

ARTS

Mat Collishaw, the man who turned a church in Surrey into a work of art

The artist talks about his new public work — a spectral
transformation of an old church worthy of Harry Potter —
and his friend Tracey Emin



Mat Collishaw: "I am always looking for the transcendent"

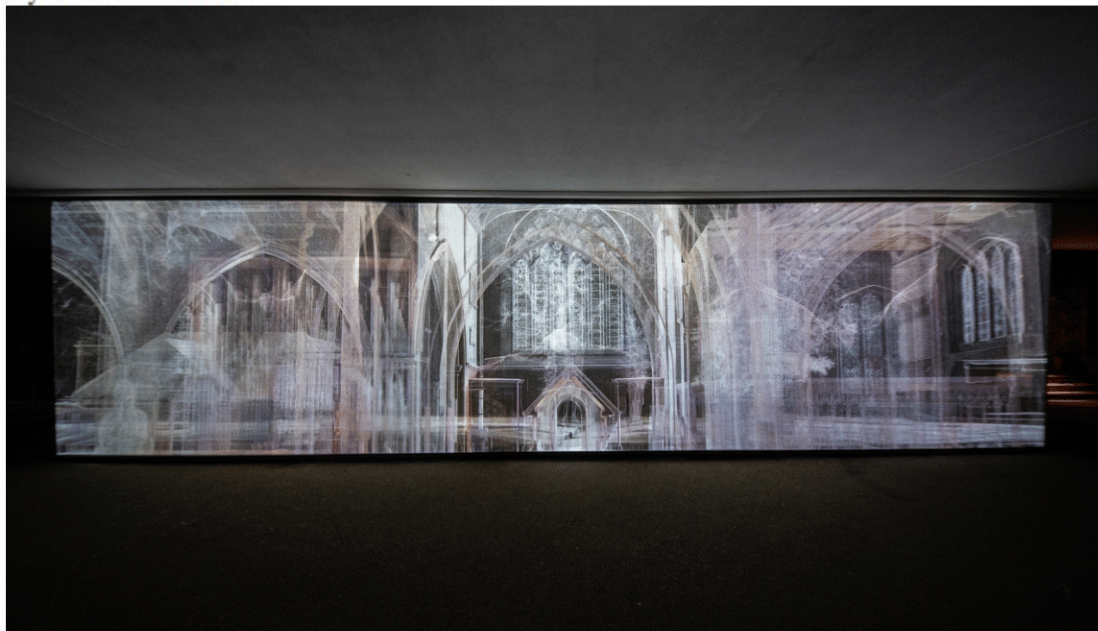
It's a bit of a Harry Potter-style adventure. Go to the graveyard of All Saints Church in Kingston upon Thames at dusk. Then follow the narrow alleyway that runs down to the river. It leads you into a tunnel. And it's there, as darkness falls, that you will find it: our capital's latest permanent outdoor artwork.

Don't go expecting some sculpted dignitary perched on a pedestal. Arguments have been raging for months over the place and the role of public sculpture. But the artist Mat Collishaw, invited to contribute to this contested forum, typically takes his own innovative tack. His *Echolocation* sets a new precedent for the way public sculpture could be.

A pale vision hovers before you. Locals may recognise it as their parish church — but not in what seems any earthly incarnation. Grey stone walls have dissolved. The solid tower is a shadow. Only a spectral tracery remains, sketching spiderweb patterns amid phantasmal trees.

Echolocation

By Mat Collishaw



As a cello picks up a single reverberating thread, an animatronic bat flies into the picture. Skirting the graveyard, it swoops through the church door. It swerves the high altar, interlacing the pillars, carving its tracks into lofty roof spaces before curving back out again into the night. Slowly the church falls away into the cruciform outlines of its architectural flat-plan. The creature flaps onwards through ethereal clouds to breast unbroken darkness with skeletal wingbeat.

This eerie apparition, projected on to a polypropylene screen that runs, floor to ceiling, more than half the length of the tunnel, is the first permanent public artwork to be created in this country by Collishaw, an artist who should be recognised (but for some reason hasn't been) as probably the most thoughtful, innovative and consistently striking of our contemporary talents.

"It would have been far easier to make something in bronze, stick it on a pedestal and leave the pigeons to do their worst," he tells me as he discusses his commission, due to be unveiled on April 14.

"Maintenance, for a start, is going to be quite a problem." Teenage skaters, armed with spray cans and box cutters, haunt the underpass. But Collishaw, working on a commission that was originally (before Covid came along) designed to mark last year's 900th anniversary of All Saints, was determined to create something more compelling.

This is the church, he explains, where 1,000 years ago the Saxon kings of England were crowned. Kingston is also the birthplace of Eadweard Muybridge, the photographer whose studies of bodies in motion changed our perceptions. It is also a significant conservation zone for bats.



