**JONATHAN JONES**

**ON THE EVE OF THE CRASH**

There is something truly unsettling about Mat Collishaw’s work, a quality that is hard to pin down. I look once and I see a romantic. I look again and I see a realist. Then on a third look, in the shadows, I glimpse something terrifying.

It is like a horror story.

Jones walked out of the Oval tube station on a winter’s dusk, a surfer plunging into a wave of ice. London was frozen, people huddled into themselves, many of them lighting cigarettes to suck the memory of heat. On the train he had been reading *My Name Is Red* by Orhan Pamuk, and he recalled this novel’s poetic descriptions of snow in sixteenth century Istanbul as he trudged down an apparently endless frigid south London avenue. Does it really get as cold as this in Istanbul, he wondered. Then he remembered his last visit to this part of London, to make a film in the empty and desolate, semi-derelict Victorian house where Vincent van Gogh lodged as a young man. The ashen fireplaces, collapsing ceilings and dusty floorboards of the light-filled house seemed haunted by Van Gogh.

Jones, whose unlikely profession was that of art critic, mused that artists like Van Gogh no longer exist. Where is the intensity in the art of today? Where is the courage? Where is the danger?

It was with such questions that he made his living.

The pub loomed like a castle in the misty evening light. Dark and at first sight apparently doorless, it was clearly no longer functioning as a drinking den. Indeed it seemed an urban fortress. He was reminded of the old film *Assault on Precinct 13* or the British comedy horror flick *Shaun of the Dead* in which a London pub becomes the final bastion against a horde of rampaging zombies.

Finally Jones found a doorbell, rang it, and was let in by a young man with paint on his clothes. On an easel in the pub’s cavernous ground floor space stood a painting of what looked like drapery, which the youth was evidently working on before he came to the door. He led Jones upstairs, past a Sarah Lucas cigarette sculpture, to the kitchen where Mat Collishaw offered a strong handshake.

(Van Gogh to Theo: “With a handshake!...”)

Slides flitted by on the Mac screen. Collishaw apologised that one computer had recently been stolen in a burglary—so this really was an urban fortress, though perhaps not a perfect one.

An African child crawls on the dry earth, watched by a hungry vulture. It is a famous photograph, taken by the South African photojournalist Kevin Carter during the 1993 famine in Sudan.

Collishaw’s new work, he explained, would take this image and animate it. The sudden-death moment of photography would become drawn out, slow, agonizing as it took on an existence in time. Collishaw asked if Jones had read the book *The Bang-Bang Club*, which the critic had not. Kevin Carter killed himself when he was 33 and some people said it was because he felt guilty about the photograph. He was widely criticized for taking this sensational image instead of doing something to help: it is seen to this day as a problematic case that illustrates the complex responsibilities of photojournalism. But the truth was far stranger, said Collishaw. In reality the picture was taken at a food depot where the child was in no danger of being eaten by a vulture. Carter cropped it ruthlessly to get the terrifying effect he wanted. In other words this powerful image of poverty, hunger and human vulnerability is a sensationalist fiction. Carter’s despair was that he could not repeat it—he could not take, or fabricate, another picture as compelling. That was the true reason he killed himself, claimed Collishaw.

Jones meanwhile was looking at what looked like a beautiful still life painting, pinned to the wall. It resembled for all the world a Dutch or Spanish Old Master picture, with choice morsels of a meal laid out on a table in a chiaroscuro light. Yet it was a photograph, printed on parchment. It represented, said Collishaw, the precise contents of a death row prisoner’s last meal. It was one of a series in which the last meals of men and women about to be judicially murdered are reconstructed in the studio and photographed with this still-life dignity.

Moments stilled. Stillness given motion. Collishaw’s art is an eerie photographic nightmare, flickering in the dark. It is a zoetrope, a magic lantern.

Images of Victorian child prostitutes flashed on screen, caught in greenish light. Jones remembered the spooky and chilling impression this installation made on him at London’s Haunch of Venison Gallery.

It was even colder, and truly dark, outside. At the pub door Mat Collishaw gave him directions to the nearest bus stop, but he ignored this friendly advice and headed back towards Oval tube station.

He woke up with a start. The dream was so vivid, he still felt he was inside it.

He was in a boat being rowed over a stilled, black-green sea towards a rocky island crowned by slender poplar trees. The island, he knew immediately, was Death. Sinister figures waited on its lifeless shore. Inside the rock were tombs, catacombs, crypts and vaults.

