

Mat Collishaw's Last Meals at the Bass

By **Benjy Caplan**

published: August 15, 2013

Mat Collishaw / Courtesy of the artist and Tonya Bonakdar Gallery, New York



Details:

"Mat Collishaw," through October 13 at Bass Museum of Art, 2100 Collins Ave., Miami Beach; \$8 for adults, free for members; 305-673-7530, bassmuseum.org.

Consider the 61-year-old woman who was beaten until unrecognizable, raped, and strangled to death. Two televisions and a VCR were stolen from her home. Or how about the 26-year-old shoeshine girl stabbed more than 50 times and left to die in a church driveway, also after being raped?

"It's too much information," Mat Collishaw says. "It's not very important and is a distraction."

Then try instead: enchiladas, burritos, chocolate ice cream, and a cantaloupe cut in half. Or lettuce, tomato, cucumber, four celery stalks, four sticks of cheddar cheese, two bananas, and a pint of cold milk.

These are the last meals requested by the men put to death in Texas for the aforementioned crimes. These and other menus are the subjects of a series of 13 gorgeous photographs that, with a video installation and two sculptures, comprise a show of recent work by Collishaw on display at the Bass Museum.

"Well, I'm not necessarily sympathetic to these guys," Collishaw clarifies. "They're not nice guys. But it's this very 21st-century cold, calculating way to serve someone a meal. The chilling nature of that is

something I want to put in the pictures."

Collishaw was part of a group called the Young British Artists (YBA), whose startling work and wild lifestyles revolutionized English art in the 1990s. His work showed at the historic 1988 show "Freeze" alongside that of Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, and Michael Landy. Today, he's in his late 40s, keeps his hair just short and washed enough to be able to mix in polite company, and has the burning glower one might expect from a man who photographs smashed insects for a living.

And the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami is preparing a show of Collishaw's fellow YBA and ex-girlfriend, Tracey Emin. MOCA curator Alex Gartenfeld says, "It's an interesting time for a reconsideration of that generation of artists. When they emerged, they were just digested at the level of collecting in the United States but not on an institutional level. So we now have an opportunity to return to them in that way."

The photographs are made in the style of 17th-century Dutch vanitas still life paintings, the silver candlesticks and ornate hourglasses of those works swapped for fried chicken legs and a bowl of cereal. The foods, left to decay, had been heaped on a silver tray and are captured with a small aperture in low light atop a table. French fries spill over the side of the platter, violating the otherwise perfect placement of the series. It is a reminder of the fallible human hands in the serving and consumption of these foods.

"I chose stainless-steel plates, the kind of indestructible plates you'd find in an institution," Collishaw says. These almost mock the expensive silver platters seen in the original Dutch paintings. "As I was placing and rotating the cutlery, I decided they were a contrivance too far and removed them. But with a glass, that sliver of light that describes the surface of Coca-Cola adds to the humbleness of the picture."

Aside from the lurid qualities of the crimes that led to these last meals, many of the images have their own compelling narratives. A luminous glass bowl of yogurt was the Texan response to the condemned's request for a pound of dirt as his last meal. A woman requested "a salad and fruit," Collishaw recalls. "A woman thinking about dieting and the irony of that..."

Collishaw surely has one of the more interestingly curated bedside tables. It currently features books about Nazis and about genetic inheritance of violent tendencies among twins. But back when he was preparing this photo series, Collishaw says, "I printed out a whole folder of last meals, and every night in bed, I'd go over them."

He was looking for "an interesting range of meals. I didn't want them all to be fried chicken. A lot of the meals seem to be stereotypically Afro-American or Mexican, unfortunately. Trends emerge. Food substances likely to be consumed by children, to cull some kind of comfort from their last meal."

Silvia Karman Cubiñá, executive director of the Bass, says, "It's almost like he doesn't want to overtly shock... On face value, you're looking at a turkey sandwich. It's a rather insignificant detail when you think of the penal system, death penalty, whatever crimes and how they affected the families of the victims. And a turkey sandwich is able to connect all of that."

Collishaw sees the subject of the photographs to be not the food but the criminals who ordered them.

"I thought it would accentuate the loneliness of these people with their last meals, these little memorial portraits," he says. "They're all in their same orange suits, their same chains, but they have their particular interests. Even so, those particular menu choices they made had to fit within the parameters of what the prison kitchens offered. They couldn't just pop out for sushi."

The light in the gallery mimics that of candlelight, giving the still lifes a spectral glow.

Only days before Collishaw's show opened, a shooting death in South Miami strangely echoed the work that first brought Collishaw to prominence a quarter century ago. That image, *Bullet Hole*, was a large, backlit, and bizarrely serene photograph of a gun wound in the back of a human head. The entry point is colored like a sorority girl's glossed lips, pursed in mild surprise.

The South Miami's woman's friends learned of her death after the boyfriend who claimed to have shot her posted an image of her bloodied body on Facebook. Part of the transgression of *Bullet Hole* is its intrusion into a gallery space, its size making it unavoidable and its near bloodlessness drawing out both revulsion and a second or third look. And now here, another bullet hole was similarly lambent on a computer screen and unexpectedly intervening in the lives of its viewers.

"When I did the bullet hole, those things were rare," he remembers. "You had to go to find

them, and now you have them, apparently, finding you... These images of abject horror and death are something I try to put into the work because it disturbs me. And it disturbs me because it could possibly attract me too."

As for his own last meal, Collishaw says, "I don't think I'd be that hungry, and that's probably part of what is so appealing about this for me. Sustenance is not of much use anymore when you're going to die. The sadness of that, the idea of crying while putting that piece of soggy pizza in your mouth — I'd have a couple of cigarettes and some Jack Daniels or whatever bourbon they have."