

## **Mat Collishaw. Standing Water. Petr Nedoma.**

Mat Collishaw's self-portrait *Narcissus* – a photograph of a young shirtless man lying in the mud, entranced by his reflection in a dirty puddle on a London street in 1990 – can be seen as prophetic. In ancient Greece, the yellow narcissus was considered a flower of death. Collishaw is sometimes called a satyr. And today, this type of picture is called a selfie.

It is not exactly easy to introduce the multifaceted and varied work of Mat Collishaw. It consists of many interrelated and overlapping aspects, and some works can be fully understood only in relation to others. Although it possesses an absolutely clear internal coherence, there are places where it becomes mysterious, like an underground river. Some of his works, however, have never appeared next to each other.

For the Prague exhibition, we have chosen to present, with just a few exceptions, a cross-section of Collishaw's work from roughly the past ten years, with an emphasis on its relationship (in both form and content) to the art of the past and with an eye towards the broader historical context. Collishaw's approach to formulating the themes of his works is perhaps best described as blurring the line between the real world and a strange dream, often with a somewhat macabre undertone. The combination of seductive beauty on the surface with a hidden sense of foreboding underneath may evoke wild associations. Collishaw chooses his impulses from the past with a gentle sensitivity, with an unerring sense for their extreme, dramatic qualities, their conflict between beauty and horror, between gleaming light and endless darkness. It feels like it wouldn't take much for these works to be transformed into their exact opposite.

For Collishaw, not stating it outright, but merely hinting at the possibility is apparently the strongest impetus and reason for deciding what to work with. He tested this exceptional ability in his very first work, *Bullet Hole* from 1988. The various and often radically divergent critical interpretations of Collishaw's work, which often digress into far-fetched associations and mental constructions that reveal more of what their authors obsessively tried to find instead of the real and verifiable intentions of the artist himself, are the best evidence of his exceptional ability to create situations with an uncommonly strong potential for the most diverse associations, chains of interpretation, considerations, references and relationships. At the core of Collishaw's work lies a hidden intellectual richness and the possibility of working with a wide range of threads and impulses. Its Janus-like face, the constant struggle between two opposite viewpoints, the mixing of past and present, the creation of tension to the very limit of what is bearable – these are all tools for instilling a sense of unease or excitement that reliably forces the viewer to take a stance and to consider the path that has been staked out.

As a storyteller, Collishaw likes to work with various stories from the past without differentiating between high and low, between high literature and dubious tales, between references to the highest expressions of fine art and the lowest pulp found in newspapers with large headlines. He often works with ambivalent motifs of hidden violence, though presented as in horror films in such a way that we merely imagine it without ever seeing a drop of blood, *Children of a Lesser God* (2007), for instance. He focuses on ephemeral states of existence with a high level of uncertainty and allusions to sexuality – which is never explicitly expressed but which nevertheless hangs like a fog over his works. In its time, the French painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Cupid* (1891) was merely an example of its creator's great talent in the field of academic painting, which reflected the era's preference for kitschy, treacly genre scenes possessing a dark undertone. As an inspiration for *Ultraviolet Angel* (2008), however, the expressly fluid character of the angel gives *Cupid* an entirely different meaning that, within the context of today's excessive correctness, can be understood as an inadmissible violation of what is acceptable. This blurring of the line between reality and the imagination is a basic feature of Collishaw's artistic style. We often recognize references to the literature of the Decadent Movement, which, by almost programmatically pushing the limits of what was taboo and offering

