

Andrew Graham Dixon (AGD) interview with Mat Collishaw (MC), London October 2014.

In: Mat Collishaw, Black Mirror, 2014

Edited, designed and published by NERO

AGD: Did the new work come out of a commission, or were you already contemplating artworks in the Galleria Borghese?

MC: I saw an exhibition by the German Artist Candida Höfer, she photographed the interior of the museum, they were very well composed and beautifully lit. They were hung on freestanding internal walls. It made me consider contemporary art inside this extraordinarily Baroque environment. I thought it might be interesting to do something that integrates itself a little more with the works in the collection, to feather the edge between the what I was doing and works in the museum. I decided early on to make some works using two way mirrors with paintings appearing from behind them. Caravaggio's paintings stood out because they are such a contrast to the grandiosity of the museum. They are melancholic, ascetic paintings to be dwelt on in a sombre manner.

AGD: How did you want your work placed in relation to the Caravaggio's?

MC: They are placed upstairs and the Caravaggio paintings are all downstairs. It's not an easy thing to hang new work in Galleria Borghese, because there's no spare wall space and no real floor space to utilise. We moved a couple of things around, but the way they were positioned was almost pre-determined by the physical weight of the existing sculptures.

AGD: ...that Bernini can't easily be moved.

MC: Bernini originally wanted his works against a wall apparently.

AGD: Oh that's interesting! Because they work so well when you walk around them.

MC: It seems odd that he would have made that sort of decision. I read that he wanted to direct the way people would move around the sculptures rather than giving them free access.

AGD: Can you go round the zoetrope All Things Fall?

MC: Yes, 360 degrees.

AGD: It must be very complicated to make as well?

MC: It was a little challenging, a lot of late nights.

AGD: How do you begin to create such a work?

MC: After a lot of research and the sketching of ideas the characters and the architecture were designed on a computer. They were then animated and each animated sequence was broken down into eighteen different frames. Eighteen figures giving one second of animation in the work. Those architecture and figures and were then 3-D printed. Each frame is incrementally different from the previous frame. The entire model, architecture and figures were then assembled and rotated, and as the figures pass in front of your eye each one is hit by a strobe light, actually an LED controlled by a computer. The combination of these effects produces the illusion of movement. It's the principle of cinema basically.

AGD: I find that very interesting because somebody once said to me 'Why is Marcel Duchamp categorised as Art, in the category Art with a capital 'A', the same as Caravaggio, when he is working conceptually, and yet Martin Scorsese, whose work is visually deeply influenced by Caravaggio is categorised as Cinema. You can go to an art gallery and see Caravaggio and Duchamp works, but you would have to go to a different building to see something that is actually perhaps closer in spirit to Caravaggio. With Caravaggio's work you are looking very closely at art that for me is the origin of Cinema. I think that is where Cinema begins – in multi-panel fresco paintings in Italian 13th Century churches. And it begins in the Baroque lighting of scenes that are intended to make you feel as though you are present at the very suffering of Christ. It's that tradition of hyper-realised bodies in action that then morphs into Cinema – to such an extent that Cinema actually takes its format from painting.

That's why Cinema screens are so long and wide, because History paintings in the 19th Century were that shape – people wanted their movies to look like paintings.

MC: But don't you think that you contemplate the old media, paintings, in a different way to the new media, cinema? Because once you've got that narrative embedded in a timeline, you're in a totally different place compared to a painting. I use a lot of video, but I wouldn't consider myself a video artist. I approach a video work in the same way you would approach a fresco or a painting in an old church – that it's up to you how much time you invest in it. As you are looking at the painting it unfolds in front of your eyes, over time, you develop a relationship with it. That is what happens to me when I look at those paintings, it's that kind of space that I would like enter, an uninterrupted portal to another world.

AGD: But in a sense it seems to me that you are going against the grain of what the moving image is used to being – the moving image is used to filling up all the gaps in the imagination about what those figures might do, because it turns into a story that you can read from beginning to end. Although there is movement in your works here, there isn't enough to engender an explanation.

MC: The fact that nothing ever really happens is what, I think, gets your mind moving. There's a problem nowadays, because people don't want to stand in front of a painting for five minutes looking at it. It's slightly distressing to see a such a huge number of visitors wandering around museums, glazed over, one paintings becomes the same as another. The smart phone with all its social networking opportunities have possibly made it more difficult to focus on images that we don't really relate to. Old Art is an alien media in a way

AGD: Often what may happen is that they capture the painting on their 'image box'; a little camera, a phone or an iPad. I find it very strange. I think Walter Benjamin got it right in the essay he wrote in the 'Age of Mechanical Reproduction' – it's not just that works of art can be made differently by the means of mechanical reproduction (i.e. Cinema and so on), but that existing works of art are altered by the fact that we know that they are reproducible, which diminishes our attention towards them, because we think we've possessed them... but in fact we haven't. We've just used possession as an excuse for not contemplating them. I find it very eerie.

