

From YBA to the Cotswolds: the mellowing of Mat Collishaw

Once labelled the nastiest of the Young British Artists, at 57, Mat Collishaw's new show is inspired by flowers and trees. Rachel Campbell-Johnston talks to him about his relationship with Tracey Emin and how a religious upbringing was the perfect start for an artist



Mat Collishaw, 57, at his London studio. "I put him at the very top," says Damien Hirst. "He finds beauty in the abyss"
JUDE EDGINTON FOR THE TIMES MAGAZINE

Rachel Campbell-Johnston | Saturday October 14 2023, 12.01am, The Times

The nastiest of the Young British Artists. That was how the curator Julian Stallabrass described Mat Collishaw in a volume published in 1999 — back in the days when the YBAs were still actually youthful — that explored the loose-knit gang of maverick rebels who had burst so explosively onto our art scene. It was quite an accolade, given that the youngsters of this loose-knit movement had dished up works ranging from dead sharks in tanks to skid marks on strewn knickers.

Collishaw has certainly done a lot to deserve it. The artist who first launched himself in the landmark 1988 *Freeze* exhibition with a massively enlarged photograph of a bullet hole in a human scalp — a gaping, purple-lipped orifice amid a greasy nest of hair — displayed in the style of an advertisement for something rather more tempting, went on to make pictures of moths smashed into smithereens; to mount his own life-sized image, breathing and blinking, on a cross; to create a gruesomely detailed take on the biblical Massacre of the Innocents; to present pictures of schoolgirls passed out amid glue bottles, and of a series of women wearing sanitary towels. Clearly fascinated with the taboo, Collishaw revels in the dark and disturbing, the destructive and debauched.

He didn't mind being labelled the nastiest, he tells me when I meet him, now 57, in his London studio, an old converted pub on a corner of Camberwell New Road. "At least it was a superlative," he says, laughing. But his taste for what those with more delicate sensibilities might label perverse is about much more than a desire to merely grab the attention. "On the surface I want my images to shock or seduce," he notes, "but I want there to be undercurrents that make people wonder about other implications.

“I think it’s only reasonable that artists should try to reflect what’s really going on, to reflect what human beings are like, how we are capable of behaving,” he tells me. He has the sort of deep, gravelly voice that could sell anything – even an automaton of a woman having sex with a zebra that got into Tracey Emin’s sexed-up 2008 version of the Royal Academy’s traditionally sedate Summer Exhibition. “I don’t think it would do an audience any justice just to deliver the good stuff. It’s much more interesting and rewarding to create problematic work that sets out to question, to look for and illustrate a deeper truth. I think it’s essential that we acknowledge that we have within us the potential for good and evil.”

• [Mat Collishaw: Virtually brilliant](#)

This outlook has been fundamental since childhood. His parents, he explains, belonged to a small protestant sect, the Christadelphians. “Life was geared towards following the text of the Bible. We would read the Bible for a couple of hours every night and then Sundays would be a full day at church.” The Christadelphians seemed to him, then, to disapprove of pretty much everything that he, the second of four sons, brought up in Nottingham, wanted to do, whether that was watching television or wearing flares.



Senseless Universe, which will be at Kew as part of Collishaw’s Petrichor exhibition
COURTESY OF MAT COLLISHAW

“But I am very happy about the way I was brought up,” he declares. “It’s better to come at the world from an angle.” He describes his parents – both still alive – as “committed and brilliant” and emphasises how grateful he is for their influence. His father, a dental technician, loved nature and botany and, rather than opting for Skegness as a holiday destination, would take his family off into the wilds of Wales. “I learnt an appreciation for the beauty of nature and the sacred quality of nature – for the sacred quality of a lot of things with which I now try to endow my work.”



Insecticide 13, 2009
COURTESY OF MAT COLLISHAW

His mother, despite following a religion that didn't particularly encourage female education, secretly studied for an Open University degree by hiding her books in her children's toybox. That must have taught Collishaw how precious learning was. "I would find books so that I could look at and understand what was going on out there. I spent hours poring over the Sunday Times Magazine, captivated by the photographs of Don McCullin — beautiful pictures of unbearable suffering. I was fascinated by the contradiction. What they showed was so awful, but the aesthetics were so beautiful and astonishing."

Even more fundamental, however, was being brought up in a culture that was alert to moral value. "Things that other kids thought inconspicuous could be tainted for me, like frivolous forms of entertainment — television, for example. To a Christadelphian they were worldly pastimes. They deviated from the true path that led towards understanding the word of God. I was naturally fascinated by the forbidden."

When seen by a little boy with his nose pressed to a window, even Bruce Forsyth could accrue a special aura. "I would peep through the neighbours' curtains and watch Brucie dancing on the TV in the corner and it would feel like his spirit was trapped in that little glowing box. Afterwards I would spend hours making my own TV sets out of Weetabix packets."

