

Mat Collishaw

Mat Collishaw's shock tactics: 'Cruelty happening before your eyes'

★★★★★

New Art Gallery, Walsall

Massacred babies, death row meals, naked statues doing appalling things to each other ... Collishaw's grisly works challenge art's relationship with violence

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Shocking and disturbing ... Mat Collishaw's 3D zoetrope, *All Things Fall*. Photograph: Todd Whit/Mat Collishaw/Blain Southern/New Art Gallery Walsall

The Massacre of the Innocents is one of western art's most horrific themes. The slaughter of infants ordered by King Herod has been depicted among others by [Bruegel](#) as a war crime in a snowy village and by [Poussin](#) with an appalling intimate realism.

Now Mat Collishaw has turned it into an evil three-dimensional animated sculpture that swarms with cruelty and sadism under the arches of a huge domed temple. It is as if [Ray Harryhausen](#) collaborated with the Renaissance sculptor Giambologna to create a monstrous battle of stop-go statues that come to juddering life and do appalling things to one another. Picture the scene in *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* where Harryhausen [makes a multi-armed statue come to life](#), a sword in every hand. Replace one statue with multitudes of naked fighting figures and you start to get close to the awful wonder that Collishaw has created.



Footage of the *All Things Fall* zoetrope in motion

All Things Fall is a giant zoetrope, a contemporary version of the Victorian optical toy that uses the same principle as cinema to create the illusion of movement. A [classic zoetrope](#) is a drum with slits in its sides and a sequence of drawings on its interior that show successive states of a simple movement, say, an acrobat jumping head over heels. Collishaw's zoetrope is a circular domed temple - he modelled it on Bramante's Tempietto in Rome and it also resembles the Bramantesque temple in Raphael's painting [The Marriage of the Virgin](#) - in which nude statues struggle and die. A fat naked man is flogging a woman. Another naked sadist is throwing a baby through a window on the upper floor of the temple. Among these moments of monstrosity lie heaps of dead babies.

It is a truly shocking tableau but it gets even more troubling when the motor starts up and the zoetrope spins around. For a moment it is all a blur. Then it hits the correct speed to fool the eye and create an optical illusion of movement. These white statues all come to life. The fat man thrashes the woman over and over again. A baby falls to the ground from the heights of the temple. Utter cruelty is happening before your eyes: the animation is solid, it is substantial. As the zoetrope slows down their movement becomes stranger, more jagged, until finally the cold frieze of slaughter is static once again.

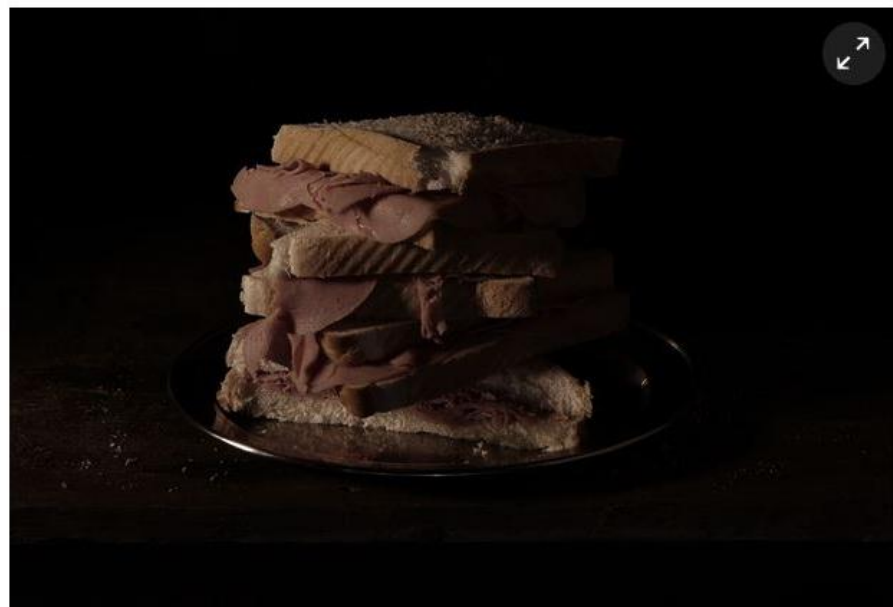
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The Massacre of the Innocents is the most disturbing British work of art since the Chapman brothers' Hell

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Collishaw's convulsive rendering of The Massacre of the Innocents is the most shocking and disturbing British work of art since [the Chapman brothers' Hell](#). But this is no cheap shock for the sake of it. This is a formidable meditation on art's sinister relationship with violence. Renaissance artists did not only portray the Massacre of the Innocents out of compassion. Art is drawn to violence because in violence the body expresses itself fully.

All Things Fall uses state-of-the-art technology, Victorian optical gimmickry and a deep feeling for art history to question the way we look at violence. It is the most jaw-dropping atrocity in a brilliant exhibition that brings together some of Collishaw's most troubling images.



📷 'Horrific and real' ... Last Meal on Death Row, Texas (Bernard Amos), 2011. Photograph: Mat Collishaw/Blain Southern/New Art Gallery Walsall



A pole dancer performs in slow motion, on three screens that are framed inside gothic windows. This triptych-like composition suggests she is undergoing a crucifixion. But her movements are eerily balletic, to a throbbing soundtrack. My eye is drawn in. Perhaps I would watch the crucifixion as a ballet, too. What's wrong with me?

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Why do we look at media images of suffering? Is it true compassion or emotional pornography?

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Collishaw does not make you feel good about yourself. Out of darkness flash images of adults rescuing children from war and disaster. It should be moving but it is uncomfortable and tense. The sudden bright illuminations are shocking, violent, as suffering is seized by the spotlight. Why do we look at media images of suffering? Is it true compassion or emotional pornography? Collishaw makes you feel you are feasting on pain. It is not easy stuff.

Not easy, either, to contemplate the last meals of Death Row prisoners, beautifully arranged and photographed to look like 17th-century Spanish still life paintings. Or rather it is easier than it should be, and this is the point. Something horrific and real - the actual meals ordered by people about to be [judicially killed](#) - has become beautiful art. Is art then just a selfish aesthetic game? Is the love of beauty a sickness?



‘A brilliant exhibition’ ... Auto-Immolation (2010).
Photograph: Barry Stewart/Mat Collishaw/Blain
Southern/New Art Gallery Walsall



Collishaw is the last romantic, an artist whose feel for morbid beauty echoes the violently sensual paintings of Delacroix and the macabre poetry of Baudelaire. He is a gothic artist, quite literally when he frames a film of a burning orchid inside a pointed stone gothic arch. Enormous images of crushed butterflies explode in hedonist displays of wondrous colour, picked out by spotlights in darkness along with grossly gorgeous sculptures of toxic flowers, poisoned and mutated by chemicals.

This is art in truly bad taste. It is art with a big brain. It is the art of our time at its most poignant, beautiful and vile. So much in today’s art is insubstantial and overhyped. Collishaw is the real thing, an artist entranced by looking and horrified at what the eye can find beautiful. In an extra installation he has created [at the Library of Birmingham](#), photographs of 1930s crime scenes flicker and fade in sudden illuminations. Ghost rooms. Dead places. I could have sworn there was someone else in the empty space around me.

Lazy artists condemn the evil done by others. Collishaw makes you glimpse the evil in yourself. He is a true modern moralist.

● [Mat Collishaw is at New Art Gallery, Walsall, from 25](#)

[September to 10 January 2016](#)