

# Interviews

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# Artists

## Mat Collishaw

*Cv/VAR* We're sitting in your studio near Manor House, but you're moving to a new place; you've bought a pub?

MC. Well one of the problems I'm having here is it's not warm enough in the winter, it's impossible to get heat, so I'm moving to a pub, which has got quite cosy little rooms upstairs. The downstairs room is well insulated with panelling, it's got gas fires burning away so it should be really comfortable. This time next week I will be in another premises.

*Will it provide you with enough space?*

The pub floor has high ceilings, it's quite a large room anyway, and beneath that is a basement, which I hope to dig out. That will give me a large space as well, so I've got a place in the dark for projections and a little bit lighter space upstairs if I want to do any etchings or painting where you need natural light. I make a lot of stuff with fabricators anyway. I've got an industrial sized work on the roof of the V&A which was made at a place over in Hackney Wick.

*So this studio is used for shoots and..*

And general fabrication. All kinds

of work that go into pieces ranging from little figures in the zoetropes to huge projections onto antique pictures.

*I came away from the Hysteria exhibition at the Freud Museum<sup>1</sup> feeling a bit pixelated; you had one of your zoetropes there. That's a kind of mechanical automaton that came to life at timed intervals. Was that the first you made?*

No, the first one was called 'Throbbing Gristle', which was shown at the Haunch of Venison Gallery. Very, very difficult things to make. They're obviously an advanced form of the Victorian zoetropes, using the barrel with slits through which you view the action. You're looking at everything animated by a stroboscope, so the three dimensional figures are rotated, with a strobe fired at them. As a figure passes you it's revealed, as it moves away the room's plunged into darkness. Then the next figure get's into place it's illuminated by the light again. And on that principle you basically establish the way cinema operates - just a succession of slightly incremented frames.

*I'm reminded of the dawn of film, the very earliest moving pictures. So the*

*animation is governed by a programme and the strobe is where?*

The strobe in this one is all around the room, so you're looking at an object which is being revealed eighteen times every second. The rest of the time it's in darkness. So the second one I made is called 'The Garden of Unearthly Delights', shown in the Haunch of Venison Berlin. It's two meters across by two meters high. This was the same zoetrope I made in the Freud Museum, on a slightly larger scale with more characters in it. When the Freud Museum show came up I decided this would be appropriate, because of Anna Freud, who dealt with child development behaviour. I thought having some very wayward, malevolent children, carrying out beastly practices, would be quite a nice thing to have going on in her room.

*The fabrication of the figures, how are they made?*

We design them all on the computer. First is a little character that you put together; arms, legs, everything, get the right proportions. Then we animate them on the computer so we have one second's worth of movement.

For example an imp stabbing a snail in the neck - one little movement. Then they're broken down into eighteen different frames, about one second of animation. First of all his right arm is high and coming down, the stake's going into the snail. Then those eighteen different frames are then sent to a printer and they're printed in 3-D. But instead of printing on paper you are printing in resin. If you imagine a tube of toothpaste gradually squirting layers of resin, which is hardening as it comes out, and that builds up until you've got a three dimensional figure. It's pretty new and it's accelerating quite quickly. You can see the little ridges there where the resin's been built up.

*The resolution is great.*

Yes, you can get higher than this. It's a very expensive thing to do; rather than give it to a fabrication company in the North of England to do, it was actually cheaper to buy one of these machines.

*Does this technology come out of the gift trade?*

I think it's from manufacture design of functional parts of equipment, things like cogs, things that have to be accurate to



Mat Collishaw *Insecticide 13*, 2009

C-type photo on Dibond

182.9 x 182.9 cm 72 x 72 inches

Image courtesy of the artist and Blain | Southern

one hundredth of a millimeter. There is a company in America we were talking about making our figures with, because they were reasonably priced. Then it turned out their machines were busy building another larger machine of the same type.

*The self replicating machine?*

Yes, very strange. So they're used for printing cogs and bolts and screws.