Catacombs... Where was he? Jones had awakened from his nightmare inspired by Mat Collishaw’s animated video of Arnold Böcklin’s painting “The Isle of the Dead”, but now found himself in a setting equally unpleasant. He was sitting in a completely empty carriage on a London Underground train. The train was motionless and its engines were silent. As he sat there, its doors slid open and he alighted onto a deserted platform. He looked for the station sign. There was none. He followed the exit directions, up a quietly moving yet except for him, utterly uninhabited escalator.

Emerging onto the London street, he seemed to be back at Oval—and yet no people huddled into themselves in this frigid night. Only one figure appeared, in the distance, and she was... Naked.

Tall and slender and wearing only high heels, she seemed to turn towards him and beckon. Then she was on her way, her heels clicking on the ground loudly enough to be heard at this distance.

He followed, but as much as he tried to catch up, so much she quickened her elegant pace.

Finally she reached a lightless building, apparently a former pub, and a door opened, then closed behind the woman.

Jones reached the door and he too was admitted before he knocked. He found himself in a plush, red-walled interior lined with intimate booths where men in business suits sat, some of them alone, others next to glamorous women.

He suddenly remembered the paintings by Mat Collishaw he had seen the day before in a west London gallery[[1]](#footnote-1)—or rather the story Collishaw told about them. Collishaw got the idea for his paintings after he was taken ill in France. Returning from the hospital he found himself turning over a folded train ticket in his hands, and wondered what it would be like if he magnified such a scrap to a monumental scale and gave it the dignity of a painting. Visiting the local museum— or was it a chateau—he saw medieval tapestries with their rich folds and creases and this added to the fascination of painting small scraps of paper microscopically close-up. Then he thought of those small scraps of paper and was reminded of the torn bits of magazine in which cocaine users wrap their drug.

His new paintings were gigantic cocaine wrappers become luxury art, images of the recent global financial crash that evoked the good time boys snorting up money on the eve of the crash in decadent gentlemens’ clubs. Some of the paintings have the names of particular clubs, real places you could go in London for drugs, champagne and sex.

On the eve of the crash.

Was this one of those clubs? Had Collishaw somehow caused Jones to be led into the location of his fantastical decadent paintings? But now the club looked subtly different. It felt subterranean, and not only because there were no windows. Noises came from above, terrible noises. Booms that shook the skull. Screams that pierced the ears. A city exploding and collapsing and burning in torment. And down here?

He was on a bed. Spread out across the floor in front of him was the woman he had followed, but she was dressed now in stockings and underwear. She was utterly motionless. Why did she not move? Was she... Jones tried to ask her who she was, but his voice was silent. He tried to reach out and touch her, but he could not. It was not mere paralysis or dumbness. He could feel nothing. He could hear nothing. His heart did not beat. His lungs did not breathe.

He noticed he was wearing unfamiliar clothes. He was in a Nazi uniform. Above, Berlin blazed. On the gramophone an old record of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* was reaching its scratchy climax.

When, please, can I awake from this never-ending moment of my death?

In his studio, Mat Collishaw is talking about the great nineteenth century poet and critic Charles Baudelaire. He has a book on his desk. It is about Baudelaire and drugs. By the time Baudelaire was writing, Romanticism was a dark folly. It no longer idealized fields of daffodils, but fleurs de mal. Baudelaire helped to create the modern cult of Edgar Allan Poe, alcoholic, addict, and horror writer. If the Romantic artist survives today it is as a transgressor, a kind of criminal of the mind, who wanders the modern world with a cynical yet passionate eye.

Collishaw utterly fascinates me as an artist. He has something dangerous in him that veers in a highly intelligent way from beauty to ugliness, reportage to fantasy, the raw and real to the dreamlike and fantastic. Because it never settles in any of these grooves the art of Mat Collishaw may be hard to sell, in a world where dealers are happy to describe stylistic traits of their artists as “trademarks”. Yet precisely because his art is so restless, it truly communicates the anxiety of modern life.

It seriously worries me.

As I lie motionless in my Nazi uniform, images flicker on a screen. I am looking at Victorian child prostitutes. I am looking at victims of war atrocities. I am looking at the child on the ground as the vulture approaches. I do nothing. I only look.

Baudelaire’s words come to my mind as the light dies. *—Hypocrite lecteur,— mon semblable,—mon frère!* [—Hypocrite reader,—my fellow,—my brother!]

The last image is a poisoned flower. A *fleur de mal* if you want to be Baudelairean about it. I smell its cankered rotting syphilitic bloom as I die again.

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1. Mat Collishaw, “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT”, Blain|Southern, London Hanover Square. 14 February–30 March 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)