



# MAT COLLISHAW. THE MACHINE ZONE

25 February – 25 June 2022

**“I work with the internal mechanisms of the visual image  
and how they affect our consciousness.”**

**Mat Collishaw**

Mat Collishaw is one of the leading figures in contemporary British art, closely associated with the Young British Artists (YBA) movement. A classmate of Damien Hirst at Goldsmiths College, he was among the 16 artists featured in the legendary 1988 Freeze.

Over a successful career spanning three decades, Collishaw has become a symbol of conceptual art and a recognized master of visual forms. His practice combines optical illusions, painting, video projections, and kinetic sculptures, where spectacle meets philosophical depth. Beneath their visual impact lies

a subtle investigation of perception mechanisms and the influence of visual media on our subconscious. Collishaw addresses fundamental questions of psychology, history, and science, exploring how technology transforms perception, manipulates consciousness, and shapes behavior patterns.

**The Machine Zone** — a term describing a particular state of consciousness typical for gamblers, who become so absorbed in the act of playing that the external world ceases to exist. This effect is caused by a system of variable reinforcement, where the player

continues to place bets without knowing when a win will occur. This principle, derived from B.F. Skinner's experiments, underpins slot machines and later digital platforms. Social networks exploit vulnerabilities in the human psyche through features like "likes" and "comments," provoking repeated returns to the screen, forming habits, and triggering unconscious addiction. In this context, the "machine zone" becomes a metaphor for our daily lives increasingly dominated by algorithmic systems and digital coercion.

**The Machine Zone (2019)** is an installation featuring robotic birds performing repetitive actions governed by a programmed algorithm. The work draws on the 1950s experiments of American psychologist B.F. Skinner, who studied how animals responded to random reward systems. By signaling actions that would be rewarded, Skinner demonstrated that behavior could be conditioned by external stimuli rather than free will—an idea that profoundly influenced behavioral science. Today, this principle underlies the algorithms that shape user behavior on social media, where platforms exploit psychological vulnerabilities to form habits and provoke compulsive engagement.

This theme continues in the painting series **The Operant Conditioning Chamber (2021)** — realistic works on aluminum based on archival photographs depicting birds inside Skinner boxes, equipped with buttons linked to a food dispensing system. Psychologist Lauren Slater notes, "Skinner demonstrated that so-called independent responses may merely be conditioned reflexes, thus questioning the very concept of free will."

**The Centrifugal Soul (2016)** is a large-scale zoetrope developed in collaboration with evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller. Referencing the Victorian era—a frequent source of visual and conceptual material in Collishaw's practice—the work features a rotating platform adorned with lifelike models of birds and flowers. Lit by strobe lights flashing in perfect sync with the rotation, the scene animates into a continuous illusion: birds hover, flaunt their plumage, and perform intricate mating dances over blooming flora. These courtship rituals are instinctive behaviors programmed by evolution to ensure reproduction and species continuity. Collishaw draws a sharp parallel between these innate displays and the ways in which contemporary technology exploits similar drives. Social media platforms and smartphones harness our deep-seated desire for recognition, prompting the

endless curation and projection of idealized versions of ourselves. The *Centrifugal Soul* reflects on how our performative instincts—once tied to survival—are now redirected into digital self-fashioning, shaped by algorithms and metrics of desirability.

In the video work **Alpha/Omega AΩ (2016)**, an astronaut's glass helmet lies abandoned in a tropical thicket. Reflected in its visor is the curious gaze of a monkey peering inside. This encounter between a primordial creature and a technological relic becomes a metaphor for humanity's drive toward exploration and understanding—a moment where our evolutionary past meets a possible future in the mirror of speculation.

**The Nerve Rack (2019)** was originally site-specific for the former Ushu Seminary in County Durham. A life-size mechanical eagle was installed in the chapel of St. Cuthbert's Church, opposite a historic pulpit crowned with a bronze eagle sculpted in the 19th century by architect Augustus Pugin. The tension between the moving machine and the static bronze object embodies the contrast between progress and tradition, the rational and the sacred. Collishaw's eagle, constructed from sharp metal parts, symbolizes the power and precision of modern technology, while Pugin's eagle evokes spiritual ideals rooted in history and faith. The artist highlights the manipulative power of images to shape narratives, shift emphasis, and sometimes distort the authenticity of perception. The same object may be perceived differently depending on context, material, and visual interpretation — as sacred or technological, animate or impersonal.

**The series Expiration Painting (2019)** consists of reproductions of old master paintings addressing the fleeting nature of life. Collishaw reinterprets these classical images, updating them through a contemporary visual approach. The paintings are framed in plexiglass and reproduce only fragments of the originals — like faded photocopies. At first glance, viewers perceive them as cheap copies, judging the image's value by a visual template — but up close, the precision and richness of the oil painting reveal their true nature.

This technique serves as a metaphor for perception in the digital age, where the rapid flow of information leads to a loss of depth and uniqueness. Collishaw demonstrates how superficial viewing, hasty judgments, and the devaluation of materials and



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techniques have become hallmarks of a time when visual images increasingly conform to the logic of digital instability.

Mat Collishaw's works have been exhibited in major museums and public collections worldwide, including Tate Modern and Somerset House (London), Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (UK), Galleria Borghese (Rome), Freud Museum (London), National Gallery of Modern Art Bologna (Italy),

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, Brooklyn Museum (New York), Museo di Roma (Italy), Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona), Arter Foundation (Istanbul), British Council Collection (London), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (Turin), Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Museum of Old and New Art – MONA (Australia), Olbricht Collection (Berlin), and the State Hermitage Museum (Russia).



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