*I came away from 'The Magic Lantern' at the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>2</sup> with a very stimulated, upbeat feeling, it really gets you. What's in your mind when you*

*orchestrate these animations? You made a caveat in the film of the project at the V&A, about people not being instantly bowled over by this. There's a critical aspect to this?*

I've usually got a list of different subjects that I want to work with, the I've got a list of different techniques I've discovered, and I try to marry the two of them together. Sometimes the subject comes first; for example I want to make a work about people fleeing a disaster area, where there is natural or man-made damage, but more about the media exploitation, given that kind of anxiety, and the way that, I think, we are stimulated by that material. I've been developing a technique where I project onto phosphorescent, glow in the dark material. You expose light to this paint, turn the light off and the paint glows. It absorbs the light energy and then releases it slowly. And I discovered that, if you project an image onto it, you will leave a ghost image on the wall, when the projector's turned off. I originally developed this method for the tableau of Victorian child prostitutes, images that I found. They were all kids between the age of eight and

twelve years old, some of them pregnant; genuine old images – very, very haunting. I felt it would be very crass to take the images from the book and just print them up. Because they have a very beautiful quality to them, and a very simple graphic style, I didn't want to abuse that, they'd been abused enough. I wanted to do something that was very ephemeral and haunting. Basically I'm looking for something that presents an image on quite a large scale and then is intangible in some way, it's slipping away from you.

The projectors I used on this are like ones for rock concerts and stage shows. They're called moving heads, projecting little images controlled by computers; whizzes around, projects it somewhere else, it's a very automated process. So I can burn these images on the wall, project another, burn it on the wall. The ghosts all linger around the room, fading on and off at different times.

*Ok, it's mobile, but is there a fixed result, a residue from all this?*

No, it's constantly changing, transient. So this figure here will appear and then this one comes

on while the one on the left is fading.

*Even looking at this print it's very powerful. It's like lost voices.*

It's very difficult to document this kind of thing. You're in a hall of ghosts. I had projectors scanning across this wall and one flashing from here, giving a trail of light which looked a little bit like a shooting star. I made the Deliverance exhibition because I couldn't initially do the child one. A gallery in New York said they couldn't do it because they might be closed down.

*Galleries can be so cautious.*

It's not being exploitative, I don't think. I showed it in Derry last year and there was a huge argument after the opening. People were saying whether you can or you can't do this kind of thing, which is good because it engages people.

*But pretty unbelievable when you're using such old documents.*

Deliverance used an updated version of the same technique. Rather than having trails of light across the wall I had a very staccato flashing light which is similar to machine gun fire, explosions and the flash of a camera with a motor wind. Where you're in a

very disorientated environment. It's recreating that environment but also capturing those images with the flash going off.

*Have you had anybody crack up on the floor?*

No, we always have warnings, but I was a bit worried about the Victoria and Albert Museum, because there's nowhere specific to put the warnings for epilepsy.

*The Magic Lantern at the V&A. It's right up in the cupola and is about ten feet span?*

It's ten meters' span, about thirty feet across.

*In this big wheel you've enlarged the butterflies as metal screens that whiz around shot by flashing strobes. What did the V&A want from you, what was their intention?*

They wanted to highlight the museum as being a beacon of culture, knowledge and understanding. And they wanted to do that in terms of new media, which a zoetrope isn't, but a 3-D animation is. I could have done a laser projection, which would have been a lot easier, probably a lot more visually overpowering. This one was more discreet, but it bridged the period between now and the Victorian times by utilizing

this Victorian technology which is essentially mechanical; a bicycle wheel on a motor, with three dimensional objects around it.

*Indeed the smaller model in the John Madejski Garden at the V&A was very gothic looking.*

I needed some exterior casing to protect it from the light. Ideally they should be in total darkness. It's a technique of using black glass which is opaque until you place a light behind it. For the case I just replicated the top of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

*It was hoisted up through the centre, which is logistically mind-boggling.*

Yes, it was a nightmare. We had a winch which was strapped on to an old winch they had up there a hundred years ago. There's only little windows where you can do it because the V&A has functions every night: if it's not weddings it's book launches. So we had three or four hours on one particular night, between ten in the evening and three in the morning. But it got up there and all got done.

*Turning to Puck and Oberon, the Midsummer's Night Dream, and Insect Life. Is this evidence of Nature a constant in your work?*

This is around 1995, this photograph is called 'Catching Fairies.' The Puck and Oberon was originally done for a fashion shoot. It's *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Shakespeare, but also drawing on Victorian fantasy paintings where you have these delightful little scenes carrying on, after the sun goes down.

