

Mat Collishaw with Otto M. Urban

December 2017 – February 2018

Otto Urban: You have been exhibiting your artwork since the end of the 1980s, you participated at the famous *Freeze* in 1988. Your first individual show was in 1990. Since then you have presented your artwork in various places, both galleries and unusual places (for example Sigmund Freud Museum in London or Villa Borghese in Rome). The rooms of Galerie Rudolfinum have a rather long memory. During its existence thousands of artworks have been presented there. The gallery is burdened with its past as well as its neo-renaissance architecture. How do you perceive such spaces?

Mat Collishaw: *It's the modern condition that an Artist makes work in a context that is designated for Art. Not long-ago Artists were making work for religious environments, public spaces and wealthy men's bedrooms, now the clinical white space, personified by a Kunsthau in Basel is the norm. I like the fact that Artists don't have to compete or complement the architecture and interior they are exhibiting in but occasionally it can perform a useful function by adding an extra layer to the work. The work I make employs plenty of references to Art history and to certain Art historical devices designed to make you think and feel in a certain way, so it's something I think I can work with, rather than having to react against. For example, I use quite conventional subject matter and composition in a lot of works, so they are initially relatively easy to assimilate by the viewer. Presenting them in a historical museum with certain conservative trimmings, helps to disguise the fact that they may be attempting subversion in some way.*

OU: However, there are ideas about a retrospective, it is obvious, that the exhibition has a certain direction or topic which is stressed in your artwork. It is different from your recent big shows in New Art Gallery in Walsall (2015) and in Arter in Istanbul (2013). Although you are not a curator of the exhibition, could you define more general thesis how do you perceive this collection? Do individual artworks compose a compact unit, do they give you new information?

MC: *I think most artist relish an opportunity to exhibit in environments that could present different readings and interpretations of works. In my case this is definitely the case as I use such different media subject matter. In the Rudolfinum I will be presenting works together that have never been exhibited in the same building, let alone the same room. This gives certain resonances which may not have been apparent before.*

OU: In the first room a visitor can see two artworks which frame the whole exposition in time. The oldest exhibited work is a self-portrait *Narcissus* from 1990. The newest one is *Albion* from 2017. Both artworks are connected with several significant motifs. One of them, perhaps the most striking is reflection, multiplication of existing reality. You often work with these motifs. Is it a certain form of relativization of your surroundings?

MC: *The image is a slippery spectre, is it a true depiction of the world or another reality in itself? By acknowledging reflections in works, you can play with this uncertainty. Albion features the oldest tree in England, but it is also a tree of mythological significance, as it's supposedly the hiding place of Robin Hood. So, the tree is more than a tree, it is also an image which informs the way we see it, it exists in the shadow lands of our imagination, as well as out there in the real worlds. Narcissus is the depiction of a youth who yearned for another version of reality so much that he lost touch with the real world. Both works play with the idea that we have a strong desire to be transported into a world of image and myth, into a world where things have things have a meaning and significance that captivate us.*

OU: *Albion* was part of *The Centrifugal Soul* exhibition which was held this year in Blain|Southern in London. *Gasconades* cycle of smaller paintings was added to it. There was a strong interaction between these two artworks, they supported each other and together they created a rather unique environment. How would you characterise it?

MC: *The Gasconades* works were paintings of birds that had left the rural landscape to live in cities, benefiting from the food and warmth that urban environments provide. However, in these surroundings the colourful birds were clashing with the dynamic city landscape. Their evolutionary designed plumage was now in competition with other elements such as graffiti and billboards, they were lost in the dog eat dog world of advertising and promotion that they were also trying to exploit. I chained them to the walls to indicate the helplessness in their bid to show off their bright feathers in order to procreate. Their colourful liveries are not there by choice, they are in bondage to the genetic program they have inherited. It reminded me of a quote from the English writer Kingsley Amis who, having lost his libido in later life said, 'Thanks God for that, it was like being chained to an idiot for 50 years'. *Albion* in the centre of the same room conjures up the ghost of the natural world they have left behind, a sad, lonely decrepit tree which is actually a laser scan of The Major Oak, presented as a large Peppers Ghost optical illusion. Geoffrey Miller, from whom I borrowed the exhibition title 'The Centrifugal Soul', describes the modern condition of self-promotion as being genetically inherited from our ancestors but that the current obsessions with platforms such as social media were leaving a hole at our core where dignity and reticence used to be. *Albion* is this skeletal hole at the core.