“What is here, and what was here, is symbolically very important,” Collishaw says. “But so much has been lost, buried under later development, that it doesn’t seem like the place to come for mystical insight.” Certainly, the underpass — a 1980s concrete fabrication with rows of bike racks — is not “the sort of structure that inclines you to philosophical musings”. But as you walk through it, Collishaw explains, you are crossing a burial ground. “There is an aura that I wanted to try to resurrect. A model of yet another dead white male on a plinth would have meant very little. I wanted to make something mysterious; something that would not just reflect the history of the area but give you a sense of its spookiness; that would play with time and space and so bring an awareness of the wonder which is always there if you find a way to look.

“I am always looking for the transcendent,” Collishaw says. It’s a legacy of his childhood, he presumes. He was born in 1966, the second of four boys brought up on a Nottingham council estate. His parents were committed Christadelphians. Every Wednesday and twice on Sunday the young Collishaw attended the Bible study sessions of a sect that appeared to disapprove of pretty much everything, from female education (his mother had to study in secret) to television sets.

“All those years of singing hymns and praying and going to church turned out to be a bit of a privilege,” he believes. Having trained at Goldsmiths alongside such ambitious contemporaries as Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas, he emerged as an artist who, thanks to his upbringing, was looking for images that could carry spectators beyond the mundane. This desire, over the course of more than three decades, has led to dozens of imaginatively complex, often technically complicated and usually critically acclaimed pieces that tend to work, first, by delivering a visual gut punch before shoving the viewer into another way of looking.

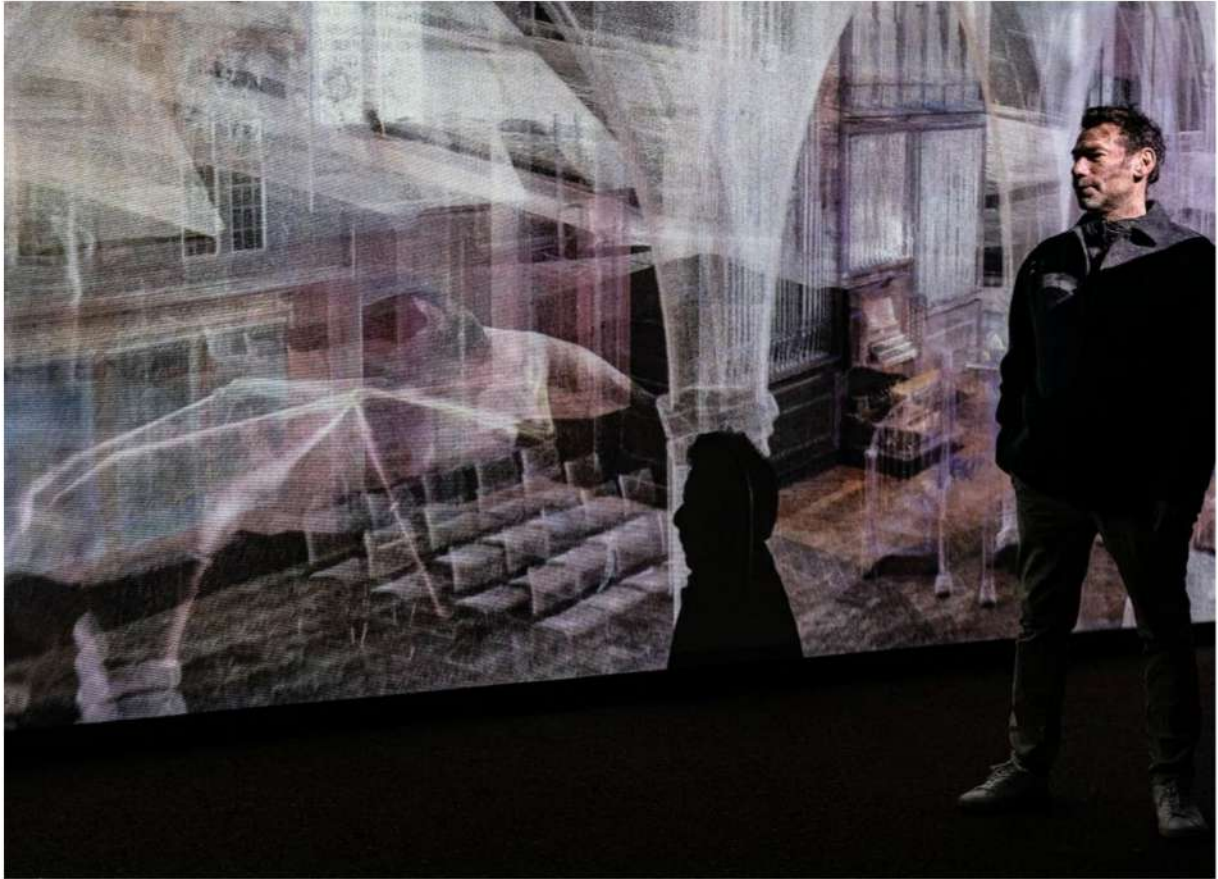
The beautiful and the bloodthirsty, the cruel and the subtle, the pornographic and the spiritual, the alluring and the repulsive all meet in photos, films and sculptures that conjure up disturbingly mismatched responses. Collishaw’s works range from the photograph of a bullet hole in a scalp with which he emerged in the landmark 1988 *Freeze* exhibition, through an image of his own body projected, breathing and blinking, on to a cross, to his mesmerisingly grisly 2014 zoetrope *All Things Fall*, a brutally detailed contemporary take on the classic subject of the massacre of the innocents.