Something perfectly ordinary was made exciting by the allure of the forbidden. "The banal felt potentially deviant, which it actually is," he adds. "I quite concur with these beliefs: this innocuous media is a hideous vehicle for manipulation and seduction and exploitation."

A shy boy who often felt awkward among his peers, Collishaw learnt as a child that “art could be an alternative form of communication”, and having come to the conclusion that drawing was the only thing he could do well, he eventually enrolled in a foundation course at Trent Polytechnic. From there he went on to study art at Goldsmiths in London where he found himself in the company of other students — Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas and Gillian Wearing among them — who seemed, like him, to be misfits and dropouts. They may not, he explains, have applied themselves to formal education. But they were insightful and intelligent and highly self-motivated.

• [Gillian Wearing interview: the former YBA on bringing the statue of Millicent Fawcett to Parliament Square](#)

His peers rolled swiftly to success on a tidal wave of hype. Collishaw's trajectory, however, was slower. For many years he remained comparatively little known.

“I've always put him at the very top,” Damien Hirst once told me. “He understands how to connect to your soul and your heart. His work won't allow us to take anything for granted — he shines light into the darkness and finds beauty in the abyss.”

But Collishaw struggled. “I've got an existential problem with seeing my name in print,” he once stated. On top of that, at the age of 23, he had fathered a child without intending to and his desire to be part of his son's upbringing had involved him in difficult court battles.

It probably did not help either that, as Tracey Emin's boyfriend (and presumably cohabitee of that infamous bed) for several years, he found himself overshadowed by an egomaniacal force. He and Emin were suited in many ways. They were both up for wild rampages out on the town. Pictures from the period catch them together, her with her lopsided smile and flamboyant dresses, him with designer stubble and shirt collar unbuttoned to reveal the sort of hirsute physique that demands a conscious decision as to where to draw the shaving line between facial and body hair. Do you want grooming, The Times asked him before the photoshoot for this feature. “I think it's too late for that,” he declared.

Collishaw and Emin enjoyed a combative relationship full of laughter and rows. “Was Tracey a muse?” (He once trapped an image of her dancing about and singing in a jam jar. “When I got sick of the racket I could just reach for the remote and switch her off.”) “She was amusing,” he quips.

He has always seemed happy to recount stories about their times together and once told me about the day he heard that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. He had texted Emin who, at the time, was in a beauty salon. They had had an SMS conversation that went something like this:

Collishaw: “The face of the world as we know it has changed.”

Emin: “I know. It's so tragic.”

Emin (20 minutes later): “The second one's gone now.”

Emin (three minutes later): “It makes me sick. I f***ing hate them.”

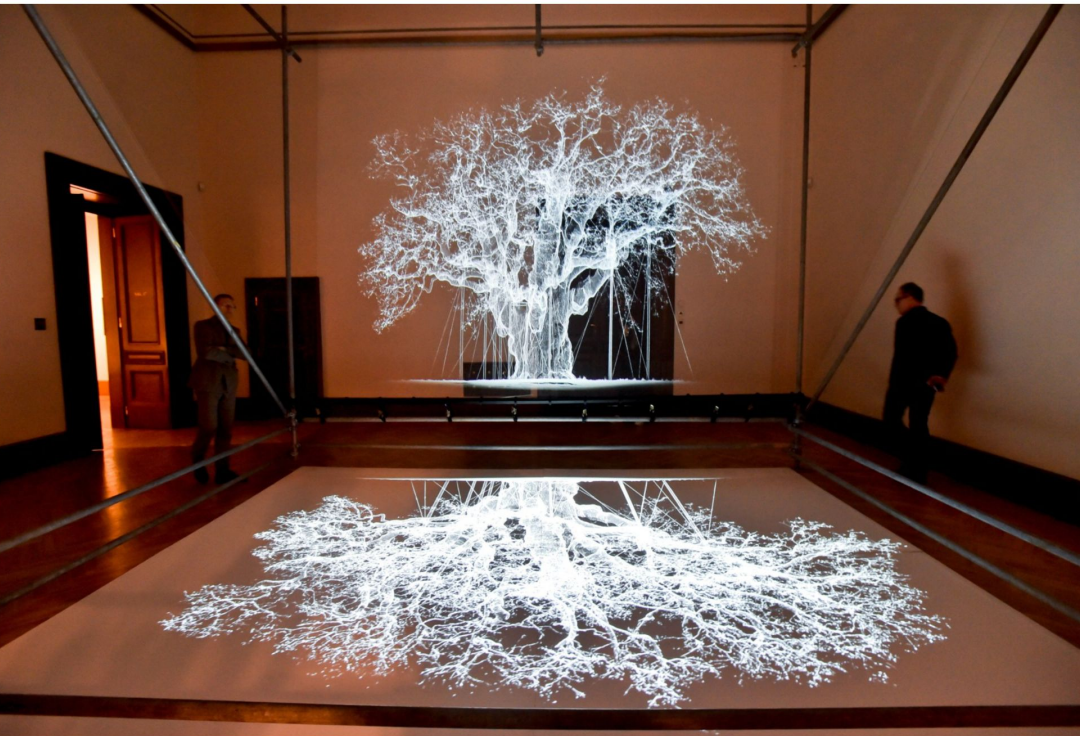
In the afternoon, when Collishaw met Emin, he was surprised that she seemed unperturbed. It emerged that she hadn't been talking about the terrorist attack. She had been mourning the pair of eyebrows a reckless beautician had overplucked.

