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# ART QUARTERLY

AUTUMN 2015

MAT COLLISHAW  
MEETS HIS HERO  
DON MCCULLIN

TREASURE AND  
THE DEBT WE OWE  
DETECTORISTS

SAMUEL WEST: HOW  
FRANK AUERBACH  
HELPED HIS HAMLET







This autumn Mat Collishaw has his first major solo show in the UK for a decade. *Art Quarterly* asked him whom he'd most like to meet. His answer was Don McCullin. Portrait by Phil Sayer

## PICTURES SHOULD MAKE YOU THINK

The artist Mat Collishaw (born 1966, far left) trained at Goldsmiths with Michael Craig-Martin, and his work *Bullet Hole* was shown in the legendary show 'Freeze', curated by Damien Hirst in 1988, which launched the generation known as Young British Artists.

The photographer Don McCullin, who turns 80 in October, is best known for his reportage from conflicts in Congo, Vietnam, Cambodia and Beirut. Latterly, however, he has been photographing landscapes, particularly in Somerset where he lives, as well as Roman sites and antiquities, and still lifes.

**Mat Collishaw** I was seven or eight when I first saw your photographs in the *Sunday Times*. We didn't have a lot of books in our house, or a television.

**Don McCullin** We never had any books or a TV in our house either.

**MC** So the most profound visual influence I had was looking at your pictures from Vietnam, Cambodia, Beirut... those images of abjection and horror, but very beautifully composed.

**DM** That's the thing about a stills picture: it can stop you in your tracks. It can have so much impact. It arrests you more than film because with film the image keeps moving and rolling on. With a photograph, it's like using a surgeon's knife. I cut all the layers of muscle back and get right to the centre of the pain in people's eyes. I wasn't a trained photographer. I wasn't a trained human being, really, where I came from in Finsbury Park with all the violence and gangs. Having survived all that brutality and ignorance and bigotry, I had to reinvent myself, and it's only because I worked with journalists and distinguished writers [notably Bruce Chatwin] that I learnt there was something else out there that I could be doing.

Did you go to university?

**MC** I studied fine art. Originally, I was a painter and then I started doing photography because I just felt painting



Left: Don McCullin, three spreads from the *Sunday Times Magazine*, 24 March 1968, showing soldiers during the battle to retake Hue



**'If I haven't persuaded people to understand what's right and wrong with humanity then I've obviously failed. I've lost'**

DON McCULLIN

was self-indulgent, and the media of the moment were photography and video.

**DM** We've both lived through a period where photojournalism has been very strong. It's now been diversified and has become art, which really upsets me. I don't want people calling me an artist. I really detest that. Is there any need to accuse photography of being art? Why can't they just let it be photography? And I don't want people calling me a war photographer either. What do they call you?

**MC** It tends to be artist, but I'm not too keen on it either. It sounds so pretentious, as though you've got ideas above your station. But if you've got to put something in your passport, it's tricky to come up with anything else.

**DM** Tell me about it. I've had to chuck a few passports away when I've trekked across various borders. When they see a camera or the word photographer ... Usually I know when to get lost when things are getting bad, but I've been attacked in the street in Beirut [for having a Falangist press pass]. I've had good kickings in African prisons. I got a terrific hiding when I was arrested [and imprisoned] in Uganda under Idi Amin. But luckily everybody was wearing rubber boots when they went for me. I'm amazed I've still got my teeth. I saw things in that prison that were just too terrible for words. In the evening they beat a man to death in our cell, just broke him to pieces. If you'd been in that prison I wonder whether your work wouldn't have taken an even darker, even deeper direction.

**MC** It might have done.

**DM** It would have been a first-hand experience.

**MC** Yes, for me and my generation it's all second-hand. We experience the gravity of the world only at a distance. But I can still respond to what I see and try to draw something from it.

**DM** There's a lot of moving depth in your images, a lot of intellectual journeying that there's not in mine. Mine are meant to stop you like that. You can go beyond where I end or even start. But you've got a much deeper message going on there somewhere.