readers the sweet scent of other worlds, worked with the corpse-like beauty of the “other shore” while steadfastly braving the light of day. In a way, this state is unattainable today. On the other hand, his works explore very topical, often tension-filled situations from the world today. Next to *Deliverance* (2008) it is also *Madonna* (2002), which is based on a photograph of an Indian woman who lost her home in a flood. By transforming this ordinary photographic portrait of a face into a monumental mosaic, Collishaw has imbued it with a broad range of connotations within the realm of immortality, with clear allusions to early Christian art influenced by the legacy of the late Roman era. In this sense, the decision to raise an ordinary newspaper photograph to the level of iconic metaphorical painting possessing a universal symbolism places Collishaw in the company of Marlene Dumas, from a certain perspective Luc Tuymans, and also Gerhard Richter and his work from the 1980 s. All these artists felt a need to comment on the events and situations of their time, and used the medium of painting to raise these situations from mere flashes of information drowned out by the immense volume of informational noise to become subjects of fundamental historical importance. The formal evolution of this medium forms a basic framework and interpretational framework that, in addition, reflects the changing nature of painting in the work of the aforementioned artists. Collishaw, however, has chosen an inherently more difficult path. He seeks out the best artistic tools for each subject. At the start of his artistic career, photography in its various forms played an important or even exclusive role in his work. Nevertheless, as he has evolved, especially after the turn of the millennium, his chosen forms of expression and presentation have become incredibly varied. Over the past decade, his work has been increasingly marked by the use of technologically advanced approaches, which in their very essence have enabled a maximum complexity when exploring multifaceted subjects. In other words, unlike the other artists mentioned above, Collishaw refuses to focus on one particular approach. Nearly every one of his works is fundamentally different in form from its predecessors, which gives him greater freedom to capture his subject more precisely, and which frees him from being bound by his own past and by the necessity to respond to and measure himself against his personal artistic evolution.

Collishaw does not make concessions to works of the past. He does not turn back or try to immerse himself in the previous era’s artistic styles, nor does he feel the need to go back and try to continue in their spirit. For him, historical paintings are merely icons with an aura, clearly defined entities with a broad and relatively fixed interpretational apparatus. They are part of a web of meanings, solid building blocks of the narrative of art history. He uses this somewhat canonical fortress as a tool for moving through time – i.e., he reuses pit in works that are unquestionably products of our present day and a part of contemporary contexts and contemporary forms of perception, with references comprehensible only to today’s viewer. Any changes in meaning are given by the original work’s dislocation from the place and time of its creation, its removal from the interpretational framework of art history, and above all its recoding within the framework of Collishaw’s artistic intention, which often has surprising characteristics and consequences. Collishaw does not copy subjects, nor does he try to bring the entire work from the past into the present *en bloc*. His goal is not for us to think of, for instance, the atmosphere of Caravaggio’s early Baroque figure painting with its contrast-rich chiaroscuro, dynamic compositions, and use of plebeian elements to radically depict the reality of the gospels in contrast to the rigid and inflexible roles of earlier eras and as a criticism of excessive Catholic pomp. The Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus is clearly and very realistically afraid of the snake, which in Collishaw’s version writhes at his feet as they try to stomp on it. By animating this typical 16th-century motif and shifting it to the present day, Collishaw completely strips it of its original intention. This period – Reformation, Council of Trent, religious wars, shrill defences of one side and denunciatory pamphlets aimed at the other – is so alien to us that the only thing we probably notice about the painting is the exceptional nature of Caravaggio’s painting talent. Ambivalent shifts in presentation and meaning, such as the glossy surface reflecting the gallery space and the extravagant and gaudy Murano glass frame, remove Caravaggio’s work from its original context with the clearly subversive aim of uncovering new layers of meaning.

Collishaw in all likelihood chose Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* (third version, 1883) – that iconic painting from the last quarter of the 19th century, that essence of Symbolism with characteristics of decadent decay, thematically an absolute cornerstone of human life – not because Böcklin's original inspiration was the English cemetery in Florence, but because of its seemingly unchanging, solidly fixed and time-proven interpretation and placement within solid contexts that do not allow for any change. Should change nevertheless happen, from a conservative perspective it could undermine a re-interpretation of history, which should form a foundation solid enough not to shake our world. At first glance, the painting's transformation into a cinematic pseudo-record of a single day from daybreak to twilight opens up the dimension of time, which contrasts fundamentally with the unchanging and static original symbolising the eternity of death. But something is missing. The boat carrying the dead, with the figure of a priestess in a white robe, never appears. This unexpected change, this consciously introduced error, completely changes the scene's dynamic. All at once, it is filled with tension. The peace of the eternal is gone, and the oversized moving image flickering on the wall forces us to return and wait for the boat, that deeply ingrained part of our visual world, to hope for the undisturbed certainty that things will be in their place. Another important element is the fresh perspective offered of the day. I don't think anyone ever considered the possibility that time might play a role in this scene depicting the ultimate end. Collishaw thus asks the question: What kind of day was it when the boat arrived? Sunny or cloudy? And when will it get there?