They remain friends — despite the fact that he broke her heart when he left her. He is full of admiration for the mature Emin. But Collishaw is now partnered with the artist-cum-taxidermist Polly Morgan with whom he shares a fascination with the bizarre, the disconcerting, the gruesome. They live and work in the same building: the room in which she disembowels dead things and carves creepily complicated snakes is downstairs from his, and the ideas of one, he tells me, can often seep over to the other.

Morgan and Collishaw have two sons. They are four and seven, not far off the age of the two boys of Collishaw's 33-year-old eldest son. "They knock around together a lot — we call them the yuncles," Collishaw says. And the family are now thinking of upping sticks and moving to in Gloucestershire, to the Slad Valley where they already have a weekend house.

A honey-coloured cottage in Laurie Lee's fertile valley might sound like a long way from Collishaw's natural habitat. "But nature has always been my most profound inspiration," he says. "My grandfather was a florist. A lot of my childhood was spent running about in his Nottingham allotment, smashing flowers and falling through the roofs of greenhouses."

Later this month a show of Collishaw's work will open in the gallery at Kew Gardens. It will be a mini-retrospective of images he has made of flowers and trees. But don't expect *Interflora*. Drawing on Dutch traditions of flower painting, he creates disturbing mutants in which (after characteristically long and complicated research) he draws parallels between some of nature's stranger genetic adaptations and the confections of contemporary AI. These are "freakish Frankenstein *fleurs du mal*", he insists.



The Standing Water exhibition at the Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague, 2018

A new panoramic film, commissioned by Kew, will, despite an optimistic twinkle, lead the viewer through desolate wastelands left charred and still smouldering by ravaging fires. It was conceived quite some time ago but could serve as a commentary on the heatwave that swept through Europe this summer. Artists absorb things almost as if by osmosis, Collishaw suggests. “When you are working, you are operating in a dream-like state. And when you are dreaming, you are trying to find a way to understand all the weird stuff in the world. It’s subliminal. Masses of research and technical work go into my pieces. But I have to remain very sentient too. It’s very important that the flow of work is intuitive. You have to channel that innate sense of what feels right and what feels wrong.

“I probably finesse things a little more than I used to,” he says. Over the years his work has grown more layered, more complex, more subtle. Another piece coming to London next month will be a film made to accompany a live performance of Fauré’s *Requiem*. Bringing the sky burials of Tibet to the urban tower block — “The dead go up to heaven in the bellies of vultures, rather than the arms of angels” — Collishaw creates a hauntingly ethereal meditation on the cycle of nature. “It’s very important to let the idea breathe — not to cloak it with too much embellishment.”



The Garden of Unearthly Delights, 2009

GETTY IMAGES

Being a father has reinforced that belief. “It’s very interesting to see life from the perspective of two psychotic drunks... to see the world like a four-year-old at a 70cm height from the floor. I think all my work is designed to be accessible from four years up. It’s designed to be engaging and visually appealing. And though hopefully there’s a bit more to it than that, I want the work to be immediately graphically appealing. It must capture the imagination. I think that’s something that occasionally gets lost in an art world that can get too academic and information-heavy, too political. And at that point you have lost the four-year-old and probably the seven-year-old as well. And why do that as it’s the visual arts? Why lose what originally got me into art in the first place — the ability to make a picture that draws the eye straight in?”

Collishaw never forgets to deliver the visual gut punch before luring the viewer into another, more nuanced way of looking. That’s why his impact — still as hard and direct as that first bullet hole — has continued to grow. And furthermore, as a friend commented when I told her that I was doing this interview, “Lucky you. Mat Collishaw has always been the nicest of the YBAs.”

[Mat Collishaw: Petrichor](#) will be at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, from October 20 to April 7, and [Sky Burial](#) will be at the Barbican on November 20

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