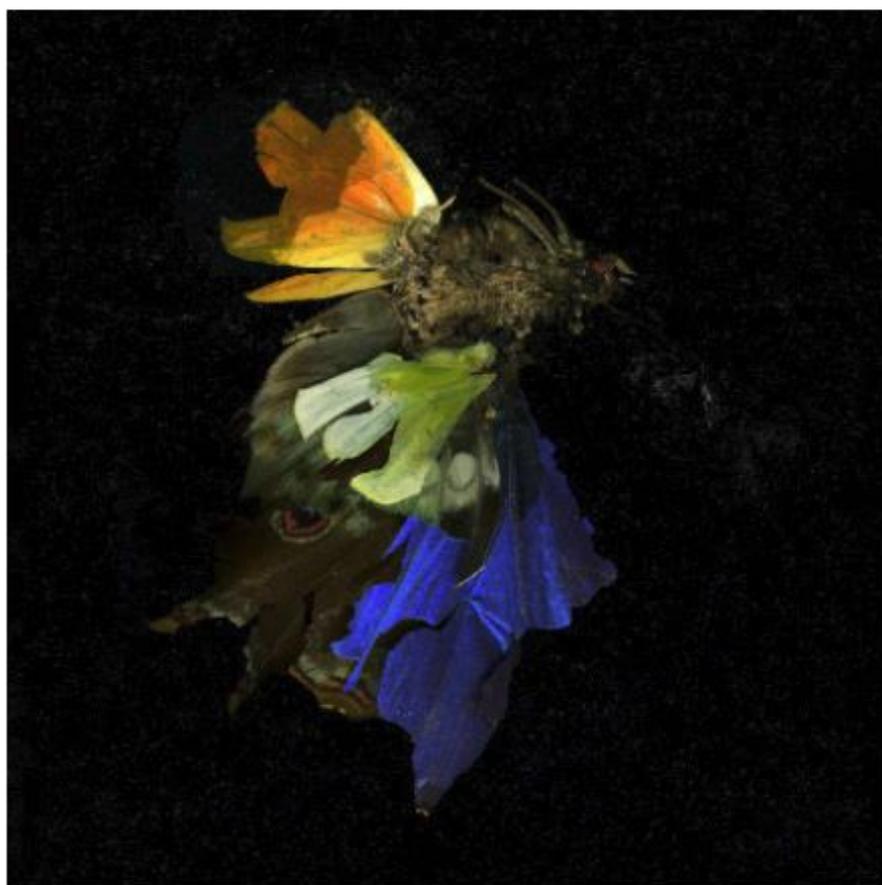
I've definitely never been an intellectual, but I am a very sensitive person, even though I came from a very hard background where you were expected to brawl in pubs as a young man. When I take a picture of pain and suffering, you look at it, and it's straightforward. You expect to see what you see. Whereas with your work, it goes into all sorts of knotted and difficult things. I am basically seeing into your brain when I'm looking at your work.

**MC** It's not a pretty sight particularly, my brain. I try and disguise what goes on in it a little bit, but I hope that when people are looking at [my work], they think: 'What is going on there?'

**DM** When I look at your work – you may not get away scot-free here – I see quite dark areas that make me feel you're working through some sort of problem. Maybe to do with what we've just been discussing. I can see in your work that it's not the sort of thing you just do. You don't just finish something and go and have a cup of tea. What you're doing is really deep, deep, deep.



Above: Mat Collishaw, *Single Nights 2*, portrait of a single mother from east London, 2007, C-type photographic print. Above right: *Insecticide 15*, C-type photographic print. Below: *Bullet Hole*, 1988, Cibachrome mounted on 15 lightboxes (2.44 x 3.66m)



Is it associated with some sort of personal struggle in your life, or are you interpreting how others are struggling?

**MC** I was brought up to be deeply moral. That's what my parents impressed on me. They were really quite religious, but not in a traditional sense. It was a small-house religion [they were Christadelphians]. So *The Bible* was really drummed into us. We read it for two hours every day, which, in retrospect, is quite a good thing. Most other children had *Tiswas*, whereas we had Nebuchadnezzar, the Assyrian king, who went mental and crawled around in a cave for seven years, eating grass and sporting dreadlocks and fingernails like a bird's claws. We didn't go to assembly at school. We didn't celebrate Christmas. It sets you apart from the other kids.

That makes it sound worse than it was, though, because when you're growing up you just assume your life is normal; you don't see it as different if it's all you know. But it possibly gave me a slightly altered perspective on things. I can't help seeing the world in a very moral way, and it's important to me that my work has some kind of moral content, even if it's only just niggling people in a way, saying, 'What about this?' Showing them that there's a certain sadism or cruelty in people's enjoyment of seeing other people suffer in images and on screen.