Collishaw’s stylistic range is as wide as the subjects are relevant. “I’ve always put him at the very top,” Hirst once told me. “He understands how to connect to your soul and your heart. His work won’t allow you to take anything for granted; he shines light into the darkness and finds beauty in the abyss.”

Of all the artists launched in the late 1980s under the banner of Britart, Collishaw has turned out to be the most consistently interesting and enduringly talented. He should by now be a household name. He has outstripped — at least, in my book — his friend and sometime collaborator Hirst. Yet he remains relatively little known. In part this is because, while his peers rolled swiftly to success on a tidal wave of hype, he was more reticent. “I’ve got an existential problem with seeing my name in print,” he once said.

Certainly, as Tracey Emin’s boyfriend for several years (and presumably cohabitee of the infamous bed), he found himself overshadowed. They remain good friends, he says. He went to her birthday party about eight months ago with his son Cliff, who’s her godson. “We’ve talked about [her cancer](#) and she’s been heroic: pragmatic and full of humour throughout some serious strife. We do talk about work at times too. She’s always encouraging me to make more watercolours like the messy landscapes I was painting in the Nineties, but I think that was before her eye operation,” he adds with a laugh.

Collishaw has been living with the artistic taxidermist Polly Morgan for more than 12 years. They bring up their two sons — aged four and two — together in Camberwell in south London. He has even, recently, become a grandfather (he fathered an earlier son at the age of 23). Perhaps he has not found fame, he suggests, because he takes his often sensitive or controversial subject matter very seriously. He uses difficult images because he wants to deal seriously with real issues, not parade them superficially in a media circus. But the other problem is that he does not have a signature style. “I don’t think that does you any favours,” he says. “People really want an artist to be branded. They want to walk into a room without having to read a label, they want to impress their dinner party guests.”



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JEFF MOORE

There is, however, a constancy in his approach. He has an underlying interest “in the way that we look at the world through images and the way that these images can change and distort the way that we see. When you make a picture of the world, it’s not the real world; it’s a representation of it. How different is it from the real world? Does it make the world more beautiful, does it make it more ugly? How do our psychological vulnerabilities leave us open to being hijacked by religious iconography or political propaganda or advertising? It’s the power of imagery to engage us, to make us behave in certain ways that I find fascinating,” he says.

The form that his explorations take is as important to him as the subject matter. He gets his ideas from books and documentaries. “When I find one that interests me, and then find that it links with another idea, I can make a work with layers.” He then collaborates with technicians and engineers (he has a basic, but far from sophisticated understanding of their methods) to “find the right form to make the ideas sing”. That form, he says, “whether photography, animatronics, video or optical illusion, becomes part of the idea. All these things have to tie in so that form gives expression to the content.”

In his latest piece, for instance, he compares the echolocation by which a bat navigates to the way that he laser-scanned the church, bouncing light off its surfaces and collecting reflected data to create a translucent image that, through its ghostly aura, evokes a sense of time past. “Laser technology allows us to see the whole structure of building, we can see the wall, and through it and past it – almost like a divine insight into what lies beyond normal human perception.”

Collishaw is far from solemn in his approach. He has a transgressive sense of humour and the sort of deep rumbly voice that could sell anything – even an automaton of a woman having sex with a zebra, which got into Emin’s sexed-up 2008 version of the Royal Academy’s traditionally sedate summer show. He found a great deal of amusement in releasing a bat – a creature that “brings rather a lot of baggage with it” – into a church in *Echolocation*. But, beyond the laughter, he is searching for something more lasting. He wants to open our eyes to “a sense of wonder about the mysteries of the universe”. “It’s very easy to become cynical and sceptical because of the everyday nitty-gritty that grinds us down,” Collishaw says. “I want to wage a war against the jaded and clichéd.”

His latest creation not only presents precisely that challenge to the staid traditions of public sculpture, but stirs up that sense of wonder that he seeks. And wonder, according to Plato, as the root of curiosity is the place where all philosophy began. How funny that we can now find this “place” by the bike racks of a Kingston underpass.

Echolocation is at 6 Riverside Walk, Kingston, KT1 1QN from April 14, matcollishaw.com