

## The Centrifugal Soul

Geoffrey Miller

Welcome to sexual selection for visual beauty. Here's a gorgeous zoetrope by English artist Mat Collishaw, who's fascinated by flowers, insects, mutations, sex and death. It's big, bright, and trippy, designed to defamiliarize animal ornamentation so we can better see its analogies to human art.

It shows male birds from Australia and New Guinea displaying their courtship plumage, a form of visual ornamentation that evolved to attract female birds. These include some of the most aesthetically impressive animals on Earth – the superb bird of paradise, magnificent bird of paradise, six-wired bird of paradise, and magnificent riflebird. Their plumage is a sexually-selected 'fitness indicator' that shows off their good genes and good health. So, if females select carefully for beautiful plumage, they'll have healthier offspring and pass on more of their own genes.

We also see flowers that evolved to attract hummingbirds as pollinators – a form of sexual selection between species. Plants can evolve to grow beauty even though they have no brains at all, as long as the eyes and brains of pollinators can appreciate them.

The bowerbirds are especially relevant to human art. The males construct elaborate bowers to attract females, and decorate them with any eye-candy that they can find – flowers, shells, stones, even bottle caps. Some bowerbirds even create forced-perspective illusions that play upon the depth perception systems of females to make the male look bigger relative to his bower. The bowers aren't just showing off good health, but also good brains, because it takes years to learn how to build an attractive bower. In fact, biologists have found more than 200 species in which animals create artistic displays in their environment to attract mates, and that's 200 more examples than can be offered for any other theory about the evolutionary origins and functions of human art.

'The Centrifugal Soul' is the title of this piece, and it's also the title of a chapter in my book 'Spent', about runaway consumerism as a form sexual signalling. The centrifugal idea is that evolution pushed us to spin out our mental traits in all directions, conspicuously, creatively, and promiscuously, to attract others. We didn't just evolve big clever brains for tool-making and social strategizing; we also evolved them to show off our good genes through mental fitness indicators including visual art, music, humour, story-telling, and other creative displays.