

IN CONVERSATION

MAT COLLISHAW & JAMES PARRY

Mat Collishaw: I loved the book [*The Mating Lives of Birds* by James Parry].

James Parry: You got it? That's great. All the adventures of the birds of paradise and the weird and freaky bowerbirds. Did you see the Magnificent Spatuletail? A little hummingbird that waves his tail feathers above his head? I mean, it's just totally mental, really.

As a nature writer, what I'm really interested in — nature appears in various guises and has done throughout your work, but where did you first become familiarised with nature? You grew up in Nottingham, so were there countryside rambles?

MC: I lived in the city, but my uncle was a gamekeeper on a local estate so we would go up there pretty much every weekend and in the school holidays — there was a lot of running around outdoors. I think nature was kind of nearer to everybody in those days. In the early '70s there were wastelands and wild areas that you could go and be feral in.

JP: ...and fewer concerns over safety, I suppose.

MC: Absolutely. You really could be 'off the leash' and wild.

JP: I think that's how familiarity with nature begins — at an early age. It's almost osmotic, and you're right, we start to pick these things up just by being out in that environment. Was there anybody who used to take you to the countryside or point stuff out?

MC: We would generally go on holiday to places that were quite untamed. We'd go to a remote place in Wales, whereas a lot of our friends would be going to Butlins and things like that, so that was a great way to become immersed in the landscape. My parents would take us on quite long walks, that kind of thing. I wouldn't say that they were picking out bits of fauna or fossils and educating us in that way, but certainly exposing us to the elements.

JP: Looking at the ways in which nature and 'natural history' feature in your work, it's quite macabre and sinister. I'm thinking about your infected flowers, it's often a sort of negative and putrefying side of nature that appears. Is that the aspect of it that immediately appeals to you? Or was that all you saw in it at that stage?

MC: I think it was, in a way, a conscious effort to try and reclaim it. I thought nature had become too cosmeticised. Nobody was making pictures of flowers, it was just such an 'uncool' thing to be dealing with, and the way flowers were generally being portrayed was on greetings cards. It seemed like nature wasn't really being served very well. There are all kinds of nefarious things that happen in the natural world, it's not necessarily a benign place. It can be a very cruel and difficult environment and I thought those traits were possibly more interesting than the benign traits, and that they can be used as metaphors for a certain sickness in the human psyche.

JP: How about man's domination over the natural dominion? Because that is something that also appears [in your work]. I'm thinking of works like *Butterfly Jar* (1998), where you've got a killing jar that a Victorian lepidopterist has filled with ethyl acetate or something, and a net they'd capture their butterflies in. And the work with frosted taxidermy, where birds have obviously been killed, stuffed and then encapsulated in ice

(*Crystal Gaze Series* (2012)). What does that say about your attitude to nature, I wonder? I've got my own views on that, but you tell me [laughs].

MC: Well, I wanted to make work about how we can show an indifference towards people or things suffering. And how certain, in this case quasi-scientific, investigations can make us behave in a way that's cruel. There's another work I made a long time ago, (*Antique* (1994)) — a canary in a bell jar, which is based on a painting by Joseph Wright of Derby, of an experiment with a bird in an air pump. It illustrates various different generations looking at this bird dying for the sake of science, but also for the sake of a little bit of family entertainment — and certain members of the family in the room have different relationships to it. Sometimes we shut ourselves off to these emotional attachments and I wanted to make works that piqued people's relationships with other people and other living creatures.

JP: It also fits in with your theme of the exquisite grotesque, which the Victorians were so enamoured of, and their own fascination with dead creatures — I'm thinking of the crushed butterfly wings (*Insecticide* series (2006-2014)), and that sort of thing, and that's why I think this new work is so interesting, because actually, you've suddenly burst out of all of that. Now, we've got creatures in all their wonderful expressive beauty and exuberance. What's prompted this seemingly very significant shift?

MC: It's true, it does appear very different, but my motivations were the same. I was trying to do something with the slightly sinister nature of these birds, in the way that they behave. Although they're very beautiful creatures and to see them in the act of courtship display is this very entertaining spectacle, there's a certain kind of evolutionary hardwired instruction that makes them behave in this manner. So suddenly, it all becomes a little creepy because they are basically following a certain kind of genetic coding that will help them survive and perpetuate their genetic line.