*They're enchanting. Can we talk through this image, which is a flattened moth wing, and set it in context?*

I started doing them originally when my son was born, because we had to dry clean the flat, to make sure there were no bugs around. And I started squashing them between little 35mm slides. I projected them on the wall, to ten or twelve feet high. Some of them had not quite died yet, so there was a daddy long legs wriggling. The leg was like seven feet long, really quite powerful. You could see microscopic detail in there, where the body had been punctured and fluid oozed out. And when you got a nice little squash there they were very dynamic images. Then you could print that; take a little slide down to the laser printers on the corner,

slip it in their machine and they'd print it. It seemed to me this was a very simple example of the photograph being an act of death: *petit morte*. This was that thing in the moment it was killed. And being taken from the three dimensional world that it lived in to being physically squashed onto a two dimensional plane. Then I'd blow them up and make them a lot bigger. It records an act of violence but can also produce some quite beautiful images.

*The Hysteria exhibition at the Freud Museum had some big prints of the insect wings going up the stairs. Do you think about the different effect when you enlarge something so minute to a big print?*

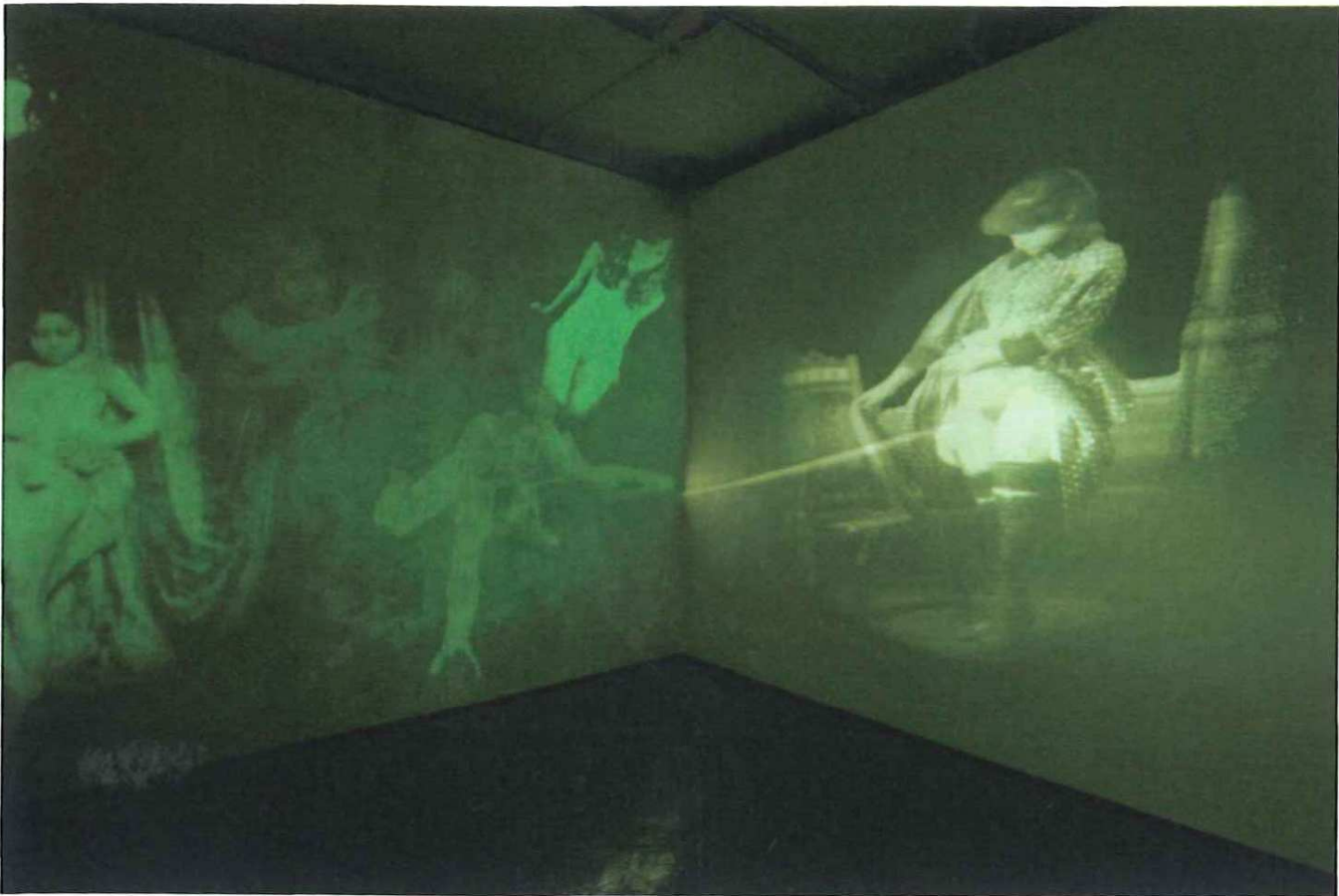
Well I think the bigger they get, the better they get. You can see more. The frames I put on these little things are of very sober dark wood with museum glass, which is non-reflective. There's so much black in there, if you use normal glass you can't see anything.

