"The reason I'm not sitting in an attic painting with a sable brush onto stretched linen"

INTERVIEW WITH MAT COLLISHAW

Mine Haydaroğlu: Welcome back to Istanbul for your second solo show here. The first was *Afterimage,* held at ARTER in 2013, where you exhibited 18 works. These included the 3D zoetrope *The Garden of Unearthly Delights,* the lithophone *Superveillance* and a sculpture with video projection titled *Ganymede*; works that blended technology with magic. There was also darkness, in the *Burnt Almonds* series, and there was a sensitivity in your reinterpretations of iconic images of the past and present in *Children of a Lesser God* and *Single Nights.* It was an abundance of sensory and intellectual stimuli. Now your second solo show in Istanbul, *Thresholds,* appeals to the mind and the senses as well. What prompted you to create *Thresholds*? How much of it is magic, how much is real?

Mat Collishaw: *I'd been casually looking for a project to make in Virtual Reality (VR) for years but I wanted a subject that was appropriate to the medium. I knew that a 360 degree immersion inside a virtual environment was quite a leap in our relation to the world through images, and I thought this should be acknowledged. By chance I heard about the first major exhibition of photographs by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), in Birmingham in 1839, and was intrigued by the possibility of recreating it. From my experiences, the strangest feelings evoked in VR were when discovering relatively mundane objects that we are familiar with, such as a table or a chair. However, the suspension of disbelief is broken when we can't touch the object we're looking at. All the photographs and apparatus in the exhibition from 1839 were presented in glass vitrines, and I assumed it would be a relatively easy task to build a vitrine in the real world, synchronise it in space with the virtual world, and project lighting, textures and the contents of the exhibition into the vitrines. I was seriously mistaken about how easy this would be, but that was essentially the idea we began to develop. The conceit was that through the VR headsets, you go back in time 170 years to experience what it was like for visitors to see photographs for the first time. However, what you actually experience is this new media, VR, which is the latest development in the trajectory of image-making that photography initiated. The experience can be described as Augmented Virtuality (AV), as it combines aspects of the real world with the simulated apparition of VR. As you walk around the room you see walls, windows and vitrines; the ability to actually touch what you are seeing reinforces the sense that you are tangibly in the space. It was designed to be a relatively straightforward experience with very little magic but a strong sense of the uncanny. To avoid collisions with other visitors, I introduced digital avatars in the form of glowing auras to indicate their presence. These ghost-like figures weren't exactly supernatural, but they seemed appropriate to the theme of travelling back in time - to 'haunt' a room from the past.*

M.H.: In *Thresholds* we are in the realm of scientific research and experimentation. As documented in your own research for *Thresholds*, inventors like Talbot, and institutions such as the British Association for the Advancement of Science, do not speculate on the illusion of things but work to create mechanical, industrial products. Products which have had tremendous impact on the global economy, everyday life, and even our ways of seeing and understanding the world. What do you think about the scientific side of things, and the mindset of these pioneering scientists and inventors? What part do artists play in this realm?

M.C.: *I certainly wouldn't claim that artists have a deeper understanding of the effects of science; I think artists utilise science as a means of expressing ideas better or enhancing their abilities. Science is also deployed by society generally in ways dictated by the context in which the developments emerge. The photographic process developed by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in France was perhaps more beautiful than Talbot's. Daguerre was an artist and a master at creating visual spectacle. In England - the crucible of the Industrial revolution - Talbot's interest lay in the mass production of images, which led to the development of his negative-positive process by which you could produce multiple copies, something that the daguerreotype couldn't do. The French government bought the daguerreotype process from Daguerre and used it as a means of promoting France as a*

great scientific and cultural force. Talbot copyrighted his process in an attempt to monetise it and tried to discover all its potential applications. Many of the photographs in the exhibition recreated in Thresholds *were not straightforward photographs; they were photograms (impressions made by laying botanical specimens on light sensitive paper), copies of engravings and stained glass, and solar microscope images. The artist attempts to reflect on the world around him or her and the human condition, but these reflections are determined by the climate and processes of the era. Cheaper and more widely available paper led Renaissance artists to experiment more with modeling and design; they could spend a lot more time working out how things actually appear and how to capture what they saw. The development of better mirrors and lenses enabled artists to see the world in much greater detail, 'the exact appearance of reality', which they could then transcribe to canvas with paint. However, they were not just idly copying, many believed these new tools allowed them to see God's universe more clearly than before; they felt these apparatus led them to glimpse divine revelations. Science drives technological change, which can provide artists with tools to look at the world in new ways, which in turn changes the way we see and interpret the world.*

M.H.: Can you elaborate on the Chartist riots of the time, which are also simulated in *Thresholds*, and the repercussions regarding the invention of photography, and later on digital technology?

