

## Mat Collishaw *The Nerve Rack*

Ushaw, County Durham  
5 July – 3 November 2019

A strange beast has landed at Ushaw. Installed in the ornate antechapel of St Cuthbert's at the former Catholic seminary just outside Durham, Mat Collishaw's *The Nerve Rack* profoundly disturbs the venerable atmosphere of worship, tradition and elevated learning. Toying with primal fears as well as with epistemological questions – about truth and information, faith and heresy – it reanimates histories of religious conflict in ways unexpectedly relevant for our own fractious times.

The work is a major new commission from Ushaw. It is part of the institution's developing commitment to significant contemporary art and to fresh ways of engaging visitors with its own spiritual and material heritage. The choice of Mat Collishaw is an inspired one. Established as one of Britain's key contemporary artists, he works across media – sculpture, photography, film, installation – to create work that often opens up new ways of seeing the familiar. Raised in a Christadelphian household, his rela-

tionship with Christianity is a complex and ambivalent one.

*The Nerve Rack* unnerves. Under the ribs of the neo-Gothic antechapel, a skeletal figure of an eagle perches, at head height. The bird is life-sized but alien, metallic, a machine. Its vestigial external body parts are crafted in a gold metal – the hooked beak, curled talons and serrated feathers. The rest of the body is stripped, to cold, skeletal, surgical steel. Conspicuous electric cables betray the source of its kinetics. And creepily, from time to time, this avian cyborg moves. It is a sophisticated work of technical and psychological animatronics. Able to respond to the presence and movements of visitors in the space, the bird sometimes abruptly turns its head to look with a chilling, soulless gaze. It flexes its wings, unhurriedly, like a henchman cracking his knuckles. Its talons toy, periodically, with its prey – a tiny mouse tangled in its clutches. I'm not the only one shivering at it.

Collishaw's alien raptor has an opponent, or an interlocutor. It faces, directly, another majestic eagle, this time fully feathered, whole, solid, golden. Augustus Pugin, ardent aesthete of Catholicism, designed Ushaw's

imposing bible lectern, in traditional symbolic form, to carry the weight and authority of the word. It was considered spectacular enough to exhibit at the Great Exhibition of 1851. In their own ways, each protagonist of Collishaw's *Nerve Rack* is a product of exemplary craftsmanship for their own times.

I speak with the artist. He is awed by the complex technology that animates his work, making sense of cold dead matter. It is the expert work of his collaborator, Adam Keenan, who designed and engineered the bird, and whose previous creations have featured in *Star Wars* and *Dr Who*. Collishaw explains the workings: thirteen different motors power its various movements. Three sensors built into the structure trigger them to a random sequence of movements. A severe metal rail encloses the two creatures in what the artist aptly calls 'an arena of combat'. Logically, the barrier is to protect the fragile and complex work of art, as well as forming part of the installation. Illogically, it feels like we are the ones who need the protection.

Collishaw found his inspiration for *The Nerve Rack* in an old book from the collection of the college library. *The Sincere and Modest Defence of English*

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*Catholics* (1584) contains snide annotations in the hand of Richard Topcliffe, the vicious investigator and torturer of Catholics under Elizabeth I. The annotated book is on display in the antechapel. Its presence makes a tangible connection with the political history of power and belief in England and its ruthless exercise as penal law. Topcliffe's preferred method of interrogatory torture was the eponymous rack, designed for calibrated excruciation, often to death. Topcliffe is *The Nerve Rack's* malign progenitor, an implacable, unstoppable animus.

*The Nerve Rack* carries out its own kind of interrogation – of the externals of power and control, which exist in tension with their inner workings. 'The idea was to strip the eagle of all its heraldic adornments, back to the skeleton and see what's going on behind this magnificent exterior', Collishaw says. 'What's happening is the skeleton becomes like a machine. You start to think about the faith, the religion, the politics as mechanical. Once you get to this huge scale of the Church at that time, it's very hard for the machine to

stop working and people are trampled and killed beneath it.'

At one level – especially here, at Ushaw – the alien eagle is a symbol for the relentless persecution of Catholics (and other non-conformists) by Protestants in 16th-century England. But its parity with Pugin's eagle means that a simple reading of the two as neat opposites is complicated. Instead it calls us to question those situations – anywhere in the Church – in which predation, authority, power and wealth can form a noxious mix, harmful to people and deadly for a living faith based on humility, trust and mutuality.

Describing the eagle as 'a survival machine', Collishaw draws thought-provoking analogies between its will to survive, and that of the Church. 'At that point', he remarks, 'mercy goes out of the window.' It is a poignant metaphor for the swift flight of compassion when power is at stake. The artist also grounds the work in the dynamics of espionage, conspiracy and disinformation. It is precisely with engineered ambiguity, duplicity and a 'wilderness of mirrors' that conflict can

be most virulently bred, including in our contemporary world.

Ushaw no longer trains men and boys for the Catholic priesthood. Its attractions for many visitors today are the benign pleasures of cultural tourism. Collishaw's sharp intervention is a welcome irritant. It is an oblique reminder of Ushaw's origins. The college was founded in 1808 by Catholic scholars from Douai, fleeing France from persecution after the French Revolution. It was only a short time after the end of penal law. Many of their forebears had been executed in Elizabethan England. Their martyrs were numerous.

*The Nerve Rack* delivers a pleasing frisson of hi-tech neo-Gothic horror for today's culture-lovers. It also presses questions vital for today's real and virtual worlds of political dogma, battles over power and information, and the dangers of sectarianism and fundamentalism in all their (dis)guises.

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