

# CHRISTIE'S

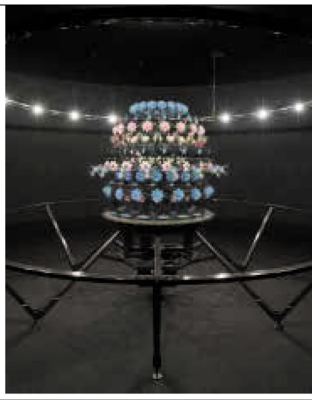
‘...Collishaw has form when it comes to allusions to Old Masters. In his series *Single Nights* (2007), affecting portraits of single mothers and their babies are composed and illuminated like Georges de La Tour’s candlelit Magdalenes. In *Whispering Weeds* (2011), Albrecht Dürer’s 1503 watercolour *The Great Piece of Turf* is brought compellingly yet almost imperceptibly to life on an LCD screen. And *Last Meal on Death Row* (2011) consists of 13 still lifes of food arranged and lit to resemble Dutch vanitas paintings of the 17th century. One’s first response is to delight in their beauty; but these were the last meals requested by prisoners facing execution.’

— *Claire Wrathall*



## The light of other days

Mar Collishaw creates startlingly fresh views of art by looking back to the powers of photography and the painters of the past. By Claire Warburton



Mar Collishaw: *Children and a Cow* (2010). Collishaw's work is a mix of painting and photography. He often uses found objects and materials to create his art.

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\* see next page.

Mat Collishaw, *Children of a Lesser God*, 2007. Previous pages: left, detail of *The Centrifugal Soul*, 2016; right, the

artist in his studio. Following pages: left, work in progress at the studio; right, *The Centrifugal Soul*, 2016

In terms of scale and ambition, there is unlikely to be another exhibit at this year's Photo London to rival *Thresholds*, an epic virtual-reality installation by the British artist Mat Collishaw. He hopes it will conjure the same 'feelings of wonder as must have been inspired by [the first ever] photographs back when they were the forefront of technology'.

More than a collection of images, this is a project that, in Collishaw's words, 'will bring the past face-to-face with the present' by seeming to transport visitors back to the dank summer of 1839 and the exhibition at which the public first encountered a series of ghostly images of plants and lace by the British pioneer of the medium Henry Fox Talbot. In essence, the installation will consist of a large, 'fairly minimal white room', based on the hall of King Edward's School in Birmingham, the great neo-Gothic building designed by Charles Barry where the exhibition took place. 'It's a bit like the one the aliens on the distant planet have made at the end of 2001: *A Space Odyssey*,' he says. 'That was a Georgian room in the film, but it's Victorian in [Arthur C Clarke's] book.'

To the naked eye, the room will appear empty bar rows of blank, vitrine-shaped structures and a fireplace. But enter it wearing one of the headsets necessary to appreciate it fully, and you will find yourself in a 3D virtual reconstruction of the 1839 exhibition, which was organised by the British Association for the Advancement of Science to showcase technological innovations such as Fox Talbot's 'photogenic drawings'. (So that you don't bump into them, the other visitors will be discernible as spectral avatars.)

The experience won't just be about seeing, however. Put out a hand to touch the tops of the vitrines, and they will feel like glass (in fact, they'll be made from an aluminium composite called Dibond). Approach the fireplace, and as you get closer you'll hear the crackle of flames and feel its warmth, though you won't be able to see yourself in the overmantle mirror, only a reflection of the room, to reinforce the sense that 'you're a ghost from the future visiting the past'.

There will be sounds from what one perceives to be the outside, too, when the peace is disturbed by the Bull Ring Riots. These were protests by Chartists, largely working men who campaigned both for enfranchisement and against the deleterious effects of the Industrial Revolution on employment. So »

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Above, from the 1996 series *Catching Fairies*. Opposite, an untitled work in progress

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concerned had Fox Talbot been about these protests that he had considered cancelling the show.

'When I first started the project, I was reading about the implications of the digital revolution we're going through now and how terrifying it is,' says Collishaw. 'It was being compared with the Industrial Revolution, but the expectation is that the digital revolution is going to be a lot worse. It's taking jobs across the spectrum, and there'll be nothing to replace them. So there will be a widening gap between those who own the technology and make money out of it and people who can't get work and have nothing to do. Fox Talbot's invention of the negative,' he continues, 'enabled him to produce multiple positives, which became the catalyst for everything we know about photography and all the many new technologies it spawned, the latest being the 360-degree immersion that is virtual reality. VR may be entertaining, but it's also part of an acceleration of technology that we don't yet know the consequences of.'

Collishaw is both a deep thinker and an artist with a conscience. 'I was brought up to be deeply moral,' he says. 'That's what my parents impressed on me. So it's important for me that my work has some kind of moral content even if it's just nudging people, saying, "What about this?"'

Born in Nottingham in 1966, Collishaw trained at Goldsmiths in London in the late 1980s, one of the fabled cohort of artists that became known as the YBAs (there are works by his friends Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin on the walls of his living room). He had an unconventional youth. 'My parents were really quite religious, and not in a traditional sense. We didn't celebrate Christmas. We didn't go to assembly at school. We didn't have a television. [Instead] we read the Bible for two hours every day. Where most other children had *Tiswas*, we had Nebuchadnezzar, the Assyrian king who went mad and lived in a cave for seven years. And that gives you a slightly different perspective on things. A lot of the Bible is quite boring when you're a child. But once you get past the language, there are great stories that were designed to engage people. Whereas *Tiswas* was basically rubbish.'

