The dark basements of the mind

After Freud, the world could never look the same, for we are all too aware of the worm in the apple. Myths and fairy tales cannot be read without the filter of psychology and psychoanalysis. Innocence, along with religion and belief, are dead; we are all knowing now. It is this territory Mat Collishaw has colonised, blurring the distinctions between reality and fantasy, innocence and profanity. Walking into his new exhibition is like trawling through the dark basements of the subconscious.

An animated video of the Swiss symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin's *The Island of the Dead* sets the tone. Böcklin's allegorical paintings, many based on mythical creatures, anticipated 20th-century surrealism. His early style consisted of idealised classical landscapes. In the 1870s he turned to German legends, inhabiting similar territory to Richard Wagner. His later works, such as *The Island of the Dead*, became increasingly dreamlike and nightmarish. Collishaw's version is projected on to a two-way mirror in which the unsettling movement of shadows pass like an eclipse during a 24-hour period. Caught like some alienated figure in a Caspar David Friedrich painting, looking out into an existential void, is the reflected image of the viewer. The lone figure from Böcklin's original painting, which is absent here, has turned up in a recreated daguerreotype on an adjacent wall. Here the negative image of a girl only appears positive when passed over by the viewer's shadow. The ectoplasmic nature of the work and the use of mirrors remind us of the tricks used in the 19th century by spiritualists and séance lovers.

Collishaw's installation, *Shooting Stars*, has a disturbing dreamlike quality. Photographs found on the internet of Victorian child prostitutes in vulnerable, yet alluring poses, are projected on to the gallery walls and mingled with similar images re-staged by the artist with an older model. Fired on to phosphorescent paint, they flare briefly before slowly fading from view. The ghostly after-images suggest the children's short, fragile lives, blighted by violence and sexual diseases. For many of these girls "their lives were not much longer than the fleeting exposure of the camera shutter," comments Collishaw.

The top floor is dominated by a zoetrope, a cylindrical device that produces the illusion of motion from a rapid succession of static images. As it begins to spin in the eerie twilight, the small figurines of *Throbbing Gristle* – a minotaur ravaging a maiden, the Three Graces, a she-wolf and a wine-swigging cherub – begin magically to move, conjuring in flickering shadow the dark underbelly of Victorian life and its concerns about death and sex.

In 1917, two cousins, 10-year-old Frances Griffiths and 16-year-old Elsie Wright, presented two photographs they'd taken showing them in the company of fairies and gnomes in a nearby glen. Their mother gave the photos to Edward L Gardner of the then-popular Theosophical Society. The story reached Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who had become obsessed with spiritualism after the death of his son. Conan Doyle encouraged Gardner to give cameras to the girls, in the hope they would come up with new fairy portraits.

The cousins produced three new photos, which were accepted as genuine by Conan Doyle, who wrote about them in *The Strand Magazine*. As claims about the pictures' authenticity flew, they became the centre of one of the greatest science *vs* superstition controversies of the early 20th century. Collishaw's series of backlit, ultraviolet light boxes make these fugitive images seem even more uncanny.

Playing on notions of the forbidden, Collishaw questions what defines personal and social morality. The Victorians veiled their transgressions behind a veneer of morality, while Collishaw reveals that we are all, largely, a mixture of the dark and the light.

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Ethereal nightmares: ghostly images play with the notions of right and wrong