

A Terrible Beauty

Sue Hubbard

*He, too has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born*

Easter, 1916

W.B. Yeats

When we meet to discuss Mat Collishaw's work we have to decamp from the pub in Camberwell, which is both his studio and stylish home, to a local café, as his apartment has been let out to a well-known London store for a shoot, and is full of rampaging children. But before we leave he shows me his new paintings. At first glance they appear to be abstract, constructed on a modernist grid, though the lines are in fact folds, creases left in the small square wraps of paper used to sell cocaine. These wraps have been torn from glossy magazines; adverts for Fendi and Gucci, a woman's foot in a high-heeled shoe resting on a glass table. The subtext seems to be that these aspirational trappings are the spectral presence of an endless illusion that functions much like an addiction to drugs. You're always left wanting more. The work is about debasement, the debasement of modernist painting as a form, as well as the recent financial excesses that have led to the current economic crisis. This tension between the beautiful and the abject is central to all of Collishaw's work; between the promise of a possible paradise and the profane. As the Marquis de Sade once said: "There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image".

With his big beard and soft Nottingham vowels, there's more than a touch of D. H. Lawrence's Oliver Mellors about Collishaw. He may have been to Goldsmiths and be part of the YBA generation and have lived with Tracey Emin, but there remains something of the outsider about him. There's no doubt that he should be more well known than he is, having made one of the signature pieces, *Bullet Hole* (1988), for Damien Hirst's *Freeze* exhibition nearly 20 years ago. However, his work has always favoured emotional complexity and philosophical resonance over ironic insouciance, and then there's been his wild life style.

The Jesuits used to say that if you gave them a child for seven years they'd show you the man. But in Collishaw's case it wasn't priestly influence that cemented his youthful experience but the Christadelphians – a 19th century fundamentalist Christian sect that traces its origins back to one John Thomas who, in 1832, following a near shipwreck on the way to America, dedicated himself to God through personal Biblical study. For Collishaw this meant growing up without a television or Christmas celebrations, in a home where the Bible was read nightly. One of four boys, his father, a dental

technician, is an amateur photographer with a penchant for taking pictures of flowers. Attending the local comprehensive, Collishaw didn't take part in morning assembly; left to his own devices he'd distract himself by walking round the classroom with his satchel on his head, or drawing. A shy boy, his artistic ability became a way of commanding respect. As many young people do, he spent time flirting with alternative religions, but his discovery of Darwin opened up a plethora of questions about the nature of belief. Later, he migrated to the library and discovered Dadaism and Surrealism. Like portals into a forbidden world, they showcased previously inconceivable ideas relating to aesthetics, desire, sexuality and the unconscious.

In the 19th century a tense debate between religion and science characterised the era. Natural history and the collecting of specimens were seen as ways of ordering and codifying the world. The *Wunderkammer*, or 'cabinet of curiosities', had been a Renaissance device containing types of objects for which the classifications were yet to be defined, but the Victorians used them to categorise objects as belonging either to natural history (created by God) or religious and historical relics and works of art (made by man). Entomology was a passion for the Victorians, and lepidoptery a particularly popular pursuit, but the border between real and bogus sciences such as spiritualism and phrenology was thin. Fairy painting was very close to the centre of the Victorian subconscious, framing many of the opposing elements in the 19th century psyche; the desire to escape the harsh realities of daily existence; the burgeoning new attitudes towards sex that were stifled by religion; a passion for the unseen, mirrored in the birth of psychoanalysis and the proliferation of spiritualism; a suspicion of the new art of photography; and a deep fear of, yet fascination with, miscegenation between different races, classes and species. This palimpsest of attitudes, with its repressions and voyeuristic tendencies, where desire was veiled behind an idealised surface, is territory that Mat Collishaw shares with the Victorian sensibility.

In 1917, two cousins, 10-year-old Frances Griffiths and 16-year-old Elsie Wright, produced photographs they'd taken showing them in the company of fairies and gnomes in a glen in Cottingley. Their mother gave the photos to Edward L. Gardner of the then-popular Theosophical Society. Through Gardner, 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 that they'd 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 and counterclaims about the pictures' authenticity flew around, they became the centre of one of the greatest science vs. superstition controversies of the early 20th century. In the 1990s Mat Collishaw came across the Cottingley fairy books. His own *Catching Fairies* (1996), shows him crouching in a murky East London canal in the guise of a fairy catcher trying to ensnare the uncatchable. In *Duty Free Spirits* (1997), three cherubic tots stand in an abundant garden of saturated Pre-Raphaelite colour looking at a dead robin, which they might or might not have killed. There's something obsessive and darkly

malevolent about the image, which is reminiscent of Richard Dadd, the schizophrenic Victorian fairy painter incarcerated in Bedlam for the murder of his father. In Collishaw's exhibition *Shooting Stars* (2008), at Haunch of Venison, he used images culled from old photographs and books of Victorian child prostitutes in vulnerable, yet alluring poses, which he projected onto the gallery walls to disturbing and dreamlike effect. Fired onto phosphorescent paint, the images flared briefly before slowly fading from view, thus suggesting the children's brief lives, blighted by violence and sexually transmitted diseases.