He doesn't regret it. 'When you're growing up you always think your life is normal; you don't see it as different if it's all you know. You don't know what you're missing.' So in retrospect, 'It was quite a good thing.' He remains close to his parents. His father, a keen amateur photographer, assisted in the creation of some of his early works, notably *Catching Fairies* (1996), a series inspired by the Cortingley Fairies hoax, photographs taken in 1917 by two young girls in Yorkshire that Arthur Conan Doyle believed were evidence of paranormal phenomena.

Collishaw has long been interested in the development of photography, the medium in which he tends to work. So it's a surprise to find on the back wall of his south London studio a series of colourful, meticulously detailed, lifesize oil paintings of English garden birds that he has made for a second exhibition of his work to be held in London this spring.

'We get a lot of birds in the garden,' he says, 'because Polly [Morgan, the taxidermy artist with »

Courtesy the artist and Blain Southern





Opposite, Collishaw with his son Cliff. Previous pages: left, *Single Nights*, Naima, 2007; right, *Last Meal on Death Row*, Texas (Paul Nuncio), 2011

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whom he lives, along with their infant son] puts lots of seed out, so they're always there twittering away in the morning. It's quite sad to see them here in the city.' Hence his decision to render them 'quite huddled and scrunched up, because they inspire more empathy when they look a bit cold and uncomfortable'.

At first, he 'struggled to find a background to paint them against. I wanted them to look urban and out of their natural environment', but greyness and concrete seemed too obvious. 'And then I thought graffiti might be interesting because it's not so dissimilar to their liveries, so their plumage becomes almost like camouflage again.'

Painting graffiti presented its own challenges. 'I didn't want to do anything that might be seen as street art. But graffiti is almost like cave painting. It's a very primal thing, tagging, making your mark. Yet to get it to work I had to be so meticulous. Sometimes you can be rewarded by the minimal effort you put into something. Look at [John Singer] Sargent. You can see the brushwork. If you stand close you can really see the way the paint has been worked. The problem for me was that I just couldn't get the graffiti to look like graffiti by doing a few strokes. But I quite enjoy the fact that something that took a kid on the street less than a second took me weeks of close observation to get right.'

In each of the 12 paintings, the bird is tethered to a perch by a chain, exactly like the one in Carel Fabritius's 1654 masterpiece *The Goldfinch*. But then Collishaw has form when it comes to allusions to Old Masters. In his series *Single Nights* (2007), affecting portraits of single mothers and their babies are composed and illuminated like Georges de La Tour's candlelit Magdalenes. In *Whispering Weeds* (2011), Albrecht Dürer's 1503 watercolour *The Great Piece of Turf* is brought compellingly yet almost imperceptibly to life on an LCD screen. And *Last Meal on Death Row* (2011) consists of 13 still lifes of food arranged and lit to resemble Dutch vanitas paintings of the 17th century. One's first response is to delight in their beauty; but these were the last meals requested by prisoners facing execution. An exquisitely lit wine bottle and glass goblet, printed on goatskin parchment and framed in lacquered Red Grandis timber, evokes a kind of horror when you learn that it represents the half-bottle of Carmel, a kosher wine from a vineyard established by Baron Edmond de Rothschild (who also owned Château Lafite), that was consumed by Adolf Eichmann before he was hanged in Israel in 1962. Memento mori indeed.

The most obvious borrowing from Fabritius's little trompe l'oeil painting is the perch, which Collishaw has copied in minute detail having scanned it and then used 3D computer modelling to plot the precise fall of the shadow in order to

be able to recreate it exactly. Whether it actually succeeds in fooling the eye is a moot point, but Collishaw also plays tricks with the viewer's perception and creates illusions using 19th-century techniques in other works he has made in recent years. Among them is the zoetrope sculpture *All Things Fall* (2014), first shown at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, which is a savage 3D evocation of the 16th-century painter Ippolito Scarsella's *Massacre of the Innocents*; and another baroque fantasy, *Seria Ludo* (2015), made for the Banqueting House at the National Trust's Studley Royal Water Garden in Yorkshire.

Showing alongside the bird paintings at Blain Southern in London this spring will be a new zoetrope, *The Centrifugal Soul* (the title comes from an essay by the evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller in his book *Spent: Sex, Evolution and Consumer Behaviour*), 'which is basically about the way that, from cave paintings to Instagram, people seem conditioned to want to promote themselves to the world to some degree'.

In this instance, he has created 'a spinning hive of activity' in which exotically plumaged humming birds and bower birds surrounded by flowers are caught in an apparently endless 'act of courtship and trying to seduce female birds by waving their feathers about and their dances'. When the work is stationary, you can see that every bird has been modelled 18 times, each figure subtly altered in order that it should seem to move when the work is strobe-lit and in motion. 'But because zoetropes are so repetitive, there's a slightly sinister side to it, as though the birds have been programmed into this behaviour. So from being a beautiful gesture it becomes mechanical and desperate.'

The third installation in the show plays on another Victorian optical illusion, 'Pepper's Ghost', and shows a subtly shifting spectral image of the Major Oak, the thousand-year-old tree said to have sheltered Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest. 'Because of the myth of Robin Hood and the tourist industry, it has been kept alive way beyond its natural life, so there are chains holding the branches together and it's all supported by these steel staves. It's so old and desolate and looks as though it just wants to die a dignified death, but we're not letting it because the myth has become more important than the tree itself. It's a metaphor for the whole Brexit-driven idea of the UK, a place that probably never really existed, and our determination to believe more in the image of something, in the myth of it, than in the truth.' Which, if you think about it, is really just another state of virtual reality. • *'The Centrifugal Soul' is at Blain Southern, London W1, 7 April-27 May. 'Thresholds' launches at Photo London and will be on view at Somerset House, 18 May-11 June. www.blainsouthern.com. photolondon.org*