I thought this was interesting and I wanted to make some work that had to do with this idea of obsession with surface and presentation to others — in this case, the male presenting to the female, and how he could deceive and seduce and entertain with this presentation. So people's obsessions now, with things that appear to be superficial and narcissistic and part of current trends, actually might be motivated by the deep-rooted desire to attract a mate. In the case of the birds of paradise, it's the survival of their genetic line. I was interested in the depth of something that appeared so superficial.

JP: And also I suppose the lack of choice? I mean, they don't choose to do this. As you say, it's genetically driven. And there's also a level of competition, because they're competing with other males that may be around.

You've got three different types of birds of paradise and you have bowerbirds down at the bottom. How did you select which ones to include?

MC: They were mostly practical reasons. I knew these birds needed to be both designed and animated on a computer, split into different frames and then 3D printed. Although, the technology is improving rapidly, it's still very difficult to print very thin bits of sculpture, I therefore had to eliminate pretty much every bird that has a slightly bushy thin-feathered appearance. I had to select birds that were really quite tight, with very few frills. I could've possibly done it, but they would've started looking really wooden, so I went for birds that were stockier in build.

JP: But actually, I think that served you very well, since the Superb Bird of Paradise is one of the most dramatic because of this ridiculous iridescent chest plate, and the leaping around motion of it.

MC: It was the repetitive, ritualistic dance movements which became possibly more important than having a decorative feathered headpiece. I wanted them to look kind of desperate in their little acts of courtship. The only different act is that of the bowerbirds, which I wanted to put in because they're just so interesting — they're pretty much like artists, trying to impress everybody else by getting a lot of coloured things together and piling them up.

JP: Yes, they have been described as the 'artists' of the bird world and when they were first described to Western scientists, nobody could believe that the bowers were constructed by birds; they thought they were made by native Australians.

MC: Right, then the birds would come in and occupy them.

JP: That's right, yes, so they were an interesting sort of intervention in this, really, but I think what's especially interesting about the whole sculpture is that to the viewer, it functions almost like its own ecosystem. Was that something that you bore in mind when you assembled it?

MC: I wanted it to look like a bouquet that was being presented to you — a multi-colour, multifaceted object. It reels you in and as you approach it, it acts like a trap — poised, ready to spring — if you get too close it might clamp itself shut and trap you inside. There are elements of seduction in its appearance and also elements hinting that that this seduction might be a honey trap.

JP: The desperation of the birds of paradise, as you've just called it, this sort of frenzy, this thrashing around, what should we extrapolate from that as people in the first quarter of the twenty-first century?

MC: I originally considered making *The Centrifugal Soul* (2016) because I wanted to make something about the obsession people have with presenting themselves in a certain way on Tinder, Instagram etc., using filters and Photoshop to alter their appearance — basically crafting and creating a persona for themselves which they then project out.

JP: Do you think that's a genetic thing, as it would be for birds — or is it something that is enforced on us by contemporary society? There's a distinction there perhaps, isn't there?

MC: I think there's possibly a bit of both going on, but the means by which we now communicate with each other have become quite different to what they have been for thousands of years. Suddenly a lot of it has become even more visual than it was before, so you're basically updating a feed which has your persona programmed into it. It's not dissimilar to the behaviour of the birds of paradise that are very dependent on their visual appearance, it's an evolutionary arms race.

JP: What's the nature of the relationship between the hummingbirds and the big blooms that they're nectaring on? What part does that play in the whole bouquet?

MC: To a degree, I'm trying to create this sculpture and things have got to work practically. The hummingbird I don't think is typical as a bird of paradise. I mean, it uses its plumage...

JP: It has an iridescent plumage, certainly, yes, and they flash their shiny bits to lure in females. The males will compete aerially in a way that many birds do right across the spectrum.

MC: Yes, but my hummingbirds aren't really in the act of courtship display, they are feeding, so they're taking the nectar while inadvertently picking up pollen and sowing the seeds of these flowers in the act of getting food and sustenance.

I thought about the experience of walking down [a high street like] Oxford Street and seeing Nike over here and Benetton over there, all these different brands that are polluting the visual atmosphere — all that branding we are being assaulted by daily. It's not a lot different to nature's identifiable fauna. In a way, it cheered me up to know that all this visual pollution out there wasn't just crap, that there's a deep-rooted reason for the way it manifests itself. The flowers function a little bit like that in the zoetrope I've made, they propagate themselves by giving to the customer and in addition, giving something else for them to take away, to advertise their particular strain.