OU: On small formats in the *Gasconades* cycle there are depicted birds on a typical urban background of flaked away walls covered with graffiti. Birds appear quite often in your work. From video installation *Interminable Drifter* or *Antique* object (both from 1994) via *Ganymede* (2007) to *Gasconades* cycle. Birds are an important symbol for you. What kind?

MC: *Birds were the first thing I drew incessantly from the age of about 7 or 8 so I can't remember my initial attraction. However, when you are trying to make art you are trying to pin something down and make it obtainable, birds allude our grasp by their freedom to fly, so are a natural choice of subject matter. It's the attempt to pin them down as much as the birds themselves which is of interest. I've also made several series of works depicting fairies which have similar qualities. These works could be described as being under the influence of Nympholepsy, not a fondness for children, but as the dictionary describes it, 'a frenzy of emotion, as for something unattainable'. As John Updike said of Vladimir Nabakov's prose, 'It yearns to clasp diaphanous exactitude in its hairy arms'.*

OU: Motif of birds is strongly connected with motion, with flying. This links up birds with butterflies and moths which often appear in your work. *Insecticide* cycle from 2006 belongs to your most often exhibited artworks. On exhibition at Rudolfinum it is presented in the same room as the installation *Deliverance* from 2008. What does these artworks connect?

MC: *I find it both disturbing and fascinating that the average person finds it intriguing to look at images of suffering. This is something that runs through Art History as well as occurring in many other forms, from gladiatorial combat, to the spectacle of bear baiting, bullfighting, Tom & Jerry cartoons, Jean-Claude Van Damme films, Grand Theft Auto etc. I'm interested to know if this is evidence of a cruel streak inside us or there is something more interesting and less malevolent going on. So these works are little experiments in a way, they attempt to ask us, why is it that we find it captivating to look at a bird in a cage, a crushed butterfly or a mother and child in distress. Perhaps there is a basic subconscious need to experience the world in all its morbid apparel, to better prepare us for any potentially threatening circumstance that may ambush us.*

OU: Besides birds and butterflies, flowers appear quite often in your artwork. For the first time it was already in 1994 in the photo *Tiger Skin Lily*. The flower in this photo looks aggressively, it comes alive because of the animal skin and it is becoming a symbol of danger and threat. In this sense the cycles *Infectious Flowers* (2005) and the *Venal Muse* (2012) are significant. In the first one exotic blossoms covered by skin infection and inflammation are depicted on the background of a dramatic sky. In the second cycle blossoms remind sleazy flesh, tendons and muscles. On your web site you mention in this connection not only *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1867) by Charles Baudelaire but also texts by Joris Karl Huysmans *A rebours* (1894) and Jean Genet *The Thief's Journal* (1949). What is your connection with these authors?

MC: *The English have quite a romantic and sentimental attachment to nature and landscape which sometimes does a disservice to the red in tooth and claw bearing of the ruthless and indifferent quality of the natural world. I wanted to make works which reflected the animal nature of plants and flowers, their unrelenting struggle for survival and dominance. The animal skin flowers were designed to contrast the decorative images of flowers used on greetings cards and bedspreads, flowers as breeding machines designed to attract attention and reproduce by whatever means necessary. I was also interested in the idea of nature as a barometer of our spiritual health, and that if nature appeared to be sick it was because it reflects our current malaise. Hussyman's A rebours describes a man's descent into extreme decadence, the outside world is abandoned for an interior self-indulgence and degeneracy. His taste become so removed from normal propriety that he embraces a corrupted perverse version of the natural world. At one point he becomes an avid collector of flowers that appear to boast their own sickness and decay. Genet also creates a world in which all normal morality is inverted, the wounds and scars on the bodies of fellow prisoners become like adornments, decorative medals symbolising the achievements of these criminal Gods. Baudelaire, it goes without saying, embraces a nocturnal world where disease and corruption are endemic. In all these books sensuality and corruption conjugate, not dissimilar to certain Gothic Art such as Grunwalds crucifixion, The Isenheim Altarpiece. How do you look at paintings like this? They inspire empathy and revulsion at the same moment, they are manipulative yet also grounded in a sordid reality. These are all elements that I tried to infuse my infected flowers with, the gloriously sensual and the fiendishly grotesque. The idea that all of the beauty and seduction harnessed in advertising and propaganda is masking corruption and moral bankruptcy.*

OU: The installation in the 2nd room feels like a sacral place. Motifs of Christianity, Antic mythology and cruel materialism are mutually connected and refer to each other. You work here again with contrasts between the form of an artwork and its content. In a certain way you follow your first known work *Bullet Hole* from 1988. Is this tension also important for you as a viewer of an artwork?

