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— *Brian Appleyard*

VIRTUALLY BRILLIANT

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BRYAN APPELYARD



Back in the 1990s, when Young British Artists were wild and crazy media fodder, and not yet stinking rich, Mat Collishaw was doorstepped by the tabloids. “They asked me if I was the person who made the stains on Tracey Emin’s bed.” He was then Emin’s boyfriend, and the bed in question was *My Bed*, a work consisting of the smears and detritus of several weeks of her intimate life. Emin, who failed to win the Turner prize with the work, complained to her friends that she had lost £500 by being at the ceremony and not appearing on an arty TV show. In fact, she had. She was just too drunk to remember.

It made her a household name – the sort of person you would never want in your household – and, as collateral damage, Collishaw became known as her photographer boyfriend. He is not, in fact, a photographer, and he’s certainly no longer her boyfriend.

“I don’t think about myself as a photographer. Photographers wear black, and are very techie – and I don’t, and I’m not. You get this whole aesthetic with photographers. They’re meticulous people.”

Collishaw is a YBA – probably, as Emin would have noticed, the best-looking one – but he is somehow detached. He is not, for a start, stinking rich. “It’s just that a lot of my peers have performed way out of proportion, like Damien [Hirst], who is my mate from college. He’s making an exhibition in Venice that cost £50m. That’s not normal. So the standards are a little perverse.”

Also, in spite of being among the most prominent YBAs in the 1990s, he is not quite so prominent now. In a review, my colleague Waldemar Januszczak spoke of “a whiff of failure [rising] up from his career”, but went on to say he is one of the best British artists around. Which he is.

“Whiff of failure!” Wow, Waldemar, thanks. But it was a great review. How do you judge success? I’m living in a

very nice building here, and making art for a living – that’s pretty good.”

The very nice building is the King William IV pub, on a corner in Camberwell, south London, which he bought some years ago because he “couldn’t afford anything like this in Hackney”. Downstairs are his studio and that of his partner, the artist Polly Morgan. Upstairs is home, which on this occasion contains a nanny; his baby son, Clifford; Polly; an assistant; and two dogs, Tony, a terrier mix, and Trotsky the Staffie. The King William is all a man could want: I’d buy it off him in a heartbeat.

Part of the studio area is painted white and furnished with white tables with white boxes on the top. A builder’s electric fire glowing red is the only dash of colour. Two tech guys load me with a sort of Ghostbusters backpack and a virtual-reality headset.

At once, the white room expands to become a large Victorian gothic space, decorated with paintings. The white tables and boxes have become wood-framed vitrines containing photographs. The builder’s fire has acquired real flames, at which you can warm your hands. The other people who have been Ghostbusted up have become shimmering, elongated ovals of white light.

Noises are coming from outside. I look out. There’s a street, a classical colonnade and facade. Early-19th-century policemen walk up and down; a crowd appears.

This is Collishaw’s *Thresholds*, which will first be seen at Somerset House as part of the annual Photo London fest. It is a virtual recreation of a show in 1839 in Birmingham of photographs by Henry Fox Talbot. The first photograph ever was made by Nicéphore Niépce in 1825, but in 1839 Louis Daguerre applied for patents for his “daguerrotype process”. This effectively announced the arrival of photography as a commercial technology. The Birmingham exhibition was Talbot’s competitive response.

For most visitors to the show, these would have been the first photographs they had ever seen. The event was, in fact, the start of the image-soaked world we now inhabit. Daguerre’s method produced beautiful one-offs,



but Talbot used negatives and paper, so they could be multiply reproduced; he, not the Frenchman, owned the future.

“I’ve been looking for a project using virtual reality for a while, just because it’s there,” Collishaw says. “This was a no-brainer. I didn’t want to do a project with unicorns and magical elves and strange misty forests. I wanted something that was mildly mundane and strangely uncanny.”

“We are using the latest tech to go back to the birth of the medium. It’s kind of like a conceit that you’re experiencing the birth of photography, but you’re experiencing it through the latest technology in visual simulation.”

Collishaw’s obsession with the uncanny and the making of images emerges from his childhood in Notting-ham, spent under the fierce discipline of the Dawn Christadelphians – and, frankly, if you want your boy to be an artist, this is exactly how you should bring him up.