MC: I'd like to bring the aura back, to obtain that frisson of standing in front of a Caravaggio painting that physically exists, that you have made your pilgrimage to, but maybe can't feel because you're in an unusual environment. With these works I'm taking trying put that spark of life into a media that is considered soulless, but that maybe you are more familiar with, video, the moving image

AGD: Why do you use the glass frames? These dark, almost cobweb-like glass tendrils surrounding the screens?

MC: It's an attempt to commemorate that silvery, transient moment, when the characters were living, breathing people, which is pretty much how Caravaggio wanted to portray them, as opposed to what they've now become – these great icons. Glass is basically form frozen in time, similar to the paintings in a way, a moment suspended. It's originally molten, you work with it, then, at the moment when the form is arrived at, its put to one side and it solidifies. It's arresting fluidity. I also wanted the frames to be a little funeral-like, a bit like the plumes on the horses at an east-end funeral.

AGD: Yes they remind me of that. They are funereal. In a sense they commemorate the kind of death of the moment and its transformation into the painting. What's bizarre about Caravaggio's painting David with the Head of Goliath is that he really did encapsulate his own image – he engineered a death; the image is a death of the person. He actually painted himself as if dying, or as if almost half pleading whilst dying.

MC: It's a supposed to be a plea for clemency from the Pope. These days you would get an un-smiley emoticon on a text. In this painting it's loaded with poignancy, even now we experience a sort of Gothic thrill from confronting this apparition from the past.

AGD: What would you call these works? Are they sculptures?

MC: I would like them to be in the no man's land between definitions. David Hockney said that video brings time to you, whereas with painting, you bring time to it.

AGD: That's a very good quote.

MC: And I'd like to be somewhere in the middle, where you can't really pin point what it is or which side of the fence the work is on. Another reason the Caravaggio paintings were appropriate for the project was because his figures appear against black – there's nothing, no temples, no trees in the background, so they emerge like a spectres from behind the two-way mirrors in the works.

AGD: The dark background can become a place where your shadow plays and your reflection comes into being, and here it's not distracting. Well it's a distraction, but an intended one.

MC: The black becomes a nowhere space, an intangible place that is unknown, and inaccessible. The mirror adds a more indefinite quality to the blackness.

AGD: And I guess it means different things in each case, but in the one that was based on Saint Jerome Writing, it seems to be very much the darkness of morbidity...

MC: All three paintings deal with impending mortality; in each case we are contemplating an image of someone contemplating an image of mortality. St Jerome looks at the bible while the skull watches on, Madonna dei Palafrenieri has the child peering at the snakehead he's stamping on and David taking in the severed head of Goliath.

AGD: The glass is instrumental here I feel - Francis Bacon was very insistent on putting glass on his paintings. He wanted people to see themselves. It's slightly reflective but not totally reflective, because he wanted them to see the picture. But he didn't want his pictures to be shown naked.

MC: A kind of veil that adds a slightly claustrophobic feeling to the painting. That lump of flesh, humanity trapped like a beast behind this glass. That and the fact that you can see your own pathetic reflection in the surface, something that I was trying to evoke with the mirrors in these works. Your miserable mortality in contrast to the paintings timelessness.

AGD: Coming back to your earlier point about these being real people, these paintings here in the Borghese are a huge paradox. There was an argument between the Franciscan wing of the Church (which very much held Christ's messages for the poor) who felt that paintings should be painted in the colours of earth and dirt and that people should have grimy toe nails and look poor. At the same time there was also this big anxiety that produced the Baroque style – the fear that if you made the Church too suited for the poor, there could be a social revolution. Yes it is for them, up to a point, but let's awe inspire them rather than making them feel at home. Caravaggio was in the middle of this, if not more on the left wing side of the argument. And the paradox in his career is that his pictures kept on getting rejected, especially later on in Rome, because they offended this sense of propriety that has begun. Or in the case of the Madonna and Child with St. Anne – Dei Palafrenieri, she probably was too sexual. The paintings got rejected by the Church and then of course they became available for art collectors, and none bigger than Borghese at that time. Things that had actually been created for every man were now being acquired as luxury objects. That is the paradox.

