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How artist Mat Collishaw brought Elizabeth I to life - as a robotic head



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Detail from the Armada portrait of Elizabeth I, painted around 1588 CREDIT: © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, LONDON

Picture Elizabeth I. At the forefront of your mind might be one of the many actresses who have brought her back to life over the years. Judi Dench, say, in whose hands the Tudor monarch was a tart-tongued, rotten-toothed old woman for the 1999 film *Shakespeare in Love*; or Cate Blanchett's liquidly beautiful naif, turned steel-sinewed sovereign, in the preceding year's *Elizabeth*.

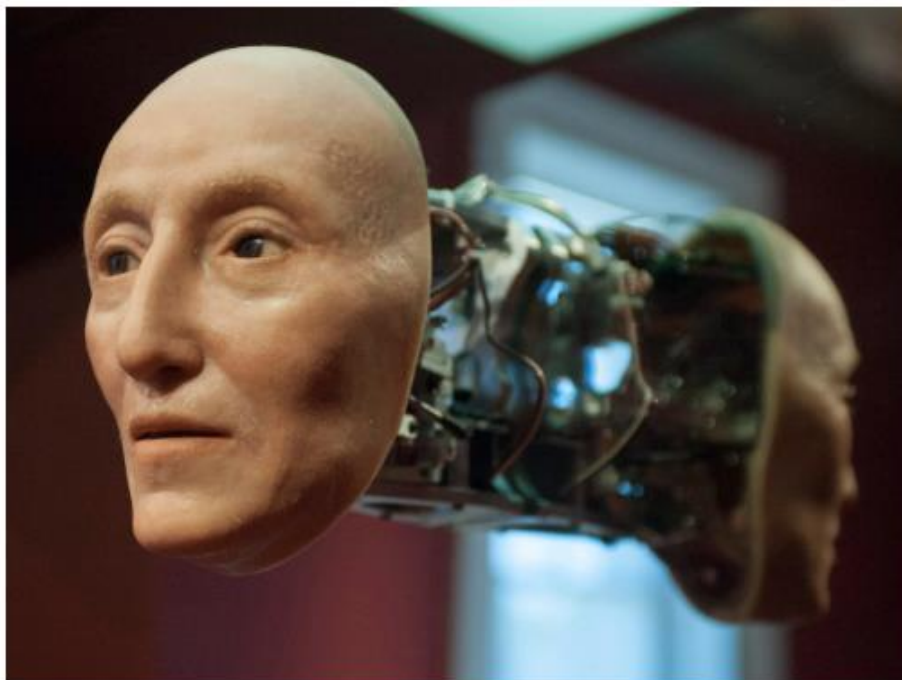
Perhaps it's a painting you think of – the padded ornateness of the Armada, for instance, the assured splendour of the Rainbow, or the withered and sunken crone in the recently discovered portrait from the workshop of Marcus Gheeraerts, who also gave us the flush-cheeked fecundity of the Ditchley.

Which of these is real? The answer is, nobody knows. Those who commissioned the portraits would have had their own status-enhancing hopes. Add contemporary accounts to the mix – ambassadors at the English court seeking to please acquisitive monarchs in far-away lands (or perhaps win favour for themselves at Whitehall), or ladies of the Bedchamber who had tired of administering to royal demands – and you realise there is no true version at all. Everyone had an agenda, including Elizabeth herself, and that was mostly to remain unknowable, a scrim of shadows and mirrors endlessly refracting the opinions of those around her.

“She was very artful in the way she presented herself,” says the British artist Mat Collishaw. “Her cosmetics, her jewellery, her hair and clothes, the way she was idealised in paintings, were all propaganda.”

Collishaw, one of the original Young British Artists, has spent a lot of time contemplating this subject recently. Invited to respond to the newly restored Armada portrait, painted to commemorate Elizabeth thwarting the Spanish invasion of 1588, he has created an animatronic mask of Elizabeth’s face that is an amalgam of biometric information gleaned from her painted portraits and a 3D scan of her death mask, to which have been added some of the details from the more reliable contemporary descriptions of her appearance.

The end product, installed on a wall directly opposite the Armada portrait in Queen’s House, Greenwich, is intended to replicate exactly the size of Elizabeth’s face in the Armada portrait, and to be a fair representation of how the queen might have looked in 1588, at about 55 – chin hair, sunken eyes, wrinkles and all.