**DM** I don't think human beings have ever been

in such a critical place as we are now. In that respect, I think I've failed in what I've tried to do. Did you ever think you'd see videos of people on beaches being beheaded; 20 men, all in one go? If I haven't persuaded people to understand what's right and wrong with humanity then I've obviously failed. I've lost. There is so much information being thrown at us, even if a lot of it is just throwaway. Look at the way people are getting into pornography. Though I haven't watched any pornography.

**MC** That's quite an admission.

**DM** The last time I saw something pornographic was about 25 years ago. A mate of mine rented a cottage over near Bath. I'm not going to tell you who he is. And he had some technician bring in some satellite thing that picked up something from Holland.

**MC** It was hardcore, I imagine.

**DM** I suppose they call it hardcore, but you know, I looked at it and I thought, 'I can't get hooked on this.' I love women and I love beauty. I think I'm reasonably balanced despite all the scars of war. It would be so easy for me to dwell on all those years of pain and suffering and burnt children. But look [he indicates the bucolic view across the valley from his home in rural Somerset], I have this every day to look at. That helps a lot.

**MC** Going back to the war images you're best known for, were you aware of painters like Goya before you took them? The way of crystallising that moment between life and death: I can see it in Goya's work and in yours. It's almost as if you intuitively



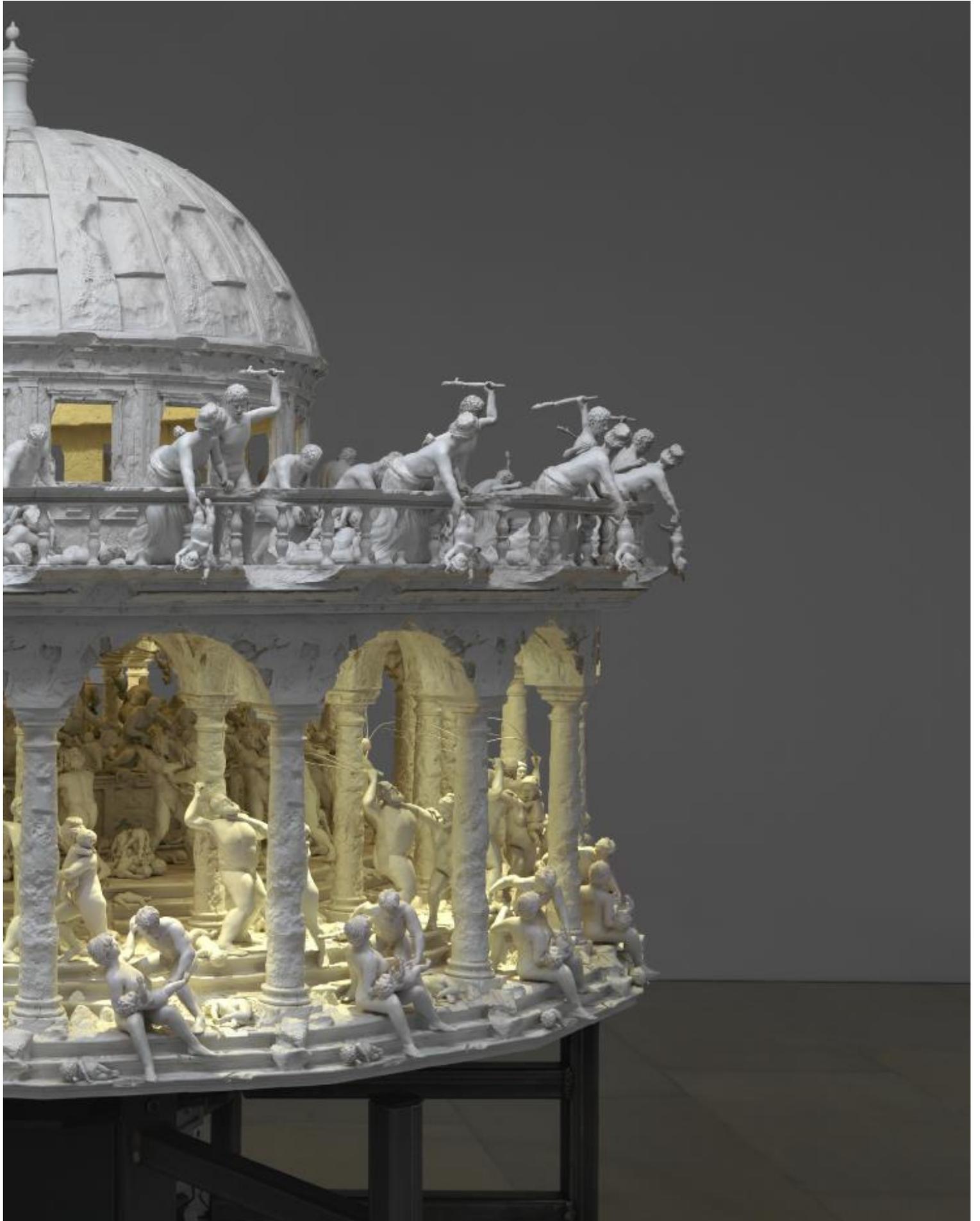
Above: Don McCullin, *The Roman Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria*, 2007, platinum print. 'I fell over in the temple,' says McCullin, 'and broke my rib and collapsed my lung, and I had to work for two or three days with one lung. This was taken from my hotel bedroom window. It's of the funeral area. You go to these great places, and you know that they're only there by the suffering of others. You know that the people who worked in the stone quarries died, and they were beaten all the time. I think the Romans were quite capable of being like the SS. 'I don't think you'll be able to go to that part of the world for another 20 years. But Isis won't destroy it. They're like the Khmer Rouge when they dug into Angkor Wat knowing it wouldn't be bombed. Nobody's going to bomb Palmyra'