*How many of these did you make?*

Of the ones I've put out - twenty four.

*Something different again, caught my eye: *detritus of New York*?*

Yes, I was quite impressed when



Mat Collishaw **Shooting Stars**, 2008

45 gobo images, hard drive, 3 rotating projectors and fluorescent paint  
Dimensions variable Image courtesy of the artist and Blain | Southern

I went to New York, the amount of fast food that's so easy to buy: Chinese, Mexican, whatever. From all over the world you could get food in two minutes, and the detritus was dumped everywhere. It reminded me of the old Dutch paintings, their still life pictures - Vanitas - of fruit, vegetables etc.

A lot of these were about showing off the talent and technique of the artist, and also the quantity of

food we could import from different countries: look we've got a pineapple. Just the luxury goods they had around and gorging on it. So I decided to make contemporary versions of those things using fast food. But it was just a big pile of stuff from all over the place, piled up to make a seductive image. And there's little lizards and hermit crabs, butterflies, moths and beetles.



*Of course all this fast food turns into junk immediately, but that's the formula isn't it?*

I try to avoid a moralistic take on these things and prefer to go the other way around the hill, where it appears I'm celebrating this thing there. I think that way you get a more interesting artwork. Like at the moment I'm making a work which could be considered to be about climate change, but I want to pitch more on the side of celebrating climate change: a huge celebration of global warming, which is obviously the wrong thing to do. But if you think of the paintings of John Martin<sup>3</sup> at the Tate: lightning crackling, rocks tumbling down; there's obviously a moral warning there of the end of time, but John Martin makes those things exciting. You can feel the excitement there. Should you be doing that? It's quite an odd thing to be stimulated by. So, though I'm not 100% up for the earth boiling over and total destruction, I think it's interesting to make an artwork where you shift your moral position, to celebrate rather than make a moral judgment.

*A sectioned image of an orifice with hairs.*

This one has been misunderstood to a degree, it's an image from a book of fatal..(inaudible) and it was the most inoffensive image in it. You could get away from the horror of it all, it had a certain abstract quality about it. In a way it's like the Japanese Rising Sun, you've got an impact zone in the middle and it radiates around from that. It also resembles a camera, you've got a rectangular shape with an aperture in the middle. It's an orifice with hairs, but it's all kinds of different things. I started making images with colour photography, using pornography. I wanted to make very contemporary images from things that were out there. Not tasteful, things that were not allowed in the art gallery situation. And they weren't giving me enough impact and I came across this and decided, ok this is it, and it's got to be quite big; a lot bigger than the person who's looking at it, it's twelve feet by eight feet; an assault in some way and an attempt to grab your attention. But at the same time it's quite dumb, it's a statement that doesn't lead anywhere.

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*Interview recorded 23rd March 2011*



Mat Collishaw **Supervilliance**, 2010 Corian, acrylic, steel, lights, electrical circuitry 249 x 157.5 x 16.5 cm  
(98.03 x 62.01 x 6.5 in) Image courtesy of the artist and Blain | Southern Photo Credit: Peter Mallett