HIS DARK MATERIALS

Artist Mat Collishaw has never shied away from difficult questions about life, death and society's ills – and now he has turned his critical gaze on our growing addiction to social media. Claire Wrathall meets the former YBA whose work will be exhibited at The Lanesborough in 2020. Portrait by Jorge Monedero

Sitting in the sunny, book-lined office above his studio, once the bar of a handsome Victorian pub in a suburb of South London, the artist Mat Collishaw is talking about the work of BF Skinner (1904-1990), the American psychologist and behaviourist who experimented with rats and pigeons.

"When they pecked certain buttons, they got food," he explains. But when Skinner introduced "variable" rewards, and the animals could no longer figure out what they needed to do to generate food, "they became completely addicted to tapping the button. Something strange happens when you don't know whether you're going to get a reward or not; you become addicted to trying. It's the same psychology they use in gambling, in slot machines and in the interfaces and architecture behind Instagram and Twitter and even email. The not-knowing is what keeps you locked in, so the spectre of Skinner's experiments lives on today in everybody's iPhones. I think there's something chilling about that, about how suggestible we are and how predetermined it all is."

Skinner's research is also the inspiration for a new installation, *The Machine Zone*, which will go on show at London's Somerset House this autumn: a room filled with six boxes each housing "a cute little" animatronic skeletal bird, "a kind of machine-animal hybrid peck, peck, pecking away. And then on the wall, we'll have photographs of expired pigeons" based on those in 17th- and 18th-century old-master paintings.

"I like to reference art history," Collishaw says, though equally there are few conceptual artists whose work embraces leading-edge technology quite like his. Think of the epic, highly complex virtual-reality installation *Thresholds*, first seen at Photo London in 2017. Or his zoetrope sculptures – works such as *All Things Fall*, first shown at the Galleria Borghese in Rome, a moving 3D evocation of the 16th-century painter

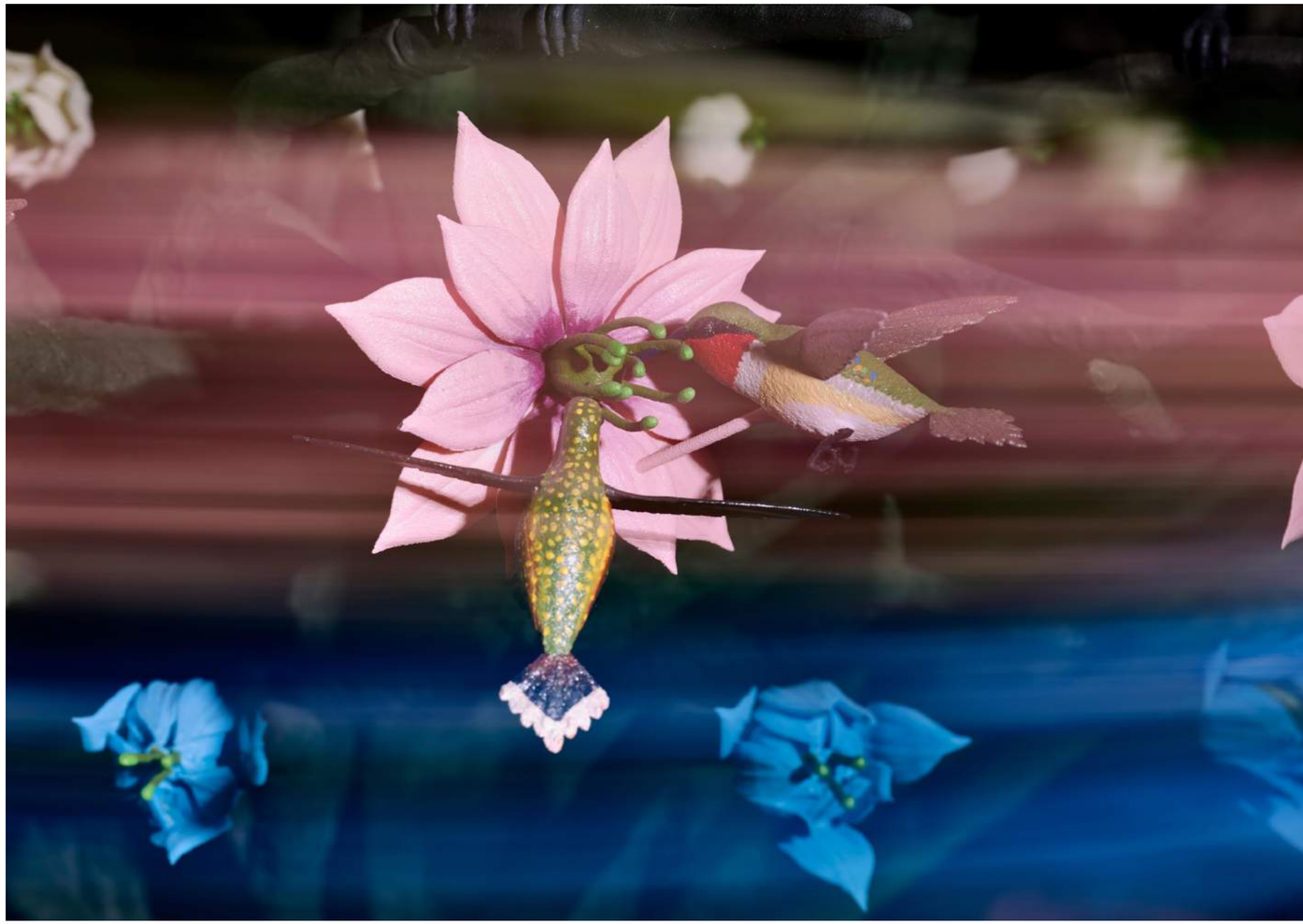
Previous pages: artist Mat Collishaw in his studio, a converted South London pub