Right: *Aphrodite*, found in the Hadrianic Baths of Leptis Magna and now in the Castle Museum, Tripoli, Libya, 2009, platinum print. 'I love Roman things. And this is the picture I love the most, one of my favourite pictures that I've done in my life. I've got an obsession with these statues now. I want to do more of them. There's not much to it, but it says a lot, that torso, about beauty and dignity. It makes me think of the man who made it, and what might have happened to it since. It was given by Mussolini to Goering during the war, though after it was over, it was returned to the museum in Tripoli. The idea that Mussolini could help himself to one of the great works of art in the world is incredible'



*All Things Fall*, 2014,  
a zoetrope based on  
*The Massacre of the  
Innocents*, c1557, by  
Ippolito Scarsella, a  
painting that Collishaw  
has said "thrive[s] on the  
repetition of characters  
spread across the canvas  
[...] designed to excite  
our emotions and  
keep our eyes moving  
around the surface in an  
agitated manner without  
intimacy or focal point.  
[In action] the zoetrope  
capitalises on this,  
repeating characters to  
create an overwhelming  
orgy of violence that is  
simultaneously appalling  
and compelling"



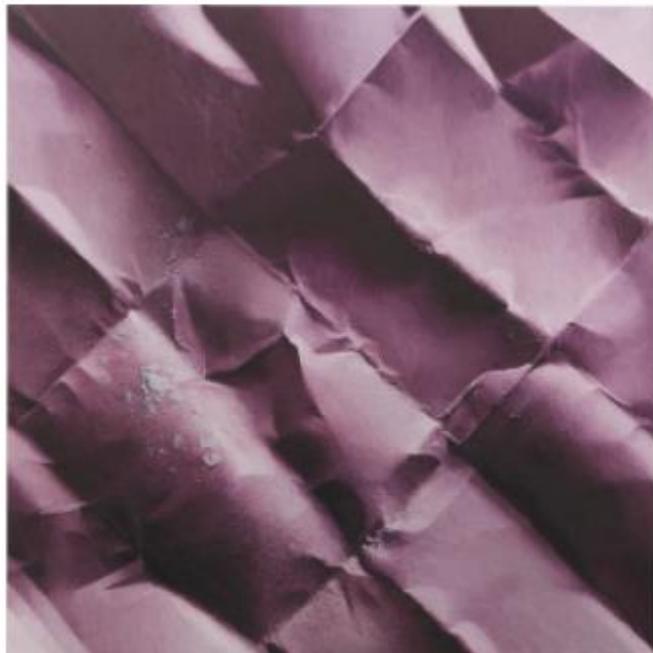




**Left:** Mat Collishaw, *Last Meal, Texas: Paul Nuncio*, 2011, C-type photograph, one of a series of 13 still lifes of meals consumed by prisoners on death row. Nuncio, a convicted murderer, was executed by lethal injection. **Right:** *Elysium*, 2012, oil on canvas, 2.3 x 2.3m. 'These paintings are paintings of nothingness,' says Collishaw of the paintings he made in response to the banking crisis. 'The cocaine is all gone except for the last few crumbs. But at the same time, you are in fact looking at something: a bit of creased paper, torn from *Vanity Fair* or some other magazine, which has been debased. It has become an empty receptacle. So in a sense you are looking at the presence of an absence.' **Opposite:** *Black Mirror, Hydrus*, 2014, after Caravaggio's *David with the Head of Goliath*, black Murano glass, surveillance mirror, steel wool, lacquer ultra-HD screen and hard drive

**'It's important to me that my work has some kind of moral content'**

MAT COLLISHAW



English dialects. There must be 50 of them. I spent years on the *Observer* just doing little domestic stories, so I've been to every small town in England.

**MC** I'm doing two shows this autumn, one in Walsall and one at the Library of Birmingham. They've got one of the biggest photographic archives in the country. I found this seedy little brown cardboard box with no label containing shots of crime scenes: places where crimes had taken place, not the actual crimes, so it's not like Weegee, where you have bodies everywhere.

I'm printing them in phosphorescent ink on to clear acrylic so that when you hit it with a flash of light it glows in the dark and then fades over about 15 seconds till it's become totally invisible. I am interested in the origins of photography, in the magic and the presence of those images.

