



# Mat Collishaw

*Carl Freedman: How would you define your approach to making art?*

Mat Collishaw: I really don't have a strategy or a overall plan, but a possible analogy would be to say that my approach is similar to some one like Sherlock Holmes. A good detective is always going to be looking for those tiny little clues which don't seem like they are part of the story. Every thing has a potential significance. I think is you have too much of a pre-determined strategy then you are probably going to end up looking in the wrong direction because you are not open to all the possibilities.

*So is there end towards which this detective work is directed? Is there a specific mystery to be solved?* Within this process of looking there is a desire to overcome an isolated way of seeing things. To bring things together in such a way that they throw light on one another. Things which may seem at opposite ends of a spectrum are still somehow connected.

*This is quite a traditional concern. Finding an order in things and making sense of the world.*

Yes, or making nonsense of the world. Disrupting the normal sense of order. It's like that line from the

Lautreamont which the surrealists really liked –

'Beautiful as the chance encounter on the dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella'. Things have become very slippery. There is such vast range of ambiguous emotional phenomena out there, and it's all happening simultaneously. For example when we walk down Oxford Street, on the one side we see vagrants and we experience emotions of empathy and pity, then on the other side you can have your emotions tickled by a furry pink teddy bear in a box which plays a funny little tune.

Our emotions are being manipulated so much that problems begin to occur. What is true feeling? What makes a genuine response? And these same problems occur with the vast deluge of imagery churned out every day. Representations of degradation and suffering seem to no longer have an effect on us. They have become so familiar and common place. What moves us more is the quality of the photograph: the lovely composition and elegant perspectives, the technical competence and the superb printing technique. We get detached from the subject and we end up being detached from the world.

*Your snowstorm sculptures and the video would be a good example of those ideas.*

It's making a visual paradox. You've got this kitsch fantasy world contained within the plastic bubble of a snowstorm ornament and when you look closer you see it contains an image of a homeless person. And these two different elements cast a light on each other, though not that it makes either of them more meaningful.

*Do you see yourself as a humanist?*

I'm mourning the loss of humanism. There's nothing didactic about it. It's more a curiosity. I'm not taking a moral stance. I'm side stepping all that and saying look at the incredible richness, beauty and texture of this fucked up world we live in. I think before anything changes we first have to reflect on how we live.

*Don't you feel like you have a responsibility?*

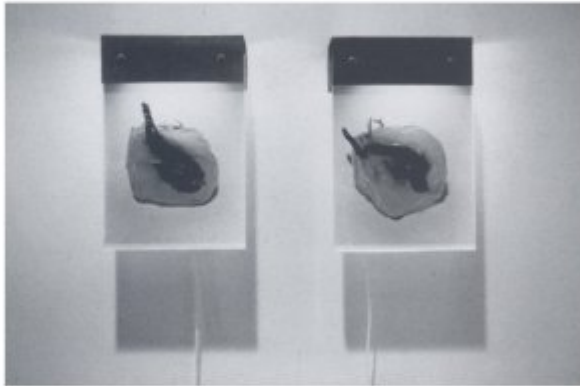
That depends on how much I've drunk. But no, I think that it is definitely the artists responsibility to be irresponsible. What is this idea of responsibility anyway?

*I don't know. Being accountable for one's actions?*

When I was younger I thought I could change the world through being socially responsible. I became involved with different organisations which were supposed to be making the world a better place for



*Untitled, 1995*



Untitled, 1985

other people. And slowly I realised that these organisations are full of people who are full of themselves. And they don't achieve anything because they are too confrontational. All they are doing is just comforting themselves for the fact that they feel weak and alienated. I just don't think you can expect people to change so quickly. You have to find a way to seduce them, or prick their consciences a little bit.

*How do you find the politics of contemporary art?*

It's funny when you find yourself in an art situation, which is also a small group which is removed from the rest of the world. But at least you get the opportunity to say something as one singular person and that's got to be important.

*Perhaps that's what the politics of contemporary art is.*

*The politics of the individual.*

Don't you think that's self-indulgent?

*Yes, but it's also a freedom. It's a way to create a structure for your own living. Though that normally implies a rejection of established values which is the source of conservative criticism directed towards contemporary art.*

Yes, well probably in the time of Jesus, people said 'why doesn't that guy just get a job and get his hair cut, and stop walking around like a lunatic preaching to people'. And, in a way, I suppose Jesus was a self-indulgent kind of person. But at least he was offering an alternative to the church and the state, which had people in its grips.

*I suppose it is a bit like a slap around the face for some people when they come up against contemporary art.*

*But then I quite like all those anti-art reactions.*

Yes, I think that kind of reaction has a lot of truth in

it. But I don't want to alienate people with my work. I think I'm prepared to meet people half-way and give them what they want, to give them something which is pleasurable and seductive, so that at least they look in the first place. And then put something in which says "maybe your pleasure in looking at this is questionable".

This new piece 'Leopard Skin Lilly' which I'm showing in Minky Manky is a good example of that idea. The flower is really eye-catching and vibrant but there is also something sinister about it. Despite the immense variety of flowers that we have, there still isn't enough to satisfy our appetites, our greed, for more and more different types. There's a basic human hunger to transform nature and elaborate it for our own ends. We have the knowledge to do that now, to change things into how we want them to be.

*Is this a case of romanticism. That science and progress are no longer seen as transforming the world into a better place, that the brave new world is destroying a purer earlier time?*

There is a genuine fear of things being out of our control, of not knowing what is around the corner. Yet there is also a curiosity and a fascination. It's the temptation of the unknown.

*Do you think that sense of fear and wonderment is a continuation of a childhood sensibility?*

Up until my teens I was a complete believer in God. I was brought up completely religiously with the idea that everything is spiritually endowed. And then you realise that's not the case. And in place of that you're faced with this idea that you've evolved from a monkey. You're robbed of your whole spiritual side





Nature Morte, 1994

and left without much to go on.

*Is the 'Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe' piece, and photos of you trying to catch fairies, a way of trying to deal with the spiritual side of things*

Catching fairies is trying to take something which is impossible to take and presenting that. It's an attempt to make a play on what making pictures is about.

A desire to believe in something other than the real world which inhabit. What kind of extraordinary creature is man that he needs these semi-translucent four inch high figures that fly around with little wings. Why do we need these ideas, where do they come from?

*It's quite a leap from earlier work which included suicide, rape, pornography as subject matter.*

Shifting to fairies was probably the most challenging thing I thought I could do. When you're looking at all these medical books of people blown apart by shotguns and plane crashes and stuff like that, it gets a bit boring after a while, or pornographic images and these kind of things. It's not a challenge any more. But for me, the subject matter isn't that important, it's a pretext for talking about a relationship with the world.

Communicating is the bottom line with art. I'm not going to be so pig-headed as to think that I can do whatever I want and people should be interested. Most people communicate by talking and having a good time and going out to the pubs with their mates. And that side of things is absent from my own life. I don't communicate in that way, I don't find it natural. So the only way for me to possibly talk about my real feelings is to do what I do. And then usually you can't say anything anyway because there is nothing to be said.