

1. The Expulsion of Mat Collishaw

*I can imagine, in some otherworld
Primeval-dumb, far back
In that most awful stillness, that only gasped and hummed,
Humming-birds raced down the avenues.*

- D.H.Lawrence – ‘Humming Birds’

So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

- Genesis 3:24

How much D H Lawrence have you read? Probably not a lot. Let's face it, Lawrence, the rhapsodic, bi-curious, pan-continental shagger from Nottingham, is hardly a go-to figure in 21st century art appreciation. You won't see Lawrence being quoted in essays by Hans Ulrich Obrist. I myself would reach for papal language to evoke Lawrence's 21st century artistic presence. I would describe it as anathema.

It's a language I'm tempted to employ as well for Mat Collishaw. He's a dark one is Mat. His art welcomes blackness and horror with an enthusiasm that would have looked sinful – very sinful - in the age that gave us Lawrence, but which, in our own blank times, appears closer to anachronistic: detached, gothic, backward looking. We no longer understand sin with the appropriate dread. We remain enthused by evil, we are aware of transgression, but we judge things mostly in greys. We don't partition into right and wrong with the clarity that was once our gift. And it is into this moral vacuum, this no man's land of sinfulness, that Mat Collishaw comes a-prowling, tip-toeing about in his recurrent darkness, a sneak thief in the night, sticking pins into our souls and hoping, so hopelessly, to re-animate our memory of the fall with his voodooistic acupuncture art.

Similar claims can be made for D.H. Lawrence. Geographically, the two of them are from the same neck of the woods. Literally. Lawrence was from Eastwood, a village on the edge of Sherwood Forest that's in the Domesday book. Collishaw is from Nottingham itself. So the Nottingham morality – we rob from the rich, we give to the poor – is one of his inheritances. And he obviously knows all about the forest and its Robin Hood tree because there it is, huge and ghostly, haunting the vacuum at the heart of this exhibition with its spectral presence: the hollow trunk; the place to hide; the emptiness at the centre of *The Centrifugal Soul*.

Lawrence was brought up with biblical rhythms ringing in his ears. His Nottingham folk were bible-bashers who trusted fully in the great book and who filled their wayward son with an inviolate sense of its sanctity. When, Lawrence transgressed, which was pretty much all the time - if he could sin, he sinned - he did so with an ecstatic awareness of his guilt. This enthusiastic transgression was simultaneously old-fashioned and progressive. His knowledge of the old sexual laws was quaint, but the way he broke them, the delirium with which he tugged and peeped and climaxed, showed a disregard for propriety that was fully modern.

Again, all this is like Mat Collishaw, who was brought up in Nottingham as a Dawn Christadelphian, a 19th century millenarian sect started in America by a renegade Christian called John Thomas who believed in the primacy of the Bible. For the Dawn Christadelphians, the Bible is the only truth there is. That's why I put the quote from Genesis about our expulsion from paradise at the top of this commentary. Not only does it point directly to the artistic territory this event is seeking to explore, but the language of Genesis, the language of expulsion and fall, is the language that Mat Collishaw grew up with. And although, these days, he is no longer a believer, the rhythms of the King James remain within him. What are those ornate birds whirling before you in the Waltzing Matilda of Sin that is *The Centrifugal Soul*? They're birds-of-paradise, silly.

There is much to admire about the Dawn Christadelphians. The modern world is keen to demonise their kind of brotherhood, and to brand it a sect. But ever since I visited Waco, where 80 Branch Davidians from Britain were murdered by the FBI after Bill Clinton sent in the tanks against them, I have been militantly reluctant to think badly of any such grouping. What's precious about them, what's marvellous, is the sense they cherish of the sanctity of existence. For the Dawn Christadelphians, our belief in our own purposelessness - our existentialism, our nihilism, our Sartrean despair – is a betrayal of living. A non state. Open your eyes to the

world, and you open your eyes to wonder and its betrayal. And this note of sanctity rings on in the art of Mat Collishaw, as it rung in the words of D.H.Lawrence.

The sanctity of which I write is not a religious tone. It's an atomic ecstasy that distinguishes the animate from the inanimate: a quality that life has. And it's one of the things this show is about. There are lots of other things. So we'd better get onto those, hadn't we?

2. Birds, Beasts and Flowers

The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his environment.

- D. H. Lawrence

The whole event is set in darkness. Of course it is. Mat Collishaw's displays are usually set in darkness. In the past, the explanation favoured for his love of black is that he was overly interested in the satanic: the morbid. Perhaps he is. But he also haunts the dark for practical reasons. Recurrently in his art, he has evinced a fascination with the early Victorian machinery used to achieve illusions. With spectral projections, pioneering modes of photography, magic lanterns, fairy deceits and the like. His art is often an art of mechanics and illusions. And for the illusions to work, he needs twilight.

At first glimpse, *The Centrifugal Soul* could well be some kind of a trap. There's something ominous about the quotidian metalwork surrounding the central bouquet of brightly coloured flowers. When you step closer to examine its enticements, will it snap shut on you? Isn't that how honey traps work? The rat sees the cheese. The rat takes a nibble. The trap snaps shut. Kompromat.