**DM** And the chemistry, the science of it.

**MC** The fact that it's almost organic, almost alive.

**DM** Do you do all your own printing?

**MC** No, I used to print a lot but I'm colour-blind.

**DM** I'm colour-blind too.

**MC** And when I started doing colour printing, it didn't really take off, so I quit the darkroom.

**DM** I did a lot of colour for the *Sunday Times*,

I just don't have any interest in it. But the darkroom is an amazing place because you bring focus not only to what you're looking at but to yourself as a human being. You're alone in there; you really analyse yourself. The red light makes it feel like a natural womb-kind of feeling place.

There's no end to how far you can take the depth of your thinking.

**MC** It is such an exciting place. I was in there about six weeks ago, doing a project for the BBC about the TS Eliot poem 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock', and made a little film of me developing images that pop up in the poem then disappear to be replaced by the next image.

It's like you're in a subterranean environment. You could be in a cave somewhere because it's dark, there's water dripping in the tanks, and then you've got these images being projected, so you've got some light coming in, and they're things that are already in your head because you remember taking them, and they're reappearing as you're printing them, so you're experiencing all that again.

**DM** I'm now doing platinum prints with platinum dust that you buy in a bottle – it comes from Arizona. I hope you'll agree they really border on works of art. They look like engravings. They're really quite beautiful.

How do you cope without a darkroom?

**MC** I'm afraid I do a lot of it on the computer with Photoshop.

**DM** So you've taken a big step in that direction.

Does that make you feel uncomfortable? Do you ever think: 'I wish I could go into a darkroom?' Is it that you haven't the time or space? Or doesn't it bother you?

**MC** But a computer is an amazing toy to have. It's what I was waiting for because everything's there in this little paintbox. In my childhood, I sketched, I had colouring books, I built little theatres out of Weetabix boxes, just creating a world somewhere. With Photoshop, you can put pictures in there and manipulate them in any way you want. OK, so they might lose their truth in the way they represent the world...

**DM** But why should they lose their truth? It was your statement, and you seem a reasonably truthful person: why would they lose their truth? Just because you're sitting down, doing it in daylight? I'm very dogmatic about photography – believe me, I can be very boring about it. But at the end of the day, if the work is good then once you've arrived at what you've created, it shouldn't matter how you got there.

● 'Mat Collishaw', the New Art Gallery, Walsall, West Midlands, 25 September to 10 January 2016, [thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk](http://thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk), and at the Library of Birmingham, 18 September to 3 January 2016, [libraryofbirmingham.com](http://libraryofbirmingham.com).

Both exhibitions free to all  
'Don McCullin: The New Definitive Edition', containing 40 new unpublished photographs, is published by Jonathan Cape on 8 October, £50



PHOTO