

Beyond Here Lies Nothing
Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Rachel Campbell-Johnston: Mat, you've been an artist for almost 25 years now and in that time you have created some pretty eye-stretching images. Where do you think your fascination with the forbidden, with vice and perversion comes from?

Mat Collishaw: Well, I don't really see it that way ... which might be naïve of me. When I first came to London in the mid-1980s, the Conceptual/Minimalist work on show at places like the Lisson gallery felt strangely remote to me. It was an esoteric world that a lot of people I knew didn't have access to. I actually enjoyed experiencing it but felt slightly disengaged from it, like studying a fossil rather than the raw material. The sort of images that seemed to me to have real potency were the ones that my friends were looking at, in medical pathology journals or weird pornographic publications. It was this type of imagery that I felt should be in my art.

RCJ: Growing up in Nottingham, did you visit museums? Were you taught about art?

MC: No. My parents are Christadelphians, a small protestant splinter group, so life was geared towards following the text of the Bible. We would read the Bible for a couple of hours every night and then Sundays would be a full day at church. Christadelphians seemed to me, as a child, to disapprove of pretty much everything I wanted to do, from watching television to wearing flares. Maybe that's why I became fascinated by the forbidden; when seen by a little boy with his nose pressed to the window, even Bruce Forsyth can accrue a special aura. I would peep through neighbours' curtains and watch him dancing on the TV in the corner and it would feel like his spirit was trapped in that little glowing box. Afterwards, I would spend hours making my own TV sets out of Weetabix boxes.

RCJ: So you went from this strict upbringing to Nottingham Trent Polytechnic and then Goldsmiths Art College [London], where you found yourself working alongside students such as Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Michael Landy and Gillian Wearing. Did you feel at the time that you were part of a gang? Did you feel a current of thought gathering pace?

MC: A lot of the students there, like me, had hardly applied themselves to formal education before this. They were misfits and dropouts and that generated a good communal attitude. The teaching was very hands off; no one came along and said 'I think you should be using a little more purple on that one'. You had to be incredibly self-motivated. All those odd characters, all with such strength of personality. I don't think I realised how special it was to have them all there in that little window of three to four years.

RCJ: With hindsight did you see yourself as part of a "movement"; did you see yourself as a YBA?

MC: No - because we all were (and still are) so different. I suppose it was inevitable that people would start packaging us all together but at *Sensation* [Royal Academy, London, 1997], which came ten years after *Freeze* [Surrey Docks, London, 1988], I looked around and thought 'What?! Is this supposed to be a movement? Because to me it looks all over the place!'

RCJ: Your work made an impact though –quite literally. Bullet Hole[page 22], which you first showed at Freeze and then again (although it had to be remade in between) at Sensation, was bought by Saatchi. It has become, in a way, your signature piece.

MC: Yes, but it felt like a damp squib to me at the time. So when *Sensation* came along I wasn't so interested in people's responses to attention-grabbing art. I didn't want to elicit some infantile tabloid response.

RCJ: And when Julian Stallabrass called you the nastiest of the YBAs were you upset?

MC: At least it was a superlative! But, actually that comment was a bit below the belt. I don't create 'nasty' art for the sake of it. Although I think the world can be a glorious place, there are also a lot of ugly, malevolent forces at work and it's only right that there should be a balance of this in my art. There is beauty in some of the things I do but there's also a dark side because that's the way I see the world. On the surface, I want my images to shock or seduce, but I want there to be undercurrents that make people wonder about other implications.

RCJ: So you are interested in working in that peculiar force-field that exists between repulsion and seduction?

MC: Exactly. I've made images of flowers with infectious diseases, for example; irises and roses which, from a distance, look beautiful but when you get up close you can see that they have syphilis pustules and suppurating wounds on their petals. The idea came from a number of sources, among them Jean Genet's *Thief's Journal*, which I was reading at the time. In prison, many of Genet's lovers were covered in scabs, sores and wounds, but instead of being horrified by them he saw them as emblems of achievement - marks worn like medals. I thought this was such an unexpected way of presenting something which most people would only view with disgust. Huysman's *Against Nature* or Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* are similar; there is a sickness about the obsessions they show, about the descent of the mind into decadence. But it's not a horrific or appalling sickness - it's more a fascination with darkness, which I think is actually quite healthy. There is an exquisite, sexy pleasure in that darkness, in revelling in such magnetic horror.

RCJ: You often allude to art historical images. You have made works that draw directly from the Bible or classical myth; specifically I am thinking of your picture of Ganymede being snatched by an eagle, which you projected onto smoke that billowed out of a church font, or a film of yourself projected, breathing and blinking, onto a cross. How consciously are you looking at the art of the past?