M.C.: *During the early stages of the development of* Thresholds, *where the intention was simply to recreate the 1839 exhibition, a lot of research was undertaken to determine how the exhibition would have looked; from the Charles Barry-designed building to the images and apparatus on display. In the process of researching we started reading about the Chartist demonstrators who were rioting on the streets shortly before the exhibition took place. As I'd also been reading a fair bit about the potential negative effects of digital technology, it seemed an interesting idea to introduce the reverberations of these Chartist protests into the experience. The Chartists wanted the vote and proper representation in Parliament, but they were also concerned about factory automation taking employment away from them as skilled artisans. We discovered letters from Talbot and his associate John Herschel expressing their concerns over the disruption the Chartists could cause to the exhibition. I thought it appropriate to have their presence to indicate that, although the marvels in the exhibition were great demonstrations of technological progress, there were also social implications to these developments, and that the magnificent achievements on display were tainted in some way by this.*

Digital technology is leading to perhaps more drastic changes. Factory automation, whereby robotics, software and algorithms are designed to do all routine work, will potentially effect employment dramatically. We have no idea what jobs will be created in the process of these changes, but it appears that robotics and software will only become more effective, and so it's difficult to imagine employment prospects improving. In addition to this, we are entering an era of bioengineering when digital transplants and genetic engineering can effectively enhance natural biology. This is an exciting and terrifying prospect - and the reason I'm not sitting in an attic painting with a sable brush onto stretched linen! I think it's important that artists try to interact with emerging technologies and create works that reflect on their positive potential but also their malign influences.

M.H.: You have exhibited *Thresholds* in several venues. Can you tell us about your collaborations? Who have you worked with in this project; did you have a team, where did you conduct your research? How many people does this project involve each time it is set up?

M.C.: *The original idea came from a conversation with a wonderful photo historian, Pete James; we developed the project together and without him it wouldn't have happened. Sadly, Pete passed away as we were opening in Bradford in early April. Pete stored a wealth of information and was a great researcher; he spent over a year investigating the original 1839 exhibition. I also worked with Greg Hobson and Brian Liddy, who both used to work at the National Science and Media Museum, which has a vast archive of Talbot's material. Larry Shaarf, a world expert on Talbot, and Hans Krauss were also invaluable for advice and sup- port. For information on the architects Charles Barry and*

Augustus Pugin, I consulted David Blissett, who's currently writing Barry's biography. Paul Tennent from Nottingham University's Computer Science department did all the initial VR testing and development with me; my knowledge of these areas are very limited and Paul was key in creating the system that we used. Pete Gilbert has also been instrumental in installing and maintaining the technology deployed in the project. Nick Byrne and VMI created all the CGI interiors from information gleaned by myself and the other researchers. The White Wall Company built the original physical room which has travelled around the UK for the last year; they set up the room in each venue, installing and de-installing, before transporting it to the next venue. Paul Tennent and Pete Gilbert then install the technology and we train staff at each venue to help with the calibration and general running of the installation.

M.H.: Where do you intend to go from here? What are some of the projects you are working on now?

M.C.: *I'm currently developing a project on Van Eyck's* Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, *also known as* The Ghent Altarpiece. *At the time it was made, it would have been the IMAX cinema of its day. It's quite big with gate-like panels that open up to reveal the stunning centre painting; it also has incredible, unprecedented realism in several panels.*

However, despite the fact that it's a magnificent altarpiece, a sublime portal into the realms of heaven, it's also the most stolen artwork ever. Having been burnt, smuggled, held hostage, sold as stolen property and buried deep in Austrian salt mines, it has the dirty fingerprints of humanity all over it. I'm using enormous robotic arms and 96 inch LCD screens to recreate the panels and to tell its nefarious story.

I'm also recreating a historical figure using robotics, bringing her to life, allowing her to blink, breathe and look around the room she's imprisoned in. It's an attempt to strip away the veneer of history, which we have buried her beneath, to reveal the human being behind the mask.

In terms of VR I have a project in development that deals with our appetite for spectacle and the timeless desire to experience the abject and the grotesque. It reflects on the way technology is apprehending us in a self-imposed digital prison. I'll be recreating a tableau from the 17th century, which you can walk through, touch and interact with.