Right: The Centrifugal Soul *(detail), 2016, a zoetrope installation that features bowerbirds and birds of paradise as they perform mating rituals*

Below: All Things Fall, *2014 is another zoetrope, this time referencing Scarsella's 1610 painting,* The Massacre of the Innocents

Overleaf: Albion, *2017, takes as its subject the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest*

LEFT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLAIN|SOUTHERN (PHOTO: TODD WHITE). RIGHT AND OVERLEAF: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BLAIN|SOUTHERN (PHOTO: PETER MALLET)



Ippolito Scarsella's savage *Massacre of the Innocents*, involving hundreds of minutely calibrated 3D-printed figures.

Collishaw is both a deep thinker and an artist with a conscience, horrified by the "real-world consequences" of, among other things, our addiction to synthetic communication and its deleterious effect on mental health. To which end he is also working on a VR reconstruction of London's Bethlem Hospital, known as Bedlam, as it was at the start of the 17th century, "a hellish institution" that the public would visit "as a form of entertainment", goading and taunting the inmates.

"We look back and are appalled, but it's not that different to what we're doing now with [reality-TV programmes such as] *Love Island* and *The Jeremy Kyle Show*. The internet has given us a voyeuristic appetite for spectacle of the debasement of human behaviour and unprecedented access to it."

Collishaw, in contrast, was "brought up to be deeply moral. That's what my parents impressed on me. And it's important for me that my work has some kind of moral content, even

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if it's just nudging people" to think. Born in Nottingham in 1966 and trained at Goldsmiths, now part of the University of London, he was one of the fabled cohort of artists known as the YBAs (Young British Artists), but his childhood was an unconventional one. His parents are Christadelphians, a Christian sect founded in the 19th century, and "really quite religious but not in a traditional sense. We didn't celebrate Christmas. We didn't go to assembly at school. We didn't have a television. And the Bible was really drummed into us. We read it for two hours every day. That gives you a slightly different perspective on things, which in retrospect is quite a good thing. 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 [children's TV] was basically rubbish."