MC: A lot of the time I am working on an intuitive level. I sense that there is something interesting about an image but I don't know what it is, so I have to go back, look and try to find out. And often, I discover it's something to do with religion or myth. Myths and religious icons have survived because they have a peculiar potency - their message is universal; the cross is a symbol of transcendence, depicted through an image of suffering, which ultimately becomes a means of finding solace. There is something cathartic about it, but it's also a simple graphic symbol. If Christ had been put on the rack it wouldn't have worked so well, as an image it wouldn't have stood the test of time. If he'd had a graphic designer he would have advised him: "You've got to go with the cross".

With *Ganymede* [page 132] I was trying to make something specifically to do with abducted children; the myth of Zeus coming down in the form of an eagle to snatch away this beautiful boy seemed to reflect this. To project this pagan image of abduction onto the smoke that rose from a font - the Christian instrument of induction - was intended to stir the sort of mismatched emotions that interest me.

RCJ: Images of children recur again and again in your work; from your photographs based on the Edwardian scandal of the faked Cottingley fairies (1917), through to images of the Beslan school siege (2004) in which gunmen took children hostage. Why is that?

MC: I try to disguise my liberal nature, but generally my work is trying to flag up the dispossessed and disenfranchised; drunks, prostitutes or homeless kids. I want to give a voice to them but not in a whingeing, heart-on-sleeve way. I would rather run the risk of being considered exploitative or nasty than being just a bleeding-heart-liberal, banging on about a cause that nobody but the converted would be receptive to. You have to come out aggressively to actually make someone feel the pathos of a certain situation.

RCJ: So you don't think your luridly fascinating images are exploitative - that shock is just a short cut to fame? You genuinely want to make people feel the humanity of your subject?

MC: Whether they seem on the surface like enticing bits of eye-candy or pieces of hard core pornography, my images always work in much the same way; the impact is instant, but there's a twist to make you think. *Deliverance*,

[page 136-139] for example, was inspired by the Beslan school siege, and ultimately questions the morality of the media.

We get a thrill when we see disasters unfolding in the newspapers or on TV; experiencing these situations vicariously stimulates adrenaline, making us feel more alive, and the media harnesses this biological response. At the time of the school siege, the reporters had three days to get down there with TV vans and cameras. There was an audience waiting at home to see what was happening moment by moment. Live. Occasionally one of the children would break free and run from the barrel of the kidnapper's gun straight down the lens of a camera. That image would immediately be relayed back to our front rooms, feeding our craving for stimulating visuals. This is something that we have become addicted to, and I wanted to create a work which would make people reflect on that.

RCJ: And finally, you are mainly known as an artist who works with photography and video. But in your latest work your chosen medium is paint. Why?

MC: Because you can't just paint – you have to address the whole history of painting and then make some sort of paradigm shift. I've been trying to find a way to do this, and creating these paintings was my solution. On first impression, some appear to be abstract monochromes or Pop Art paintings, but on closer inspection they are revealed to be *trompe l'oeil* representations of scraps of paper - pages torn out of magazines - that have been used as cocaine wraps. The geometry of the creases recognisable to anyone who has ever bought illegal drugs.

They are intended as metaphors for the end of a prolonged societal binge and the debased side of human nature that will pursue something to the very end. The current financial black hole is a symptom of this; we live on credit, which is like living based on an illusion, which is itself similar to the experience of drug-taking. Ultimately, I think that we are easy victims when it comes to being beguiled or deceived by images. This is what happened in the case of the Cottingley fairies; Conan Doyle wanted to believe in them - he needed to trust in there being something more than we already have.

These paintings are depictions of nothingness; the wraps are empty - 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 aspirational magazine, which has been debased. It has become an empty receptacle. In a sense, you are looking at the presence of an absence.

Hopefully, my latest paintings won't be so different to everything else I've created, despite the change in medium. They are still about the human condition, which is at the core of my entire practice. This might sound like a huge generalisation, but in the end, isn't that all we've got?

beyond here lies nothing but chillness, hostility, frozen
waves of an ice-hard sea.

Ovid (43 BC – 17/18 AD): Extract from Poems from Exile

Rachel Campbell-Johnston is the Chief Art Critic of The Times Newspaper.

ENDS

Bruce Forsyth is an English TV host and entertainer who became famous for TV series such as *The Generation Game* and *The Price is Right*.

Arthur Conan Doyle was a Scottish writer and physician most noted for writing *Sherlock Holmes*.