Since practically the beginning of his career, Collishaw's somewhat morbid fascination with the dark side of life has been nourished, among other things, by Victorian imagery, which represents a very specific aspect of British artistic sensibilities. This preoccupation has been predominantly characterized by a sense of stuffiness; it feels ageless yet antiquated, focused on unclear and vague moments in history from a pseudo-romantic perspective. But the Victorian era was also a time of important technological discoveries and innovations that were combined in strange and unusual ways, especially in the world of art. The era's most progressive technologies (such as the daguerreotype) existed in contrast to a kitschy, treacly, and distinctly literal visuality that bore all the signs of decline, academic mannerism, and a strange timelessness. It is here that we should seek the roots of Collishaw's penchant for pseudo-Gothic cabinets with burning flowers (*Auto-Immolation*, 2010), or for carved neo-Gothic baptismal fonts – a reference to dusty old religion, but also a slightly ironic take on the myth of *Ganymede*, which was a somewhat alien element even for Rembrandt. Collishaw's decision to project the eagle carrying the young prince as a flickering image onto a cloud of smoke couldn't be a more apt representation of the obscure esoteric theories from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries regarding the communication of images, ideas and voices from beyond the grave.

Much of Mat Collishaw's photographic work, especially in the 1990s, was built on the poetics of strange encounters, twisted explorations of the dark unconscious tinged by a strongly felt but merely insinuated late-Baroque vanitas. But Collishaw was more inspired by Jung than by the theologically questionable effusions of ecstasy associated with exorcisms and the cult of the dead. In fact, the subject of psychological experiments that often veered into uncontrollable extremes while exploring taboo realms haunted by the dark spectres of the sleep of reason is a popular field from which Collishaw frequently digs up the exquisite treasures he so dearly loves to play with. His long-term series of large-format photographs of dead butterflies – whose title, *Insecticide* (2006), can be read in two different ways – captures the fundamental essence of the contrast and connection between beauty and death: with each new work in the series, the boundary between these two poles is gently shifted in a back-and-forth rhythm. The cold flame burning the beautiful tropical flower in an antique pseudo-Gothic cabinet is a type of message not easily conveyed using the language of today, but the level of trepidation that it evokes is quite authentic and vividly felt.

Another ambivalent element in Collishaw's work is his relationship to the history of art. He does not descend to its roots in search of its foundations, the base from which at least a part of today's artistic production has sprung. Instead, he possesses an almost unerring ability to identify a certain difficult-to-define aura capable of functioning in a new context and through a different material. Collishaw is

definitely not concerned with the basic circumstances of the original work's functioning, but he knows how to take advantage of them. His attention is focused primarily on the potential for reinterpreting the older work within a new context, on staging a visual sensation, often while preserving its essential aspects merely as an echo of the original meanings and connotations. In other words, he transforms the old art in the form of a mere symbol into his own original message, which often contrasts with the original work. Dürer's *Great Piece of Turf* (1503) is a good example. Collishaw is here working with that fundamental moment from Dürer's artistic and intellectual world when Dürer raised an insignificant piece of landscape, a detailed study of nature, to the level of a work capable of existing independently, which was a revolutionary act at the time. In *Whispering Weeds* (2011), Collishaw uses animation to let the grass wave in a light breeze, thus magically bringing to life the world of nature from the early 16th century without burdening it with any added meaning. Similarly, *The End of Innocence* (2009) takes Velázquez's phenomenal portrait of Pope Innocent X (1650) – at its time a highly representative depiction of the head of the Catholic Church, then probably the most powerful man in Western civilisation – and dissolves it into thousands of slowly coalescing "pixels", flickering flashes of suspended coloured light falling within a darkened space like an immense waterfall representing the end of innocence. Though they only went halfway, Bacon's dozens of interpretations of the same painting contributed significantly to expanding the subject's range of meanings both into the past and into the present. It is difficult to say which of these works shines of its own accord and which is merely a passive reflection.

