat, much featured in her work. One of the first times I met Collishaw he was climbing over the fences behind Emin's house searching for the cat, which hadn't come home.

It struck me how he went on looking long after I would have given up, but hours later he found Docket in a deserted house five doors down.

I ask Emin which bits of her work relate to Collishaw. 'There's a neon called Very Happy Girl; it says "22 centimetres circumference, diameter 4.5". I put it up in a New York show and two gay guys bought it straight away.'

I mention a less complimentary piece called Fuck off back to your weak world. 'Yeah, I did that after an argument,' says Emin. 'But Mat subconsciously influenced me a lot too. Made me push the edge more with things. Go down in the belly of the thing more and not be afraid of it. Mat's not afraid of things that are dark.'

Why did they break up?

'The fact that he was sleeping with all and sundry,' Emin says.

Collishaw doesn't move a muscle. 'Also, you had piles,' she continues gaily, 'and I did some drawings of them. You said that's the end of this, I'd taken it too far. But I think it was just an excuse to end it.'

'Just looking for a way out,' Collishaw smiles.

'I physically adored Mat,' Emin says. 'Five-and-a-half years, I never looked at another human being sexually. But I don't have to put up with the stuff that nearly killed him. But I feel really lucky to have loved him.'

Emin gets the bill, and Collishaw leans forward and says: 'You don't need to put any of that stuff in about the women: you know how she exaggerates.'

Maybe, but she's right about 'the stuff that nearly killed him', namely the drugs and the booze.

My own nights out with him have been an adventure to say the least. He comes from a group of people who have stood on the edge, as Hirst says, longer and more precariously than most, but to spend your life at the bottom of the pit is only to half live it - and that's why this talented artist only has half the career and half the recognition he deserves.

When I picture Mat, I think of a meteor that will either burn out or cool and transform into some newly discovered, brightly coloured planet. When you look at his work you can see how much would be lost - and how much there is to come.

---

'Mat Collishaw' is published by Other Criteria at £28;

Mat Collishaw is showing at Haunch of Venison, Zurich, to 21 July, and at Sudeley Castle, Gloucestershire, to 31 October

---

How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2015