

# The Daily Telegraph

‘Collishaw’s great skill is to use one form of illusion to illustrate another. The optical kind draws out the psychological kind... The things we think we see, the things we think we want, the things we think are true about ourselves, the past, or what’s in front of us – this is what Collishaw develops, as if from invisible ink. And the fact that he can convert such abstract ideas into works that are elegant and entertaining makes him, uniquely among artists and thinkers so far this century, a cross between an aesthetic philosopher and a magician.’

— *Gaby Wood*



# Somewhere between art and illusion

Virtual reality meets Victorian fakery in Mat Collishaw's eerie new works, finds *Gaby Wood*



If you could live in a virtual world, would you? That is, perhaps, a strange thing to wonder when you're wearing a headset and a heavy backpack and are walking through an environment you know is not real. The artificiality, and even the relative discomfort, would seem to assert itself. When I tried out Mat Collishaw's extraordinary virtual reality installation, *Thresholds*, in his south London studio a few weeks ago, I knew that it was impressive and magical and strange, but being in it didn't prepare me for the effects of returning to reality. There is a before and after. You don't understand how much you enjoyed the virtual world until you feel the urge to go back.

Paul Tennent, the Nottingham University Research Fellow who has helped Collishaw to design the computer system, says it's common to have "dissociation issues". He doesn't call it virtual reality. He calls it "augmented virtuality", as if the so-called real world were a mere mirage in the first place. As soon as he says that – why? It's just a phrase, after all – everything around you feels a little bit less familiar. Collishaw smiles as I hand back the headset. "The human mind is a very suggestible thing," he says.

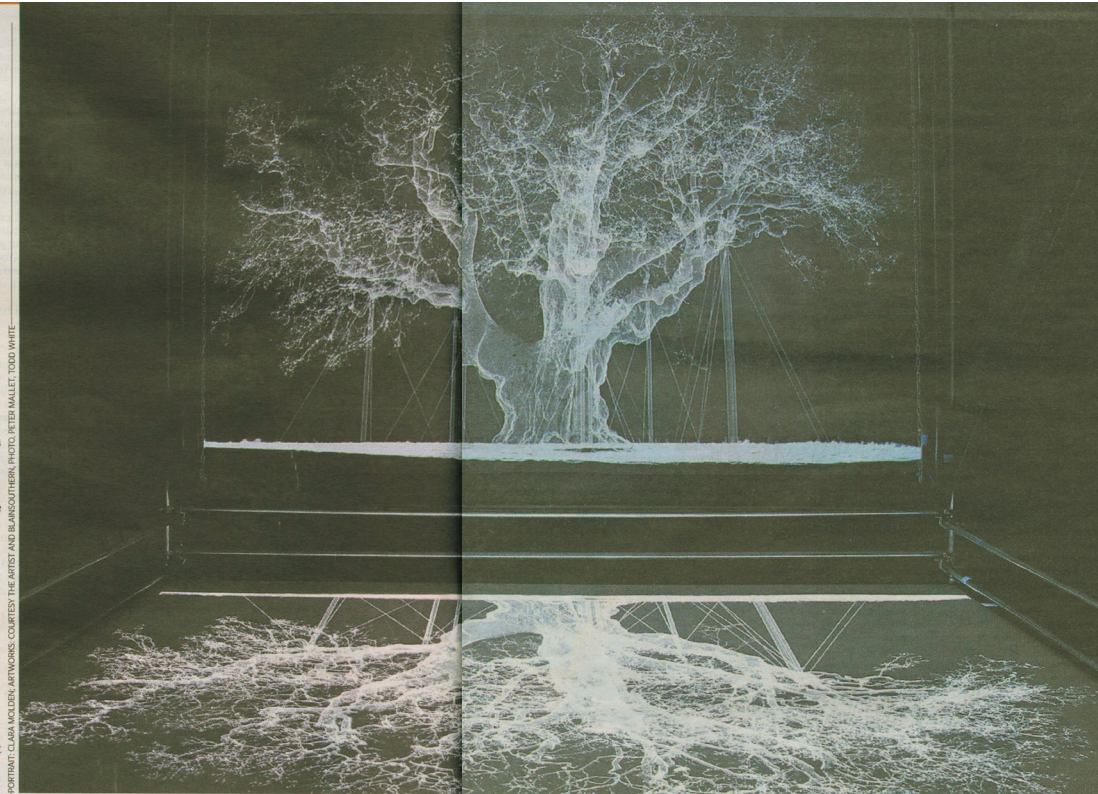
Collishaw, who is 51, was one of the original Young British Artists who came out of Goldsmiths College in the late Eighties. Though he now lives in the pub in Camberwell they used to frequent as students, the YBA phenomenon is not something he particularly likes to dredge up. It's understandable: they never really thought of themselves as a group in that way.