MC: *The form of an image can dictate the way you see it as much as the content, this is quite obviously apparent in advertising, but also occurs in religious painting, which is selling you something in a different way. I try to combine form and content in a way that transforms the general interpretation of a subject. In the Last Meal on Death Row works, a Cheeseburger becomes almost sacred in appearance, because of the way it is composed, lit and framed. Contemporary fast food takes on the solemnity of 17th century Dutch Vanitas painting. Bullet Hole was a very small image in a textbook which was blown up large and presented in lightboxes like an advertising hoarding, at this scale it became monolithic and confrontational. In most of the works it is a way of giving the everyday a kind of timelessness and universality.*

OU: You refer to a famous portrait of pope Innocent X by Spanish painter Diego Velasquez from 1650 in the installation *The End of Innocence*. Francis Bacon was inspired in several cases by the same piece of art. How do you perceive the work of this artist?

MC: *I had Bacon's version of Velazquez's Pope on a postcard behind my desk for a while. When I wasn't looking directly at it, it seems to shimmer with the vertical lines that run up and down the canvas. I've heard it said that Bacon got the idea of these vertical lines from the way curtains hang, so it was like hanging a pleated veil over the image, eroticizing it. However, in the case of the Pope it seemed to bring*

the psychological terror of the painting alive, to animate it and plug it into the electric chair of the 20th century. I wanted to exaggerate this and absorb it into the digital age. There is a sense in which Velasquez, in the act of painting, made God in the form of the Pope manifest. That image was then photographed and printed in a book from which Bacon made his painting, which was then photographed and made into a postcard. So, the image of the undepictable deity is constantly appearing and reappearing in many different forms, shape shifting. Always changing always, the same, this is what I tried to create in The End of Innocence.

OU: The last project *Thresholds* works with virtual reality which is completely present and constantly developing technology. Its new usage enables virtual visit of photos exhibition which was arranged by a photographer and inventor Henry Fox Talbot in 1839. The whole work is very complex and, in fact, timeless, it is a different view of the past, resp. it makes our experience with history richer in a fundamental way. Does the final result clearly meet your expectations?

MC: *My expectations were influenced by the fact that I was quite ignorant of the limitations of Virtual Reality when I initiated the project. I knew that this was a medium that I should try and work in, as it is was huge step in the way we look at the world through the simulated image. However, I wanted a subject that somehow acknowledged the technology's status as being a bit of a game changer in the way that we see the world. When, by chance, I had a conversation with a friend about the first proper exhibition of photography in 1839, I immediately thought that this could be an interesting experience to recreate. The idea that you are looking through the window of 21st technology, through the window of early Victorian technology, and through that into the real world. I didn't want to create an experience that was obviously a construct, where you sit in a swivel chair and teleport around. I wanted visitors to be able to walk freely and to be able to touch what they saw, so that they were relaxed enough to forget the fact that they were in a simulation. On this level it definitely worked, although the technical challenges were not insignificant. At the very beginning of my research, I discovered that the Chartist demonstrators were on the streets outside at the time of this exhibition in 1839, they were partially demonstrating about developments in technology taking their jobs away from them. This gave me another perspective which I made a key part of the experience, albeit one witnessed through the rooms window. As you look at the exhibits inside the room, early photographs and various other innovations in technology you hear a disturbance outside, if you then cross the room to look out the window you can see my recreation of these protesters with flaming torches shouting angrily and smashing window. This introduced a parallel with contemporary concerns about digital technology taking away employment through sophisticated algorithms, factory automation etc. It's this element the of the work that's most pertinent to me as it gives the enterprise a moral dimension, technology can be very helpful, fun and perhaps inevitable but what are the social consequences?*

OU: There are also two works at the exhibition in which you put into movement the famous pieces of art, the Albecht Durer watercolour and Arnold Bocklin painting. In fact, other references to art history. However, they are highly specific and personal and generally they refer to your older work *Blind Date* (1997) when you travelled from London to Madrid blindfolded in order to see the famous *las Meninas* by Velasquez. After seeing it you had put on the mask and flew back. The theme of looking at something or perceiving of what we see has clear psychological aspects. How much do you work with emotional effect of the artwork on the viewer?