But this relationship can also work the other way round. In his series of photographs *Last Meal on Death Row* (2011), Collishaw reproduces almost the very essence of the Dutch still -life. The various surfaces and textures are captured using the Dutch Masters' sense for the most minute detail and visual veracity. The play of light on the food, the reflections off the glass and moisture, the items' arrangement on the table and the use of a dark background do not differ in any significant manner. The only differences are in time, technique and the context of the depicted foodstuffs: The photographs show death -row inmates' actual wishes for their last meal prior to execution. Reality of form meets reality of subject matter. The purpose remains the same: the artistic depiction of a still -life with food, but with a fundamental difference. For the Dutch, still -lives with food were a status display; they represented their dream of the monetary and social status they were striving for and hoped to achieve.

But they were also evidence of their refined taste and real living standard. What is more, this type of art also showed their independence and freedom from the demands of the Catholic Church when it came to deciding which subjects were worthy of artistic representation. By comparison, in the photographic series *Single Nights* (2007) the use of a high -contrast chiaroscuro – a reference to the paintings of George de la Tour – remains associated with the original intention of depicting the life of people on the margins of society. These photographs of women and children are practically a social documentary, capturing the difficult lives of very real single mothers living near Collishaw's studio. Similarly, in *The Corporeal Audit* (2012), a beam of light, strikingly reminiscent of a copier or scanner slowly passes over the dead body of Christ covered in a thin cloth. This almost magically brings to the fore the details of a fateful situation with the disturbing coldness of the contemporary world. On a basic level, Collishaw merely recreated and underscored the exceptional craftsmanship of the 18th -century Neapolitan sculptor Giuseppe Sanmartino and his ability to carve marble into a light fabric clinging to the dead body, to which he added the seemingly banal detail of the band of light. Both layers of the work – historical and contemporary – exist in a fragile balancing act involving the subtle and iconographically precise depiction of the fundamental dividing line between light and dark (in both a real and metaphorical sense) and the still physical presence of the dead body, separated from the world of the living by the magically thin and airy fabric made of solid marble and exposed to the inquisitive gaze of some great examiner.

In the late 19th century, the world was developing in two divergent directions. Alongside a fiercely defended conservatism that clung to past values and attempted to preserve them as long as possible, the era also saw the slow (from today's perspective) expansion of rational progress and engineering.

In fact, it gave us many incredibly obscure inventions and patents whose aim was often the technological representation or reproduction of reality. Most of these inventions, however, disappeared with time, replaced by different and more meaningful solutions. The somewhat inconsistent manner in which these inventions reproduced reality, and their often short-lived existence (even in their own time, many of these inventions were nothing more than a curiosity), adds an unusual layer of meanings to such works, one that today hints at old and partially forgotten blind alleys of history, echoes of the past that we know only fragmentarily and in an entirely different sense. Collishaw likes to reach into this reservoir in order to revive half-forgotten techniques such as the zoetrope, Pepper's ghost effect, simple animated figures or the use of phosphorescent paints. In *All Things Fall* (2014), the rapidly spinning zoetrope transforms the massacre of the innocents, anachronistically situated in a circular Renaissance-era church, into a kaleidoscope of brutality, an endlessly repeating, vulgar and carnival-like chaos, a cheap sensation that confronts the viewer with a story from the Bible mined from the depths of our consciousness.