JP: The birds that you have chosen to feature in this zoetrope are rainforest birds. They live in the dark understorey of the rainforest. I can see there's an analogy with the city there, in a sense, because these flashy iridescent parts, their plumage that flashes in the rainforest perhaps also fits with the influence of chiaroscuro and Caravaggio on your work, it seems to come together here somehow. A lot of the birds actually choose dark places in which to perform, because that makes the iridescence that much more powerful and noticeable from a distance.

MC: And then, as you say in your book, some of them will choose a position where they're against the sun, so they reflect the light of the sun back, against the mate they're trying to seduce. It's a clever little technique.

JP: Yes, and that comes back to your point about genetic strength, because the males that choose the best position therefore make the best mates. One aspect that I think is quite interesting is that often the real action, the act of mating, doesn't take place in the theatre of display and there's perhaps a message or two for us out of that, isn't there? Theatres of display and theatres of consummation are perhaps different.

MC: And I think more private. Normally the consummation is taken away from this arena of spectacle and performance where they do the seduction.

JP: And it's much briefer, of course. It's perhaps, as you say, an example of where 80-90% of the effort goes into the display aspect.

MC: Which kind of correlates with the way things happen in the world that we live in too. I also have these little paintings, did I show you these little guys?

JP: Yes. The trompe l'oeil. I was going to come onto those because here, man is exerting his domination again because the poor little critters are chained by their legs. They're there as our little pets and playthings. I know you based this on the seventeenth century painting of *The Goldfinch*.

MC: This one here is the starting point. Fabritius.

JP: How did you come across that? Where did you find Fabritius?

MC: Well, he was on the cover of the novel which was hugely successful and was everywhere. I knew it from that probably more than I did from my art knowledge. It was quite a poignant little painting, sad, because it's depicting something that's quite pretty but is essentially quite cruel as it's tethered to its position.

This is a trompe-l'oeil painting, so it's a painting about painting, and about creating this illusion. The bird can't fly anywhere because it's fixed by a chain, but really, the bird can't fly anywhere because it's made of paint, it's not a bird. It's like a little visual game, the trompe l'oeil tradition.

We're also getting a lot of birds in our garden because my girlfriend is putting a lot of seeds out and so there are these beautiful, pretty little glimpses, shapes, colours, dynamic little events happening outside. I thought

I'd really like to make something with them now that I'm doing this bird of paradise work but I couldn't think of how to present them. I thought about this little chain mechanism, and how Kingsley Amis (1922-1995) had once remarked, I think when he was about 72, that he had finally lost his libido and that he was grateful because it was like being chained to an idiot for 50 years. In that sense in our desperate need to procreate and to advertise our sexuality to the opposite sex it's like being, you know, chained to something. You don't really have a choice in that matter. It's just something that we're primed to do.

I was trying to make work that had to do with this kind of impulse to advertise ourselves. I thought the graffiti might be a way of illustrating this, because it's a bit like cave painting — making very primal marks on the walls. It's also like advertising, by using dynamic shapes and colours to quickly ascribe your identity on the wall, but as it's generally anonymous, it is about signalling to those people in the know, who's tag is whose, just getting your mark out there.

The paint in all the pictures is old and peeling, you can see the image that's being rendered is paper thin and behind that is the blank nothingness of the wall. So the liveries that these birds are displaying, are clashing with the colours and shapes of the city that they're now living in, they're suddenly in a much more competitive environment.

JP: That somehow underlines the sadness of their condition, doesn't it? The chained captivity they're subject to. Actually, it's even more poignant because it was a Goldfinch that inspired you to do this. Goldfinches are native British Birds and during Victorian times they were highly-prized cagebirds, valued for their singing; there was even a time when they were deliberately blinded in the mistaken belief that if they were blind, it would make them sing louder.

MC: What was the thinking behind that? Was it thought that the bird would have more soul if it was impaired in a way?

JP: I think so, that it would be even more desperate to make its mark, and that's why there were quite a lot of poems written about Goldfinches. They have a sort of iconic position in bird folklore and yet, you know, fantastically, they are birds that we see a lot more now. They've increased a lot in the last 20-30 years, often because people are putting out seeds for them. I'm not sure, but you may well have them around here, which probably 50 years ago you wouldn't.

MC: I didn't realize that. There are quite a few around here, which is great.

JP: How did you go about choosing the other species? You've also got a Great Tit, a Bullfinch, a Goldcrest...

MC: Again, practicality was quite important. I wanted particular positions, and I just trawled through a good range of birds, the colours and shapes, looking for the kind of shapes that work with the graffiti pictures that I've got.