The initial mood, therefore, is a mix of mystery and temptation. And because there are exotic birds fluttering in a busy orbit about the enticing fairground flowers, you are prompted, perhaps, to think of sex. Not with juicy Lawrencian vigour – not at all - but on an innocent classroom level. As if you've encountered a model in a museum that explains the behaviour of the birds and bees. It's the first reality of The Centrifugal Force. Stage one of its spin cycle.

Slowly, it starts to revolve. Then quicker. And quicker again. Faster and faster. And as it quickens, a new set of storylines become evident. The paradisiacal birds are moving. They hover. They plunge. They puff out their feathers and begin to dance the dance of courtship. In my down time as an art critic, I'm a bit of bird watcher, so you will not mind, I hope, if I recognise the species for you that are now ganging up on the flowers. The ones at the top with the blue chests are Six Wired Birds-of-Paradise, *Parotia sefilata*. The ones with the orange wings and blue beaks are Magnificent Bird-of-Paradise, *Cicinnurus magnificus*. The hovering ones, darting in and out, performing cunnilingus on the blossoms, are humming birds, and they are always difficult to tell apart. My guess is that these are Golden-Tailed Sapphires, *Chrysuronia oenone*. Not that it matters for long. Because in its third stage, *The Centrifugal Soul* begins to spin so violently that the avian identities become a blur. Vacuum cleaner technology has turned nature's subtle mating game into a spinning nightmare.

Zoetropes - of which this is a modern version - were invented early in the Victorian age as a form of pre-film animation. They take their name from the greek, *zoe*, which means life, and *tropos*, which means turning. So – wheel of life. They create their illusions of movement with a combination of spinning and strobing, and the excitement they trigger still has a sense of the miraculous about it. Indeed, these low-tech mechanical marvels seem to me to prompt a visceral excitement that out-excites their sophisticated modern equivalents. Imagine how fruitfully the madly spinning zoetropes must once have pleased the Victorian mind.

This one, however, is a vehicle for glum ideas. According to the evolutionary psychologist, Geoffrey Miller, the brains behind the show, the source of its scientific understanding, sexual attraction has evolved into a contemporary form that is low-grade and hollow. We no longer broadcast our sexual status in the skilled manner of the bird-of-paradise with intricate displays of dancing and astonishing flashes of beauty. Instead, we buy stuff

on Oxford St that does it for us: new trainers, painted nails, trinkets from Accessorize. "Premium products are bought to display wealth, status, and taste, and they miss the deeper mental traits that people are actually wired to display, traits such as kindness, intelligence, and creativity". We shop, we show, and at our centre, says Miller, is the vacuum that forms at the heart of a dust devil: *The Centrifugal Soul*.

Hollowness is what this show is most often about. In a letter written to Cynthia Asquith in 1915, Lawrence complained of what he called 'the hollow men' - men whose 'souls are hollow' because they have no 'real being'. His letter was written ten years before T. S. Eliot's celebrated poem, *The Hollow Men*, put the phrase into general symbolic use. Lawrence's observations were, therefore, pioneering.

For its next step in the dark, the show confronts us with a ghostly tree. Huge, gnarled, spreading, crippled, the decaying tree turns slowly in a ramshackle vitrine and seems to float. It's another of Collishaw's Victorian illusions, achieved with controlled lighting and angled reflections, an illusion technique called Pepper's ghost. In the past, it was used to project the ghost of Banquo onto the stage in productions of *Hamlet*. Here, it lifts the slowly revolving 3-D tree to crucifixion height.

If you are any kind of Robin Hood fan, or if you've been to Sherwood Forest, you will recognise the Major Oak. It's probably the most famous tree in Britain, and one of the most mythologised. According to Nottinghamshire legend, this was where Robin Hood and his Merry Men hid from the Sheriff of Nottingham - in the hollow centre of the Major Oak. Re-imagined as a 3-D laser scan, how weak it looks, how sickly. Propped up since Victorian times on an elaborate system of crutches, the Major Oak is a national monument on its last misbegotten legs. Collishaw has called the piece *Albion*, and to evoke its crippled spirit I'm going to throw into my text the first word that springs to mind - 'Brexit'.

Surrounding the hollow *Albion* tree are more birds sitting in paintings on the walls. This time the birds are British. Robins. Chaffinches. Cole tits. Common garden avifauna striking a glum paradisiacal note in a downbeat British way. The backcloths against which they sit are covered in graffiti and blurry name tags. This now is their paradise: a garden of spray paint scrawled onto the walls in a final, desperate lunge at sexual attraction. I'm here. I'm nobody. Look at me.

Back at *The Centrifugal Soul*, at the bottom of the spinning bouquet, the darkest of the forest birds is collecting the bright blue bottle tops that litter the forest floor, and decorating its nest with them. They must be bower birds, *Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*, which plaster their nests with bright things to attract a mate. And that's the upside, the only upside, of Mat Collishaw's centrifugal lament.

The final product of the mating urge, the end result of our expulsion from paradise, is art itself.