We find a similar approach in *Albion* (2017), a giant negative of a slowly revolving oak, the last remaining tree of Sherwood Forest, which according to tradition provided shelter to Robin Hood. The dreamlike spectre of the historic oak recalls the silvery light of moon, which seems to erase the burden of the place's historical gravity and the place this myth holds within English history. At the same time, however, it is a faint echo of earlier meanings, which in this case had an almost formative influence on the understanding of English history in the 19th century. Standing in distinct contrast to this somewhat detached and playful use of technological curiosities is *Deliverance* (2008), one of the exhibition's central pieces. The tragic events of the Beslan school siege in early September 2004 emerge from the darkness in staged scenes depicting the tension-fraught rescue attempt. Various images are flashed onto phosphorescent walls, slowly fade in a greenish light and disappear, only to return after a moment as an even more urgent memento. Collishaw found an exceptionally effective technological approach to faithfully portraying a tragic situation and translating a past event into the present without losing the context of the situation or its emotional charge. Besides using the technique of projecting images onto a wall covered in phosphorescent paint, he works with visual details that are a part of our collective awareness of the tragic failures of our society: Some of the people are arranged in poses from well-known photographs of human suffering from past wars. Made present through such repetition, the past is in fact not drained but reinforced; it takes on an iconic character and becomes a universal symbol even though it is, paradoxically, presented as a fleeting and fading image. The symbolism of *Deliverance* is both very imperative and precise in its layering and combination of very different levels of reality.

The use of interconnected layers of reality over time is a central element in the oeuvre of Mat Collishaw, one that characterizes nearly his entire body of work. Important points of reference and inspiration include selected works from the history of the visual arts, which he variously borrows from, imitates, appropriates, lets speak on their own, intervenes in or uses as a methodological aid. In any case, he never tries to copy them directly or to straightforwardly translate them into other contexts. He is well aware that we cannot go back in time. However, even if these older works could be copied faithfully and precisely, we must consider everything that has happened since they were created. Age-old visual stereotypes – even specific images mined from the depths of past centuries – exist and function quite differently today. Their content, meaning and sense has shifted, as they absorb the entire duration of their existence. At the same time, for most of this existence they have encouraged reflections that have expanded their layers of meaning while preserving the traces of the intervening years. If such a work is placed within the here and now, it must by necessity act in both directions. On the one hand, it introduces new facets into the past and can even destabilize its established and more or less fixed function and place in history. And on the other hand, it can fundamentally enrich our lives at the very least by an echo, a kind of allusion to a past that is easily lost from view due to the false impression that everything important is taking place right now. Their contribution to our reality is primarily in their multi-layered message, which by its very nature must provide the contexts that contemporary interpretations can – indeed, must – be based on. But reproductions of the past can easily become unbound from their original context, naturally losing the

fundamental interrelationships that formed the framework of their message, until all that is left is a fading echo on the level of mere feeling. But even when presented in a different form, vague memories can bring back lost motifs and ideas – entire complexes of meaning, even – and strengthen their meaning precisely because they are presented in a setting alien to their original intention but whose openness is capable of creating new contexts and connections.

Collishaw's use of the art of the past has created entirely new, often even richer works than anything envisioned by their original authors. But in these historical excursions, we must ignore the process of spiritualization, which every message from the past is characterized by and encased in along with our personal emotions, although these always act *post quem*. In other words, we should try to imagine the historical model at the time of its creation, purified of all the layers it has accumulated over time. By doing so, a large contrast in meanings is revealed to us, usually resulting from a lack of sufficient information capable of providing a complete picture of the world at the time – a world that we cannot experience but that we can merely attempt, however clumsily, to somehow reconstruct. Most of our knowledge about the history of paintings and their period contexts comes from a very brief period of time just preceding our own era, when people began to reflect on art in a manner and form that we today can recognize and understand. Nevertheless, even these reflections tend to offer an interpretation of (rather than insight into) the artists' true original intentions. This game with the past has many different pitfalls, since by its very nature art made today cannot have certain essential qualities that are created retroactively and spontaneously and that cannot be in any way influenced or programmed. For Collishaw, working with the reality of an original, historical work of art often means translating not the entire set of intricately structured meanings, references, allusions or even myths about the work itself, but only certain layers of the work – layers that furthermore can only be read within today's contexts or sometimes just within the context of Collishaw's work. But he does more than just dig up treasures from the depths of previous eras. Some of his works – *Deliverance*, for instance – feel as if they have been sent back outside of real time. By their manner of execution, Collishaw's reports from our world today, essentially quick news items with a short expiration date, acquire an entirely new dimension and become a timeless message, a majestic and monumental body of work that rises above everyday banality.