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Collishaw’s mask of Elizabeth I sees past her own contrived fiction to the loneliness and fear of death behind the pomp.’

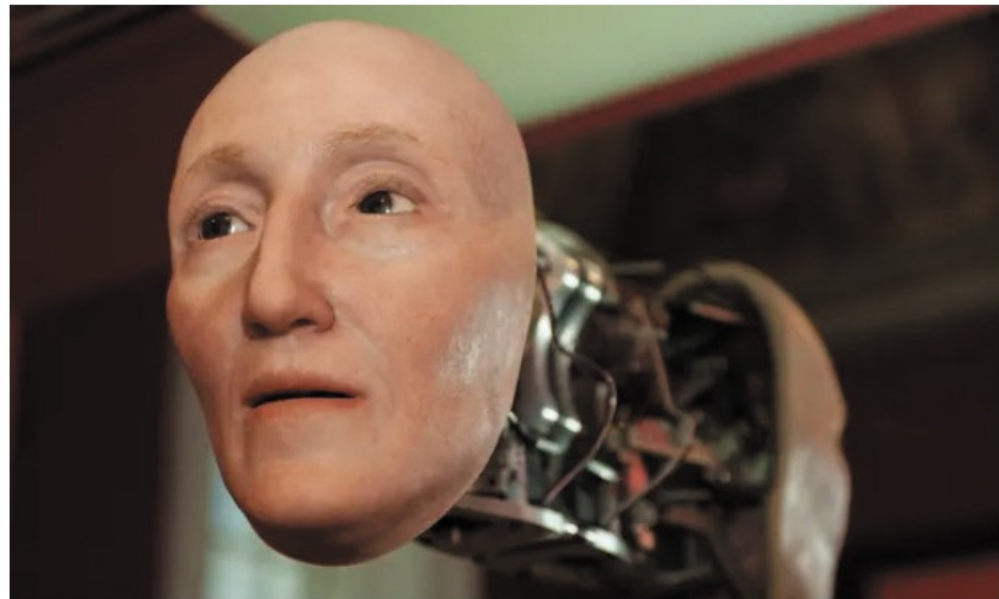
— *Jonathan Jones*

The Mask of Youth review - Mat Collishaw's spooky audience with the Virgin Queen

★★★★☆

Queen's House, Greenwich

Reincarnated by robotics, the unsettling face of Elizabeth I grimacing at the Armada Portrait is haunted by ageing, empire and a no-deal Brexit



▲ The macabre side of portraiture ... Mat Collishaw's mask of Elizabeth I in the Queen's House, Greenwich. Photograph: David Westwood/National Maritime Museum/Blain Southern

The eyes of the latest portrait of Queen Elizabeth I follow you around the room. No, they really do. Mat Collishaw, the former Young British Artist - not so young any more - is having a second life as Britain's most intelligent creator of digital art. His hyperrealistic mask of the Tudor queen comes to life, whirring and grimacing, to shock visitors in the shadowy former royal chambers of the Queen's House. As the days darken, the effect will get spookier. By Halloween it should be eliciting shrieks.

The Virgin Queen's dark eyes dart around nervously. Her mouth opens as if to speak but she cannot find the words. She is dazed by a future she can't comprehend, a robot ghost staring in horror and doubt at her own painted image - Collishaw's undead death mask has her eyes fixed on the [Armada Portrait](#), painted in 1588 and a treasure of the Queen's House after being [meticulously restored](#). Pale-faced and encased in jewels, with her fingers touching the New World on a globe as she contemplates Britain's imperial destiny, the woman in this painting is the regal embodiment of stout British resistance to an attempted continental invasion. Phillip II of Spain, the most powerful European ruler of the day and widowed husband of Elizabeth's Catholic sister Mary, thought he could sail in and seize this sceptred isle. But Liz and her dashing sea dogs had other ideas.



▲ Patriotic confidence ... the Armada Portrait of Elizabeth I. Photograph: Philip Toscano/Press Association



The prosthetic mask and the metal mechanism behind it are suspended in a mirrored recess, so when you look at her troubled expression, you also see what she can see reflected in the mirror around her. The Armada Portrait shows Elizabeth I as a young woman, the pearl-skinned [Faerie Queene](#). In reality, in 1588, she was 55. Collishaw's techno-portrait shows her as she might have looked at that age, without the flattering deceit of the anonymous artist.

It is unsettling to see a figure from history bemused by her own image. Collishaw meditates not just on age and youth - his Elizabeth is about the same age as his YBA generation is now - but the macabre side of portraiture itself. His rubber-faced queen has been decapitated: she has lost everything but her face. It lends a new literalness to the old idea of a portrait as the "head" of someone famous. Though the Tudors were not sluggish when it came to chopping off heads: Elizabeth I's mother, [Anne Boleyn](#), lost hers to a royally commanded axe; Elizabeth herself ordered the beheading of [Mary](#), Queen of Scots.

Plenty for her to think about then, as her face twitches in the mirrored void. Like Caravaggio's great painting of the decapitated, snake-haired Medusa, she is a face imprisoned in limbo, gazing at herself in paralysed dread.

Collishaw's mask of Elizabeth I sees past her own contrived fiction to the loneliness and fear of death behind the pomp. The Armada Portrait is not only a painting of one person. It is a piece of Britain's history. Behind the queen, Spanish ships are sinking. It is not just Elizabeth I who contemplates her vanity but Britain itself. The national myth of self-sufficiency that the defeat of the Spanish Armada helped create has mutated and decayed into Brexit. Collishaw's Elizabeth has come back to life in the Britain of Theresa May, and she's not too happy about it. Looking at the grand patriotic confidence of the Armada Portrait, she sees how all that pride has melted into petty nationalism and no-deal nightmares. Legends tell of national heroes who will come back to save Britain in its hour of need. This great queen has returned from history but she looks as helpless as the rest of us.

● The Mask of Youth is at the Queen's House, Greenwich from 3 October.