“There were several hours when you were forced to sit down and do nothing while someone spoke. I did a lot of drawing. I also remember looking at art

books while listening to hymns. It was a transporting experience and quite pleasant. There was a sense of communion with a great spirit that is not a bad thing to instil in a young mind.”

Best of all, the DCs think television is wicked and “of this world”, so they never had a set. “We didn’t have a TV because it was potentially malign, so to me this box was charged with mystery. For everybody else, it was entertainment – for me, it was mystery.”

He had a paper round and would peep into windows to catch a glimpse of the magic box. “I’d see whatever was on. I remember Bruce Forsyth. It wasn’t the television that mattered, it was the animated image that had such strange allure.”

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The best-looking YBA
Mat Collishaw, far left. Left, an image from his Somerset House show, *Thresholds*

Meanwhile, he drew all the things he could never be: soldiers, cowboys, footballers, rock stars. He was briefly a rhythm guitarist with a band called Herd Instinct, but they dumped him while he was out of the rehearsal room fetching a book about Paul Klee. Everything seemed to be telling him he had to be an artist: there was nothing else.

The final gift of the Christadelphians was morality. It has left him with a desire to seek out seriousness in his art. “For me, that gives the work depth and some kind of reason to be. I can’t be just an artist for art’s sake.”

One other thing from his childhood is that his father was a good amateur photographer, but Collishaw spotted something unusual about his style. “He would often take pictures of sunsets, but I noticed he cropped out the pylons or the nuclear power station. It was nature and beauty, but without all the corruption around. I try to get in the corruption.”

So, for example, he has painted flowers with running, fleshy sores, or butterflies and moths, crushed. “We are misled by flowers because they look pretty. I made them look like breeding machines, which is what they are.”

In his current show at Blain|Southern, in central London, he has paintings of birds chained to iron rings projecting from a concrete wall covered in graffiti. The “pretty” displays of the birds rhyme disturbingly with the brutal colours of the street artists.

So he arrived at Goldsmiths, in London, the YBA alma mater, with quite a package of obsessions, pre-occupations and a certain gothicism of temperament. But he was still just drawing and painting, until one day the sculptor Richard Wentworth remarked that his pictures were all very well, but not as interesting as a paint-spattered cigarette packet on the floor.

“It was a great college. They made you think about how everything was speaking to you and how everything is a language, visually. There were little social indicators, and how you displayed them changed the way people read them. I realised I was working a narrow seam with my charcoal paintings and drawings.”

He had, in effect, been inducted into what would become the YBAs. This involved the abandonment of fixed disciplines of painting and sculpture, and a rejection of the cerebral coolness

of late British modernism. In its place was something visceral, often savage. Collishaw’s exhibit at the 1988 Freeze show was a grim picture of a bullet wound in a head. He speaks of “the thrill of horror”.

“It was easy to have an indifferent relationship with a lot of art around at that time. It was formulaic, to do with form. I wanted to make something that punched through all that and made something you couldn’t help but have a relationship with. It was like a visceral experience, going back to a Francis Bacon-type thing, this primal relationship to a subject. So there was pornography and these horrific medical text books. You experience it as a human being and, secondarily, you assess it for its artistic merits.”

Collishaw never strayed from the gothic desire for visceral impact – he loves darkness, pools of light, the uneasy, the strange and the uncanny – until, oddly, now. *Thresholds* is an altogether calmer show. Indeed, he has gone out of his way to depersonalise the work.

“At certain points, I was thinking that I had to put more into it to make it more of an artwork, but then sometimes it’s best to let things speak for themselves, and I didn’t want to confuse the issue by layering in too much of myself. I just thought the actual idea of recreating this first exhibition of photography in the latest visual technology was such a strange, weird, thrilling thing to do.”

The old Christadelphian moral note is still there, however. He included the Chartist demonstrators outside to raise the tension in the work. Talbot’s pictures were machine-produced, and this was done at the height of the Industrial Revolution. The Chartists wanted social justice, and the uneasy contrast between the demands of the demonstrators and this world-transforming technology connects the work to the present and our own mounting technological anxieties.

Anyway, see it if you can. And buy his stuff, make him Hirst-like money. With luck, he’ll then move to Hackney or Venice, and I can get my hands on the King William. ■

Thresholds, Somerset House, London WC2, from Thursday until June 11; *The Centrifugal Soul*, Blain|Southern, London W1, until May 27