Besides, you could say that the group they were identified as is a little ossified now: Damien Hirst's shark and Tracey Emin's tent were the shock tactics of another age. But Collishaw, one of that generation's less shouty protagonists, has become consistently more interesting in his work as time has passed. He is the most serious and intricate thinker among them, and the two exhibitions he has in London this month show him at his best.

*Thresholds*, which will launch as part of the Photo London fair at Somerset House on the 18th, is a virtual recreation of the first exhibition of photographs by Henry Fox Talbot in 1839. Or not exactly that; in an exhibition in Birmingham of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Fox Talbot displayed 93 of his "photogenic drawings".

Together, they were just one item among 222 on show. The rest were industrial inventions – models of bridges and steam engines and sugar mills (also, a "humane man-trap" and "whip-making machine") – or

"The human mind is a very suggestible thing," Mat Collishaw



Branching out: the ghostly *Albion*; above, *Gasconades (Killing It)*, 2012

At college, he started appropriating images from advertising, or forensic photography (this piece in the famous *Freeze* exhibition of 1988 was a bullet wound, blown up and divided into several frames). But then, he says, "it suddenly became very fashionable to make artworks with blood and gore. I thought: if that's what people want, it's not what I want to do. It became very modish. A severed head is not something you should be modish about. I don't think I found it a little bit distasteful. Then I started using Victorian imagery, which was deeply unfashionable – weird stuff that everybody was trying to forget – you know, fairies and gothic carving. But still trying to just make work about the slightly morbid human fascination with the darker side."

Years ago, the art critic Waldemar Januszczak, who is a great champion of Collishaw's, asked rhetorically why "a whiff of failure" rose up from his career. His aversion to fashion in art might

**'Being submerged in fiction is far more entertaining than the real world'**

advances in manufacturing, like porcelain or paper or piano wire. A tiny section at the end was headed "Philosophical Apparatus", and this is where the first photographic prints were shown, on the threshold of art and science.

Collishaw was working on an installation at the Library of Birmingham (2015's wonderful *In Camera*, in which he printed archival crime scene photographs with phosphorescent ink and trapped them in Perspex boxes), when he learned of the 1839 exhibition. He had been looking for a virtual reality project for some time, but he wasn't interested in the glaringly fantastical imagery usually associated with VR games – unicorns and elves and hot air balloons. "I wanted something that was quite real, and

mundane," he says. Fox Talbot's original prints are too light-sensitive to be shown, and that gave Collishaw the idea of replicating the historical scene virtually. An architectural historian helped him recreate the Barry and Pugin room; and he built boxes you could touch, which would become vitrines containing Fox Talbot's prints once you were wearing the headset. "The key thing in this whole experience is the ability to walk around and touch things," he explains. "It's really quite uncharted territory. There's one company in Salt Lake City that I've seen do it with another haptic environment – it's a shoot-em-up game with monsters." The effect is specifically spatial. It's not like wearing 3D glasses and knowing they'll alter your vision. It's like being in a room in the Palace of Westminster – which was built by the same architects. The adjoining rooms stretch out beyond the one you're in; the fire in the hearth warms your hands as you approach (the warmth is generated by an electric heater). And outside the window, a revolution is brewing...