He has no regrets about his childhood and remains close to his parents, who have always been supportive of his art – and have just been looking after his young son while he and his partner, the taxidermy artist Polly Morgan, were away. Indeed his father, a keen amateur photographer, assisted in the creation of some of his early works, notably *Catching Fairies*, a series inspired by the Cottingley Fairies hoax, photographs taken in 1917 by two young girls in Yorkshire that even the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, was convinced were evidence of paranormal phenomena.

Collishaw first came to fame (or notoriety) when his work *Bullet Hole*, a massively blown-up photo of an ice-pick wound, displayed across 15 light-boxes, was exhibited at *Freeze* in 1988, the seminal group show organised by Damien Hirst (who phones Collishaw during our conversation). By the mid-1990s, however, as Elizabeth Fullerton puts it in *ArtRage!: the Story of the BritArt Revolution*, "having made seductive works about pornography, bestiality, rape and murder, Mat had tired of gore and horror". That said, for all the beauty in his latter work, a sense of abjection, an underlying horror and darkness, are often inherent. Look at a photograph from his *Insecticide* series, and you're struck first by the loveliness of the saturated colours, the delicacy of the patterns, the powdered gold. It takes a moment to realise that it's actually the massively enlarged remains of a moth at the point of death.

Exquisitely arranged and lit to resemble Dutch or Spanish vanitas or memento mori paintings of the 17th century, the foodstuffs in the photographs that comprise his *Last Meal on*

From top: Collishaw with (L-R) Thomas Heatherwick, Tracey Emin and Ron Arad at the 2017 Royal Academy summer party; with his wife, the artist Polly Morgan

GETTY IMAGES

Death Row, Texas series also pack a punch when you realise they're the final requests of prisoners facing execution, a tradition that "adds a civilised veneer to a barbaric act" in all US states with the death penalty except, now, Texas, which withdrew the custom in 2011. "A lot of people seem to choose comfort food," he says, "things that take them back to happier times. There's something poignant about that."

Occasionally his own suffering informs an image. "About 10 years ago, I thought I was dying," he tells me. A perforated stomach ulcer had haemorrhaged, "and suddenly I was aware how fragile life is." Recovering in hospital, he drew comfort from Albrecht Dürer's 1503 painting *The Great Piece of Turf* – a delicate yet densely detailed watercolour of wild grasses – both "from the fact that Dürer had given something seemingly insignificant so much attention", and by the actual plants... "Things that didn't need any nurturing at all, that grew despite everything else. They're a natural life force. And I thought: that's it. That's life. That's everything! Those little weeds represent life in all its glory and fortitude."

So Dürer's study of grasses became the basis of *Whispering Weeds*, an animated reinvention of the painting in which the grasses are caught by air currents – "I just wanted to breathe life into it, to bring it to life" – that exist both as a framed LCD screen (with hard drive and fan) and as a digital edition.

Nature also informs his series *Gasconades* – an 18th-century word for extravagant boastfulness – of life-size oil paintings and prints of English garden birds, each tethered to a perch, exactly like the one in Carel Fabritius's 1654 masterpiece *The Goldfinch*. Collishaw, though, had the advantage of 3D computer modelling, which he used to plot the position of each bird's shadow in order to perfect the composition.

"We get a lot of gorgeous birds," he says, drawn by the bird-feeder that hangs from the wisteria tree on the luxuriantly planted roof terrace beyond his office. "They're always there twittering away in the morning. It's quite sad to see them here in the city." At first he struggled, he says, "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 livery, so their plumage becomes almost like camouflage again." It proved a challenge to paint. "To make it 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. If you stand close you can 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."

The Lanesborough, in association with Blain|Southern, will exhibit work by Mat Collishaw in 2020. "24/7: A Wake-up Call for Our Non-Stop World", will be at Somerset House from 31 October to 23 February 2020 (somersethouse.org.uk)

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