MC: He made the characters in his paintings accessible, they looked like, and probably were, the people outside on the corner of the street, the vagrants, the drunks the prostitutes. But he elevated them to another dimension by dynamic composition and simple dramatic lighting. He preserved their very human qualities, there grubbiness their sexiness and this was considered perhaps too vulgar.

AGD: Yes, it was the whole vulgarity of it. But of course it wasn't a problem 100 or 200 years earlier – it was exactly what they wanted. And so I think that's why Caravaggio harked back to artists like the sculptor from Ferrara. In fact one of his paintings in Naples was destined for the same church that owned one of these great terracotta sculptures of the Lamentation over the dead body of Christ. The sculptures are incredibly harrowing with an almost Madam Tussaud's lifelike quality about them. Human scale, standing there on the floor of the church, you feel like they are about to move. And if you look at enough of them – the effect is a bit like your zoetrope. I feel it would be very hard for someone who has lived through part of the 20th Century, to not see something like that as a harbinger

of the Holocaust or other forms of violence that will always continue. In a sense, the artists of that time probably felt that those artworks were about atrocity.

MC: Which was a very popular theme in painting – a whole genre providing the artist with the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to paint the human body in action. This violent, frenzied orgy is so effectively demonstrated in the Massacre of the Innocents.

AGD: Those Massacres of the Innocents works appeal to everyone's sensibilities – it frightens children, it frightens women, it frightens men, it frightens everyone because this is a really bad thing that might happen, but also this might happen to you because it happened to them.

MC: There is a sense in which people are not only in awe and frightened of these potents that are given to us – but we also get a thrill out of these visceral paintings. I read that Massacre of the Innocents was the most popular Medieval History play. They'd use doll like babies with pig bladders filled with blood which they would burst on stage, drenching the first few rows in the audience. And people just loved the attraction of experiencing something that grotesque and dramatic.

AGD: Well, in Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks, he said that if you are a painter you must be sure to go to a public execution, because you will store up in your mind lots of useful poses – I'm not sure if they are poses as such – but I think Caravaggio would have probably gone to a number of executions.

MC: They were hard to avoid I imagine. In England, up to the Victorian era we still had them going on. They were a very popular form of entertainment.

AGD: There were plenty and there were some really, really horrible ones at that time. I mean you wouldn't just be killed, you would be torn to bits over a period of perhaps an hour or two – lots of grimacing and lots of blood. There seemed to have been a taste for it around 1600. There's a very good essay I once read about 17th Century drama, both in England and in Italy, and it was just simply called 'More Blood', because that seems to be what the audience wanted.

MC: It would be a thrilling day out. And with the zoetrope, All Things Fall, it's a similar sort of thing but it's an optical illusion, it's a trick. It draws you in. As soon as it starts revolving, it's hypnotic, suddenly you look at something that is not happening, and you engage with it. It becomes this festival of violence, a gory entertaining carousal.

AGD: It reminds me of watching carousal at night - kids on horses going past a little too fast to identify what they are doing, or who they are.

MC: The illusion of movement, of going somewhere where you're actually almost stationary. A movement that relies on you completing the image. There are images of violence all around this work in Galleria Borghese, frescos, sculptures and mosaics etc. As you look at them you animate them yourself to degree, you bring them to life. With the zoetrope you literally do complete the illusion in your head, you are seeing something that is not actually there, you are complicit in its manifestation.

AGD: Could you explain a little about the eye mapping software you used for the titles of these three Caravaggio works?

MC: I tracked people's eye movements across the canvas to see how their eyes traced the three paintings.

AGD: How did you do that?

MC: With Eye track software, essentially a pair of glasses that are fitted with retina tracking. I then compared the map of the eye movement to star constellations and choose the constellation map closest to the eye-tracking map. I titled the works after these constellations. I was thinking that Caravaggio seems like a conduit for some greater spirit, his paintings appeared like a thunderbolts, freeze frames of the moving image. He transformed very humble, mundane subject matter into sacred dramas. So the star constellations refers to the way the paintings appear slightly pre-ordained. Plus the idea that you are looking at something that is long dead and gone. Painting has that beautiful facility to preserve

something that disappeared hundreds of years ago, in a similar way that stars we see have disappeared millennia ago...

AGD: As in seeing the light memory of what they were?

MC: That and how he builds a scene out of the mundane elements and gives them a metaphysical charge, they have a sense of the supernatural about them. Not dissimilar to the way we find imagery in the infinite meaninglessness of star constellations, we project images onto them. It's a device that I employed to try to acknowledge that incorporeal quality the paintings harness.