In the course of his research, Collishaw discovered a letter from

Fox Talbot, in which the photographer voiced concerns about putting on the exhibition during the Chartist's revolt – and "suddenly there was a social and political context. I could set the whole thing in". In the 19th century virtual world, rioters are shouting and throwing things at the windows. "One of the reasons these people are unhappy is because the Industrial Revolution is taking their jobs away from them through factory automation," Collishaw says. "So this cosy little room with its fire burning will hopefully then have a slightly tainted tone about it,

because one of the social consequences of these technological innovations was disaster. For me this is tied in with what's happening with the digital revolution: we don't really know where that's taking us, and a lot of people think it's going to be worse than the Industrial Revolution in terms of job losses."

When not in an imaginary setting, Collishaw lives above his studio (the one that was once a pub), with Alex, his 26-year-old son from a former relationship, his partner – the

taxidermy artist Polly Morgan – and their baby son Cliff. The first floor rooms are elegantly decorated, and littered with objects that may or may not be works of art: a pair of mouse traps labelled "Mat" and "Alex", a Gary Hume drawing, a plastic baby gym, two large cabinets full of medicine bottles which are either works by Damien Hirst or indications of severe hypochondria.

Collishaw himself is a sturdy presence compared to his spectral works, and he speaks carefully, in a slight growl. He tells me that until he arrived at Goldsmiths, he was doing very classical charcoal drawings, and had little knowledge of any art after 1960. But the conceptual leanings of the college appealed to him. He visited all the art schools, and when he got to Goldsmiths he saw "one guy with six blank canvases on the floor, and his head in his hands". Collishaw thought: "This is the place for me."

He had grown up in Nottingham, in a family of Dawn Christadelphians. His father made false teeth. "I grew up without a TV," he says. "So any fakery, I'm totally up for it. I just love being submerged in fiction – far more entertaining than the real world."



On the threshold of art and science: a detail from Collishaw's zoetrope-based work *The Centrifugal Soul*

darkness on a black screen, and becomes animated, the figures moving very slowly.

*The Centrifugal Soul*, the show he has this month at Blain Southern gallery in London, has two parts: one is a dazzling model based on a zoetrope; the other, a haunting projection inspired by the Victorian theatrical illusion, Pepper's Ghost. In the zoetrope, mechanical birds of paradise move in and out of flowers, spinning and synchronised with flashing lights. To watch it in motion feels like watching a very early silent film.

Though the pre-cinematic principle called "the persistence of vision" dictates that anything projected at 16 frames per second or more will appear to be a single smooth motion, Collishaw has chosen to set his zoetrope at a slower, more uncanny rate. "It becomes very mechanical and repetitive, and because of that, I like to think, a little bit sinister," he explains. Just as the birds are condemned to repeat their seduction routine, the viewer is seduced in the gallery, tricked into entering this odd optical world.

Pepper's Ghost piece, *Albion*, is a laser scan of the Major Oak, Robin Hood's supposed hiding place in Sherwood Forest. The eerie translucent projection rotates very slowly, and seems to have thrown off the painted birds that hang on the gallery walls around it – each one a homage to Fabritius's famous painting of a chained goldfinch.

"The tree is interesting because it wants to die," Collishaw tells me. "It's very, very old, and it's held up by these steel crutches. It has chains internally, holding it up. It's very sad. This great, majestic old thing looks like some kind of S&M sculpture. So it becomes a portrait of England – this mythical idea that everyone wants to believe in, which is perhaps something we should let go, and accept the fact that England is mutating and becoming something else all the time."

Collishaw's great skill is to use one form of illusion to illustrate another. The optical kind draws out the psychological kind – something closer to delusion or disillusion. Of course his works look like ghosts: they are portraits of things that are latent in our minds, hovering until the right "philosophical apparatus" comes along and renders them apparent.

The things we think we see, the things we think we want, the things we think are true about ourselves, the past, or what's in front of us – this is what Collishaw develops, as if from invisible ink. And the fact that he can convert such abstract ideas into works that are elegant and entertaining makes him, uniquely among artists and thinkers so far this century, a cross between an aesthetic philosopher and a magician.

*The Centrifugal Soul* is at Blain Southern, London W1, until May 27. *Thresholds* launches at Photo London, Somerset House, London WC2 (photolondon.org) on May 18