The Mask of Youth: installation shot of Mat Collishaw's new commission in the Queen's House, Queen's Presence Chamber, Greenwich CREDIT: © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLAIN SOUTHERN

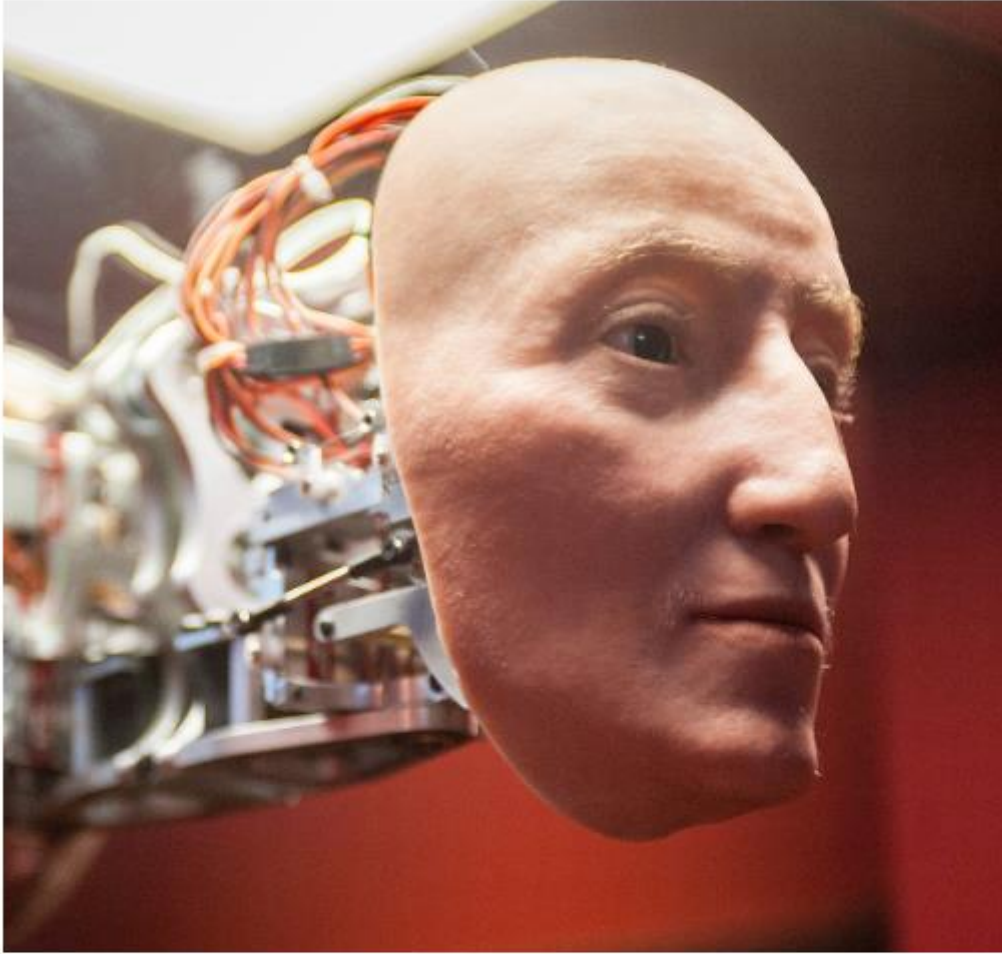
It's installed within a mirror, so that when you look at the mask, it's possible to see both the painted portrait behind you and the animatronic head in front of you in one neat swwoop, not to mention yourself looking up at it, which is, of course, what she would be seeing, if she were actually seeing. Which she isn't. Although it's so lifelike you have to keep reminding yourself of that.

"We know she had smallpox quite badly," explains Collishaw, when we meet at his London studio. He hands me a rubber version of the mask, a working model on which the scars of the disease are subtly visible, near the temples.

"By then her face had also been eaten away a little by the cosmetics she wore, and she had a lot of teeth missing, which reportedly made it hard for people to understand her when she spoke quickly. Those teeth she did have were black or yellow."

The Mask of Youth, as Collishaw has called his work, was made by the team responsible for animatronics on the recent round of Star Wars films. It's extraordinary realism comes from "those things you wouldn't get in paintings," says Collishaw, who at 52 is almost the same age as the Elizabeth he has recreated. "Blemishes, hairs, spots, shiny skin, pores. They make it uncanny."

If this seems another example of the "grotesque" Elizabeth (the version currently in favour in the popular imagination - witness Margot Robbie's balding, pockmarked incarnation in the forthcoming film *Mary Queen of Scots*), Collishaw's portrait shies away from the cut-out it could easily be. This Elizabeth is faltering, worn out, perhaps, by the phenomenal effort expended on maintaining her power. As her mouth quivers, but never quite opens, you wonder if she is muttering under her breath, even lost for words. It's unsettling: not quite the iron-willed harridan you were expecting.