MC: *At first glance Las Meninas appears to be an unexceptional view into a large room with figures gathered in the lower half of the painting. As you look at it and consider the implications of the arrangements in the scene, it gets more intriguing. You realise that the cunning design of the picture includes you, the viewer, in the contrivance. I flew to see it blindfold to emphasis this compelling power it has, as if I'd be kidnapped by it and held hostage. Essentially, it's a painting that seduces you into entering its trap, a manipulation of the mind. But this is the case with all imagery to an extent, they are designed to beguile you in one way or another and this is something I try to work with whether it is the sensuality of the baroque or the thrill of the Gothic. There are things that we respond to through cultural conditioning*

and things we respond to because of biological hardwiring, I try and play with these mechanisms of manipulation that prey on our brains pre-programmed responses.

OU: In zoetrope *The Garden of Unearthly Delights* from 2009 you connected motifs that had often appeared in your previous work. Next to the birds and butterflies there are children. Everything seems so calm and idyllic until the object starts moving. Then we can see a frantic whirl of violence. Children are often depicted in your work in a distressing and worrying situations. In a certain period from *Downs* (1989) series to *Ultraviolet Baby* (2001) or *Idle Young* (2005) you have used the motive of a child quite often. The theme is emphasized in the last but one room of the exhibition. Next to the entrance there is a big photo *Children of a Lesser God* (2007), an artwork which immediately evokes feelings of danger, illusion of threat is strong. What does a child represent in art for you?

MC: *Children and babies have often been used in Art history as a means of creating amusement, as in a bacchanal or with naughty imps, conversely, they also appear as almost sacred other worldly creatures as in depictions of the infant Jesus or as nymphs and fairies. I try to take these characteristics and reframe them. Ultraviolet baby was a film of a small boy in a baby changing facility. The room was drenched in blue light from the UV installed to prevent heroin users from injecting in the facility. The blue light conceals veins in the body. So, the baby was protected from blood and needles by this other worldly blue aura around it, not dissimilar to the golden glow often seen around the infant Jesus. A halo indicating the precious status of a young child.*

I made Children of a Lesser God when I was living in London's East end. There were a lot of quite underprivileged families with feral children living in the area. Occasionally the Social Services would arrive to take children away from their parents and put them into care, obviously this created quite harrowing confrontations.

This image was an attempt to rework this contentious operation in the style of the myth of Romulus and Remus. The babies look extremely vulnerable so close to the sharp teeth of the wolves, but the wolves are fiercely protective over the babies. The images for Downs came from a paediatric textbook where they were used as examples of a condition. I re-presented them in handmade light boxes made from quite rudimentary utilitarian materials. Because they were handmade, they were all slightly different in appearance due to cheap nature of the materials, and the lack of craftsmanship they had gave them all slightly different personalities. Within this rigid indexing they were given a subtle individuality.

OU: For the first time you used zoetrope technology in *Throbbing Gristle* installation in 2008. The title refers to a cult band – what is your relation to music?

MC: *I think for a lot of British artists popular music is hugely important. It was probably something we experienced and responded to before we even really knew what Art was. Musicians like David Bowie, Roxy Music, The Sex Pistols, The Jam, The Clash, The Specials all created world you could disappear into, worlds that related to the real world and personal experience, but also transcended it and shaped a new way of thinking, I don't think you can underestimate it.*

OU: You often work with motion pictures in your artwork. What is your connection with the film?

MC: *I'm afraid this may have something to do with growing up without a tv and watching neighbours TV's through the window while on my paper round. I became obsessed with the magic of the moving image and the ability to reanimate the world as a simulation. We didn't have a tv because of its purported corruptive nature and this added a beguiling illicitness to the experience of watching an animated film. David Hockney has said 'you bring your time to painting, but video brings its time to you', I wanted to make something in between, so you bring the time to the works as the work is bringing time to you. Digital media has made the moving image so ubiquitous that it's almost as prevalent as the still image. It seems like everywhere you look there is a beating pulse of invisible electrons creating these other worlds for you to disappear into,*

Alice in Wonderland rabbit holes creating a virtual labyrinthine warren. *The End of Innocence* is a work I made thinking about how the digital realm is becoming like a new deity, data as an all-knowing God. I originally thought of making the film as I had a postcard of Bacon's screaming Pope behind my desk, and it kept winking at me. It seemed like Bacon had copied this image from a photograph, which had been printed in a book, which had been photographed from a painting, which was a depiction of a Pope who was an envoy of God. This ephemeral being had passed through all these incarnations, shape shifting, disappearing and re-appearing in different forms. It seemed appropriate to try and return it to the realm of the phantasmal, a constantly changing stream of data bringing a never-ending supply of imagery to us.

OU: At the end of the exhibition in the last room there is only one work *All Things Fall*. It was presented at *Black Mirror* exhibition at Galleria Borghese in Rome for the first time in 2014. How did the cooperation come about?