JP: They're sort of fighting against that background. What struck me in particular was the Great Tit because, by nature, it's quite a pugnacious bird, certainly not one to sit quietly, and yet it's sitting there and you can see that it's wanting to tear itself away and yet will never be able to.

Let's talk about *Albion*.

MC: Yeah, nature again.

JP: Back to nature and back to something that you would have been familiar with as a boy, I guess. [The Major Oak] It's in Sherwood Forest, did you regularly go there to see it?

MC: We went there a few times, but I think the myth and how it lived in your head as young male particularly, is just such a great story. It's extraordinary how far that legend travels, everywhere I go in the world, people know Robin Hood — there's something very poignant about the tale that really stays with people.

I had seen some laser scanning and I wanted to work with it, but I couldn't really find my subject for it. And then while working on this exhibition, I knew I was going to have these little paintings of the birds, which probably needed something else in the room to anchor them. Something to indicate Geoffrey Miller's ideas of an emptiness at our core that we are developing because we're projecting so much onto the outside. A tree seemed to fit my birds quite well, so presenting this deserted dead-looking tree right in the centre of the gallery, became symbolic of the emptiness at our core.

I originally thought to make the tree out of bronze, but I wanted something more illusory. I started thinking about methods of projection and another Victorian device — the Pepper's Ghost illusion. Laser scanning interrogates the tree in a very specific way, it's a very cold, inhuman method of collecting data and then turning that data into an image or a film. It's almost like looking at the tree as another species would look at it. Possibly more similar to the way a bat would read something as echolocation. It's a very otherworldly and very ghostly image that it creates. When coupled with a Pepper's Ghost illusion, *Albion* hangs there like a spooky talisman in the centre of the gallery.

So this work is also about the idea of believing more in the myth of something than the actual reality of it. Rather than letting this tree die, we've kept it alive by these steel rods and chains that are holding the whole thing up.

JP: Like a life-support system?

MC: Yes, and there's something quite cruel in that. It struck me as being a little similar to what was going on at the time when I came up with it, with the whole idea of Brexit. People wanted to believe in this idea of 'Old England' — that perhaps never existed, perhaps it's just a myth — the idea of this 'great and noble race' that we have, where there weren't too many immigrants. It's like an illusion, something that never existed. There's an idea, in the work, that 'Old England' should be laid to rest and let die, but people want to believe in this myth so they won't let this image of England die. These were the kind of ideas that I was thinking of at the time.

JP: Did you go back to revisit the tree as a result of this project?

MC: I went back to have a little wander around it.

JP: Did you touch it and go inside? Because that's the thing about the Major Oak, isn't it? The cavity inside. I don't know whether you can still go in, but you used to be able to walk in.

MC: So you know it yourself.

JP: Yes, I do.

MC: There's a fence around it now, so you can't really get that near to it. When we scanned it, we had permission to go over the fence, get next to it and touch it and then it really started speaking to you. It was a

very majestic experience and it really showed its age and its dignity, as well as the indignity of its treatment with all these chains and rods. It was quite a moving thing, being right underneath it and close to it.

JP: I think what you said is very interesting because I always think the Major Oak has a sort of life and an importance beyond its reality. Its reputation goes before it, doesn't it? Because of the Robin Hood association. It's secured its role in our popular mythology.

What I think is amazing about this scan, is that actually it looks like an x-ray of diseased arteries, doesn't it?

MC: I haven't thought of them as diseased arteries, but it definitely has that interrogation that an x-ray does on the body where it's looking for something that's malign.

JP: Wow, it's almost like a waterspout, isn't it? That's incredible, the scaffolding and the supports really demonstrate the fact that we are keeping it going, aren't we? I think they were installed in Victorian times.

MC: Right. Quite a long time ago, presumably it would've died a long, long time before?

JP: Bits would've fallen off, for sure. The natural pattern [of very old trees like this] would be that it would probably have two or three major limbs still extant, coming directly from the very broad trunk, but many other branches would have come off. The amazing thing about oak trees is that they can — in times of drought, say — retrench and allow part of themselves to die off. That is quite an interesting idea, they sacrifice a major limb, pull back the cells of the fabric of the tree which are having a bad time and just shut it off and leave it to die.

MC: But presumably it's passed on its genes many times anyway—

JP: It's still producing lots of acorns every year, so yes, it's busy ensuring that it will have endless progeny. I think there was a bit of a scandal a few years ago, wasn't there? Some guy who harvested loads of the acorns and was selling them over the internet.

MC: Very entrepreneurial, nature's child.

JP: Absolutely.