Collishaw has made the mechanics of the mask fully visible CREDIT: © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BLAIN SOUTHERN

A modern-day illusionist (previous works include a 3D zoetrope that brings Herod's Massacre of the Innocents to life, a virtual reality recreation of a Victorian exhibition and a revolving spectre of Robin Hood's hiding place in Sherwood Forest) Collishaw's art is best described as a nest of boxes springing fresh surprises. Fundamental to it all is that at some point, you see how the illusion is made.

Here at Greenwich, this means the mask is installed in a recessed glass box, so that the mechanics which power its movement are both visible and audible. "It's important that you have access to that," Collishaw tells me. "Partly it's to remind you that your reaction to her image is mechanical - the paintings are telling you to think certain things - her hand on the globe, the wrecked ships in the background. All of her portraits are primed in this way.

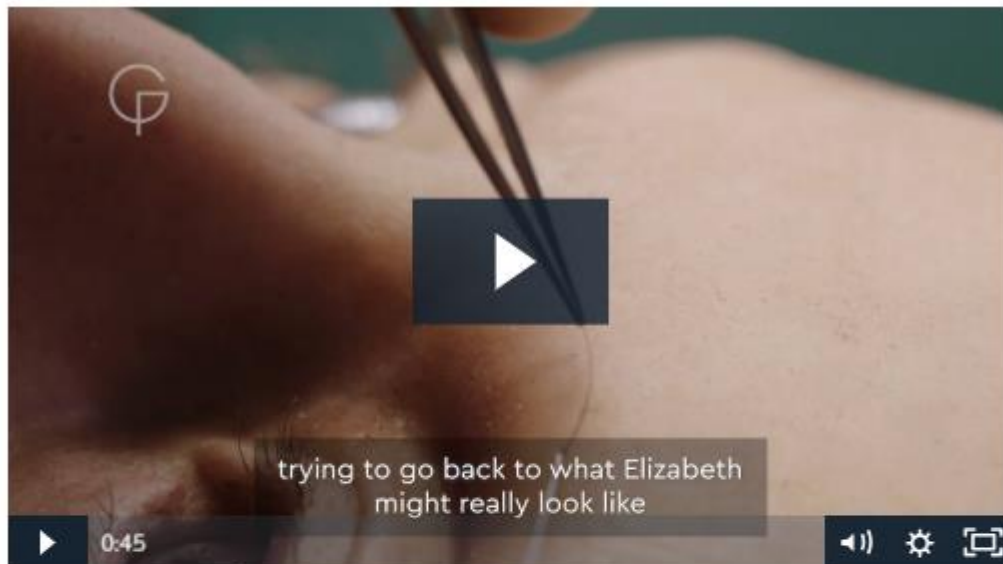


Elizabeth I in the Ditchley portrait, 1692, by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger

“But I also wanted to reflect on the insecurity she must have had in private. I mean, her mother was killed by her father when she was three years old, she witnessed many other people fall in and out of favour, and be put to death. She was presenting a mask to everyone around her, all of the time. The internal dialogue going on in her head must have been incessant.”

From the moment she became Queen in 1558, Elizabeth's outward appearance and bodily vigour were indissolubly linked to the health of the nation. "We princes, I tell you, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world duly observed," she remarked to a deputation of Lords, in 1586. "The eyes of many behold our actions, a spot is soon spied in our garments; a blemish noted quickly in our doings."

If the pressure of presenting your "best self" on Instagram feels oppressive, think how much harder it must have been in her day, when the luscious-haired, silken-fleshed Renaissance ideal held sway, the make-up and medicine at your disposal basic, and the consequences of failing to project the right impression – death. Indeed, by 1596, when she was in her sixties and enduring the most unstable period of her reign, she ordered any unseemly portrait of her destroyed, and issued a template for her face that artists had to adhere to, or suffer the (likely grim) consequences.



"As a woman monarch, she was in a very delicate position. It was a man's world and she seems always to have been on some thin diplomatic ice or other," says Collishaw. "This thing that keeps surfacing – why she was the "virgin queen" – well probably because it was the safest option for her to take. She didn't marry because she would immediately have been usurped as the figure of influence. Her husband probably would have bumped her off."

Has he come any nearer to the "real" Elizabeth, in making his work? "I read a lot about her", says Collishaw, in response, "and I was overcome by how intelligent she seems. There are lots of accounts of her speeches, and things she wrote down, and they are all beautiful, evocative, moving and powerful. But you can never, ever, pin her down to what she actually thought. To have managed that, to have remained an enigma all her life, to still be an enigma, she must have been an extraordinary woman."

The Mask of Youth is at The Queen's House, Greenwich until Feb 3
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