



Mat Collishaw: An artist in full flight

With shows at the V&A and his new gallery, one-time YBA Mat Collishaw has finally come of age

By Rob Sharp

Monday, 20 December 2010

Mat Collishaw's art melds antique curiosities with glossy modern methods. Computer-generated wisps condense into faces of female hysteria. Powered-up carousels throw cherubs into high-tech spins of rebellion.

This surface smoothing-off is the opposite, you could say, of Collishaw's person. The former Young British Artist dresses in an overcoat, wears his hair long, needs to shave twice a day, has a voice which deals every cigarette he's ever smoked back into the air. Beneath this hard-worn image, however, he is well-mannered, hates the small-talk that oils the wheels of art-world commerce, has a long-term artist girlfriend, Polly Morgan, known for her taxidermy, who advises him on what colours to use. It all sounds very domesticated.

Compare that to how he began his career. As one of the YBAs, he studied at Goldsmiths along with Damien Hirst and later dated Tracey Emin. His contribution to Charles Saatchi's 1997 Sensation exhibition was a tiled version of a photograph showing a gaping, bloody wound in someone's skull (called Bullet Hole, it was actually a medical photograph showing an ice-pick wound). It paved the way for subsequent work dealing with controversial subject matter: mischievous Victorian fairies, pornography, the Crucifixion, even reinterpretations of images from the Beslan school siege in 2004. His recent show, *Creation Condemned*, at his new gallery, Blain Southern, was advertised with a burning orchid; themes explored included "torture using traditional techniques". Pole-dancers were combined with altarpieces. Roving scanners, like those found in photocopiers, trawled behind images of 17th-century sculptures.

For the festive period, one of Collishaw's huge spinning carousels, or zoetropes, is hanging in the V&A's uppermost cupola. Lit by a series of LEDs, a group of moths in different poses are affixed to a spinning device, frozen static as if mid-flight. The artist designed the moths using software, which are then modelled automatically. When the carousel spins, and lights flash with a specific synchronicity, the resulting heady whirl captivates and unnerves, somewhere between traditional animation and a fractured nightmare.

"I wanted to relate it to the museum in the Victorian period," says Collishaw, nursing a coffee. "I wanted to use modern technology, which is what I do, and I wanted to draw something from the past. Since the brief was to represent the museum as a beacon of knowledge, the moths are attracted to the light. It's total madness."

Collishaw, now 44, was brought up as a Christadelphian, a sect of Christianity that prohibits television and the education of women. His mother studied for an Open University degree in secret. His father was a factory worker. He says that the morality of his upbringing constantly feeds into his work. "I believe in the aspiration towards God," he says. "I don't know whether I believe in it, but there's definitely an aspiration towards something more than is concrete and then a strong moral agenda. Sometimes I have moral dilemmas walking around, and I like to explore them in my work."

Take Collishaw's 2009 show *Hysteria*, at North London's Freud Museum. He says he is less attracted to Freud as a person than to the era's explosion of scientific experimentation; of superstition colliding with empiricism, of the rising importance of psychoanalysis without the

research to back it up.

The exhibition's title, *Hysteria*, refers to a print hanging above Freud's couch of the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, showing his students a woman having a hysterical fit. Charcot treated her using hypnotism. Collishaw's work explores the discomfort and ambiguity of such treatments.

"I do think Freud was an interesting figure," he says. "But the only thing I see is the damage and confusion which he managed to create. I see people who elevated him to a god-like status who are deluding themselves and messing up other people."

Collishaw says he once took his now-grown-up son, Alex, to a child psychologist "who insisted there was something wrong with him", though there wasn't. He now harbours something of a grudge against quacks. "I am interested in the dark, early exploitation of the early psychologists, certainly with regard to their views on women," he adds. "They did all these bizarre experiments; patients were subjected to bizarre drugs, many of them died as alcoholics. It was all documented and photographed."

Collishaw still goes drinking with his friends from art college, including the immensely successful Hirst. "Our thing was we were always going to do it ourselves," he says. "We were not bothered about what people thought. These days artists feel the need to toady and suck up to people, whereas with us it was all about holding up as a group, which since then, has been pretty solid. It's given us a trajectory."

Earlier this year Harry Blain and Graham Southern, founders of the London gallery Haunch of Venison, which was controversially taken over by Christie's in 2007, left the art world agog when they departed to set up a new operation, Blain Southern. Blain, apparently, felt it was "no longer tenable" to work at Haunch of Venison, and decided to leave, taking a few choice artists with him. Collishaw was one of them – and provided their opening salvo with an exhibition in Frieze week. "Everything I've asked for in professional terms he [Blain] has let me have," says Collishaw. "Things have been selling really well, and I get on with the guy. He's always the one putting the bottle of vodka on the table at two o'clock in the morning in Venice, or wherever. He's always acted like a total gentleman."

Of leaving Haunch of Venison, Collishaw says, "It's like going through a divorce. But I don't get involved with the politics. As far as I am concerned I'm just at my studio making the work."

Next he'll be focusing on a computer-generated rendering of a watercolour of some weeds that came to him during a recent stay in hospital. He says he's been using so many different techniques for so long, that it can be hard to "unravel the knot".

What this means for those looking at his art is a feeling of being unnerved, without ever quite knowing why. In that sense, like the man himself, it happily defied easy explanation.

'Magic Lantern' is on display in the V&A Cupola, from dusk, and the museum's John Madejski Garden, between 10am and 5.45pm (www.vam.ac.uk) until 27 March