

## **Columbine and Whispering Weeds**

2018 & 2011

Botanical drawings by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) are the basis for these digital works. The new artworks were created by adding subtle movements into virtual 3-D simulations of the original drawings to breathe life into the vignettes. Dürer's meticulously observed drawings portray these seemingly insignificant and humble plants growing vigorously, despite their lack of cultivation. As subject matter, they are a contrast to the majestic portraits that we often associate with this historical period.

The digital recreations were assembled by introducing a virtual skeleton into each of the components and linking real-world physics to their movements. Virtual wind currents were then applied to the simulations. Finally, videos of the moving specimens were recorded. It has been suggested that while viewers bring time to a still image, a video dictates time to the viewer. These two artworks play with that idea of engagement, as the motion of the plants encourages the viewer to linger.

## **Even to the End**

2023

Film, 9 minutes. Video projectors and media player. This film is a meditation on what the human race is capable of: magnificence and ingenuity in one instance; plunder and ruin in another. The narrative is cyclical, reflecting the never-ending task of maintaining the dynamic and balanced ecology of Earth.

Plant specimens growing in glass cases gently drift out to sea, eventually landing on a botanically rich and fertile island. This evolves into a forlorn and ravaged landscape with burnt, devastated forests. The sequence spans 24 hours, commencing at dawn and finishing as night falls. On the horizon, Wardian cases appear on the shoreline, representing a glimmer of hope.

The soundtrack is from Adagio for Strings by Samuel Barber. The composer was inspired by Virgil's *Georgics*, a classical Roman poem about agriculture. The poem reflects on how efforts to cultivate the land are perpetually threatened by destructive storms and violent fires.

## **The Venal Muse**

2012

These sculptures explore the dark themes of corruption, decadence and eroticism that are found in French literature. These include Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), a book of poetry and *À Rebours* (1884), a novel by Joris-Karl Huysmans, which describes a man's descent into degeneracy. In the latter, the lead character becomes an avid collector of flowers that assume the appearance of sickness and decay.

The flower sculptures in *The Venal Muse* are gloriously sensual yet fiendishly grotesque. On closer inspection, their fine petals reveal a flesh-like appearance with anthropomorphic scars and sores pitting the 'skin'. They display an aggressive, disfigured appearance, which contrasts sharply with the use of decorative floral imagery popular in commercial design.

By challenging romantic and sentimental perceptions of nature, these sculptures reveal its ruthlessness. Flowers are essentially breeding machines designed to attract attention and help the plant to reproduce. Red in tooth and claw, plants compete in an unrelenting struggle for survival and dominance.

## **Alluvion**

2023

*Alluvion* explores the mysterious quality inherent in genetic evolution through the medium of artificial intelligence (AI). On first glance at the paintings, we see flowers; but, on closer inspection, they are revealed as a complex web of insects and optical contrivances.

The paintings in *Alluvion* were created by feeding images of still life paintings into an AI application with added parameters referencing the bodies of insects. Collishaw carefully

moderated the images that were generated, and then painted them in oil on canvas, thus returning the 'old masters' to their original format.

Traditional still life paintings, like the flowers they depict, use optical tools including geometry, colour and pattern to seduce the viewer. In a natural phenomenon known as Pouyannian mimicry, some flowers have evolved to simulate the appearance of insects. The flowers then attract 'courting' insects to inadvertently pollinate their species. The insect-flower relationship in Collishaw's paintings has been reversed.

## **Heterosis**

2023

Digital collectables

Inspired by Tulip Mania, when the tulip became so popular that it caused the first ever speculative bubble, Heterosis is a flower hybridisation experience. Participants are invited to digitally cultivate their own bespoke animated flower.

The collection of dynamic non-fungible tokens (NFTs) combines genetic algorithms with blockchain technology to facilitate the hybridisation of mutable digital flowers. Collectors become 'breeders' or collaborative artists, creating increasingly exotic and elaborate blooms. Each token functions as a seed embedded with its own algorithm or genetic code.

Flower hybridisation occurs when the digital code of one flower is combined with the digital code of another. From this union, a hybrid blossoms, adopting attributes from both parents. The new blossom may also inherit invisible recessive genes or 'hidden traits', which contribute to the flower's rarity, potentially increasing its value.

Each flower has a unique title generated by AI from The Library of Babel, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986). Describing a practically infinite library, the story pre-empted artificial intelligence and evokes analogies with genetic codes.

Created in collaboration with Danil Krivoruchko, produced by Snark.art and El-Gabal on the OG.art platform.

Thanks to Thomas Freeth for his input on flower hybridisation.

## **Heterosis Greenhouse**

This artwork borrows from the Vanitas painting tradition, in which paintings reflect on the meaningless accumulation of worldly goods and the brevity of life. Flowers from the Heterosis collection are visible inside a recreation of London's National Gallery in an imagined future: neglected, abandoned and overgrown with vegetation.

Collishaw chose the pertinent location of the National Gallery as a place of pilgrimage for art and art history; a jewel box of visual splendour, representing the pinnacle of European culture. He contemplated how it would feel to be in a place where these visual masterpieces are present but unseen. In Greenhouse, the institution has become an ecosystem sustaining precious plant species, a sacred space for the natural world to cohabit alongside icons of art history.

## **Albion**

2017

Aluminium, media player, mirror, paint, scaffolding rig, stretching accessories, transparent mirror film, video projector and wood

Taking the form of an intricate 'Pepper's Ghost' illusion, this large-scale piece depicts the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest.

This slowly rotating, almost life-sized animation has been captured using a laser scanner, creating the eerie spectre of a tree suspended somewhere between life and death, trapped in perpetuity.

The Major Oak, which has a mythical connection to Robin Hood, is one of England's largest oak trees. It is estimated to have been standing for over 800 years and has a hollow rotten trunk at its core. Its vast limbs have been supported by an elaborate system of scaffolding since the Victorian era.

This artwork was created at the time of the European Union referendum. The title Albion refers to the ancient oak tree as an emblem of old England, a ghost-like apparition supported by chains and crutches.

## **The Centrifugal Soul**

2016

Acrylic, aluminium, LED lights, motor, paint, resin and steel

The Centrifugal Soul explores how aesthetic diversity has evolved through natural instincts of courtship and evolution. The sculpture takes the form of a zoetrope, a Victorian precursor of modern filmmaking that produces the illusion of motion.

This contemporary zoetrope utilises 3-D printing and stroboscopic lighting to create an animated illusion of bowerbirds and birds of paradise performing elaborate mating rituals. These birds perform their courtship displays against an ornate backdrop of flowers in perpetual bloom.

Collishaw worked with evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller to produce this artwork. The sculpture embodies Miller's idea that evolution has created an inescapable drive to be noticed which, in turn, feeds our need for self-promotion. Through our electronic devices and social media feeds, we are encouraged to construct and project idealised versions of ourselves, not dissimilar to the exotic birds in this sculpture, striving to be noticed.