There have been many other controversial images; a girl lashed to a cross; semi-naked pre-pubescent boys after Von Gloeden, whose images utilised the context of classical antiquity in order to circumvent the censorship laws of the time; crushed butterflies with velvety wings and smeared juices, suggesting something both sadistic and sexual; photos of exotic lilies and amaryllis, their beautiful blooms riddled with pustules from sexually transmitted diseases – Collishaw's own version of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mals*. The pull is always between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the ego and the id, between metamorphosis, transformation and decay. As with the Pre-Raphaelites there's always a dark underbelly, an ever-present flirtation with destruction, decadence and death. Beauty, as Wilde so well understood, has the seeds of its own destruction within. An early self-portrait, *Narcissus* (1990), shows Collishaw lying in the gutter, naked to the waist, staring into a puddle; emphasising the pull between the ideal of the beautiful and sordid reality. This Narcissus could well be a drug addict or a drunk lying deluded among the detritus of a city street.

An animated video, *The Island of the Dead* (2008), based on the work of the same title by the Swiss Symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin, from 1886, expands this flirtation with death. Collishaw's version is an LCD screen behind a two-way mirror, in which 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 lost girl from Böcklin's original painting is present in a daguerreotype hung on an adjacent wall so that her negative image only appears positive when passed over by the viewer's shadow. The ectoplasmic smoke and mirrors nature of the work is reminiscent of the tricks used by 19th century spiritualists and lovers of the séance.

This yearning for dissolution could also be experienced in the flickering shadows of Collishaw's zoetropes, cylindrical devices that produce the illusion of action from a rapid succession of static images. As early as the 1860s, projected moving images were created using magic lantern zoetropes. Collishaw's version, *Throbbing Gristle* (2008), spins so the small figurines – a Minotaur ravaging a maiden, the Three Graces, a she-wolf and a wine swigging cherub – move magically in their own corrupted Eden.

It could be argued that the world never looked the same after Freud, that we are all now too aware of the worm in the apple and that an image can no longer be looked at without the filter of self-knowledge.

Innocence, along with religion and belief, is dead, for we're all in the know now. Although not an admirer of Freud, Collishaw's show *Hysteria* (2009), at London's Freud Museum, explored the collision of scientific empiricism with superstition. The exhibition takes its title from the print above Freud's couch, which depicts the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot showing his students a woman having a hysterical fit, before he treated her with hypnotism. Collishaw's interest in the dark and often dubious practices of these early psychological practitioners is thus demonstrated. Three gnarled tree stumps placed in Freud's study, which seemed to grow surreally from the famous Persian rugs, doubled as record players. Emanating birdsong, the needles were placed at the centre, spiralling outwards, mimicking the rings of a tree and, perhaps by implication, simulating the process of endless repetition and recounting, the way we construct memory.

Decadent art, as Théophile Gautier suggested in his life of Baudelaire, is full of shades of meaning, always pushing against the limits of language, forcing itself to express the ineffable: "the singular hallucinations of the fixed idea verging on madness... In opposition to the classic style, it admits of shading, and these shadows teem and swarm with the larvae of superstitions, the haggard phantoms of insomnia, nocturnal terrors, remorse which starts and turns back at the slightest noise, monstrous dreams stayed only by impotence, obscure phantasies at which daylight would stand amazed, and all that the soul conceals of the dark, the unformed, and the vaguely horrible, in its deepest and furthest recesses." Many of these themes are addressed in Collishaw's contemporary practice.

Desire is at the basis of most human behaviour, from sex and procreation to the pursuit of beauty and death. Our lives are held between the two conflicting points of Eros and Thanatos. What enchants also ensnares, poisons and kills; the sublime is bedfellow with the abject. Collishaw contrives nightmarish horrors with a great formal elegance, whether taking on subjects like inmates' last meals on death row, the blood-spattered survivors of Beslan, or crushed butterflies. For a series of photographs made in 2000 entitled *Burnt Almonds*, (alluding to the smell produced by cyanide poisoning) he staged scenes of Nazi couples post-suicide in their bunker, decorated with gilt-framed oil paintings, leather chairs, and opulent candelabra. Strewn across the furniture in various stages of undress, the post orgiastic figures exemplify what Bataille calls, in his study of *Eroticism*, dissolution. "The domain of eroticism", he wrote, "is the domain of violence, of violation.... The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.... The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerks us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being."

The divine and the sacred have also always carried within them the undertones of frenzy and a flirtation with death. This violent aspect of divinity has been made manifest in sacrificial rites, from Bacchanalian orgies to the celebration of the host. Even the Cross itself links Christian consciousness to the horror of the divine and the sublime. As Bataille argues "the divine will only protect us once its basic need to

consume and to ruin has been satisfied". Playing on notions of the forbidden and the abject, Collishaw throws up complex questions about what defines personal and social morality to show that what appears virtuous is often corrupt and, what is defined as corrupt may, indeed, have some virtue. The Victorians veiled their transgressions behind a veneer of pious morality and saccharine sanctity but Collishaw convincingly reveals that we are all, in fact, a libidinous mixture of dark and light.

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