MC: *I basically door stepped the director Anna Coliva and said I wanted to show there, and, to my astonishment, she said yes. Before I got the actual green light to go ahead, I made a pretty clear proposal of what I wanted to show. I'd seen the Candid Hoffer exhibition there and was very interested in making some work to show in galleries that were totally different to the clean white rooms in a contemporary Art spaces. Galleria Borghese is swimming with imagery, mainly of a sensual and violent nature, in addition to this every surface moves as light from the windows plays across its multi veined marble walls, frescoed ceiling and mosaiced floors. I wanted to create something between the apparent movement of the surfaces in the building and the frozen stillness of the paintings.*

OU: In connection with this exhibition you mentioned several times your relation to Renaissance and Baroque art. Besides Galerie Rudolfinum your work *East of Eden* (2013) also appears in the permanent exposition of Old Masters in National Gallery in Prague, respectively in rooms with Italian masters of 16th and 17th centuries. What inspires you on that period, what makes it so present?

MC: *The desire to use imagery to manipulate emotions, but not in a cynical manner. Social Realist paintings reuse certain technical tricks from Greek and Roman history to manipulate an audience, but this language comes across as crass and austere. The Baroque has infinite complexities depending on the artist and their cultural and geographic backgrounds. The world of advertising, news broadcast etc is all designed to cater for a particular audience, more so now that targeted marketing is so prevalent. We live in a world where a huge amount of imagery is skilfully crafted to manipulate us as individuals. In the past we were sold religion, the most powerful form of control. Today we are being sold entertainment, the promise of happiness and contentment and in return we give away much more, our money and all our personal data. We are becoming like empty vessels into which strategically designed, emotionally manipulative effluence is generously decanted.*

OU: Caravaggio has a distinctive role for you. Why, how do you perceive his paintings?

MC: *Caravaggio's paintings are exemplary in the use of the common place and everyday mundanity of the characters and their settings. They are quite shocking in their depiction of religious figures who had generally been portrayed in a much more reverential manner. figure nails, the broken nose of the figure looking on. Each bristles with a visceral intensity that situates them in the present, they are not idealized at all and appear very alive and very mortal but exalted to a supernatural level. My Narcissus work attempts to elevate a lonely figure in a council estate into the mythological realm. The realism only heightens the absurdity of this self-absorbed and deluded young man. At the same time the mud and concrete enhance the intensity of the self-absorption. It looks like he would have to be seriously transfixed to participate in such a sordid act.*

OU: A series of paintings *This is not an Exit* (2013) was created quite recently. In fact, they are multiple enlarged details of crumpled papers in which someone had his daily dose of cocaine. It is a metaphor of emptiness and inability to perceive the real life around. Banality and ordinariness are placed here in the position of a goddess of emptying. Useless and tossed pieces of papers become artefacts for finders who bear their social information and open speculations about previous owners. How do you perceive social role of art nowadays? Can art influence anything?

MC: *I think art is here to humanise us, to provide a forum where we can reflect on the complexities of the world we live in. Therefore, it's not a panacea to any of our problems but it is a way of examining problems. I think art that tries to lecture or dictate a viewpoint is pissing in the wind. It's preaching to the converted, boring, self-righteous grand standing. Most political art is extremely dull and it's not a word I'd want to live in. My wrap paintings from the show This is Not an Exit were designed to look like modernist system paintings, they all followed a very specific geometry, the lines made when folding a square of paper to form a wrap. They were also tromp l'oeil paintings in the tradition of creating depth on a flat surface, many tromp l'oeil painting feature slight undulations in a canvas or paper hanging on a wall. In addition to these painterly tropes, they were also a debasement of painting, as they were emptied out drug wrappings, they were squalid remnants of indulgence and delusion. I started making them in the fallout of the 2008 market crash, when it became apparent that the grotesque binging, we'd become accustomed to were no longer sustainable and we'd reached the bottom of the barrel. In the financial district in London cocaine is ubiquitous, so this seemed like an appropriate way of depicting this grotesque self-indulgence, an oblique way of referencing the end of the party. The monochrome paintings referenced modernist monochromes and the coloured post it notes often used for cocaine wraps. The paintings with imagery were taken from magazines, another source of wrap paper. These painting depicted advertising, celebrities and pornography, all ingredients in the highly manufactured kaleidoscope of imagery we consume every day. Paintings, advertising, pornography, mind altering drugs, they are all delusional stimulants. Whether anyone understand this from looking at the paintings is neither here nor there. They are not made to be interpreted, they are made embodying all these ideas, layers to be unpeeled if you have the inclination.*