

It's official: **100 issues of Canvas**, covering the myriad twists and turns of the kaleidoscope that is Middle Eastern art since our launch in 2003 and first issue a year later. In that time we've spoken to countless artists, curators, galleries and creative institutions of all kinds across the MENA region, documenting their groundbreaking work and impact on the course of art history in this part of the world. Now we celebrate our 100th issue by reflecting on the history that has been made, on its influence over the present, and on the seeds that have been sown for what promises to be a glittering future.

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PRESENT

History always leaves an imprint on the here and now. We take a look at a selection of the major happenings of the moment, including the standout exhibitions and art events attracting the attention of art lovers across the world, including in our own homebase of Dubai, which is hosting the much-awaited Expo 2020.

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THE 1000TH ISSUE

Mat Collishaw

British artist Mat Collishaw talks exclusively to *Canvas* about *Equinox*, his permanent kinetic sculpture created as the spectacular centrepiece for the Inner Core of Terra – The Sustainability Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai. Curated by Futurecity, the 3D zoetrope is inspired by concepts of illusion and by the urgent need to keep our planet's ecosystem in balance before it is too late.

Perhaps we can start by talking about zoetropes. What are they, and how and when did you start using them as an inspiration for your work?

Mat Collishaw: As a kid growing up, we didn't have a television set in our house and I became obsessed with watching TV whenever I could. I used to spy through the neighbours' windows, fascinated by this magic box in the corner of the room with animation going on inside. It was intoxicating for me. I used to try and replicate these little images by creating theatrical scenes inside old cereal boxes. Animation has also been something of an obsession of mine from an early age and I've always been interested in how, when you look at an artwork, it is essentially illusionary. Even oil on canvas is basically a flat surface on which you apply coloured pigment to make people think there's

something there that isn't. Zoetropes are nineteenth-century inventions designed to entertain people and they combined both these dimensions, of movement and illusion. The early versions comprised a cylindrical drum or cylinder, perforated by slots and around the inside of which were hand-drawn little figures going through a series of different frames. You spin the cylinder and look through the slots to see the illusion of 3D animation, whether running, waving or some other form of movement. The Victorians viewed these 'moving' images as a kind of magic. There's a similar magical quality to all the devices that we're currently wedded to, such as our laptops and personal phones, with these invisible electrons flying around and creating all this content for us to watch. But these gadgets don't give us any idea of how the images we watch



Mat Collishaw at Terra – The Sustainability Pavilion, Expo 2020 Dubai. Image courtesy of the artist. Photography by Mahmoud Khaled

have been generated. Zoetropes do just that – when they slow down and stop, the viewer can see how the whole illusion is fabricated. I find that fascinating.

How important is the conceit dimension to your work?

For me, if an artwork is doing its job properly then the viewer is immediately confronted with a problem. I want them to be asking what they're looking at, with their brain engaged thinking about this thing in front of them, trying to decode and deconstruct what the artist was doing with it and how he or she has created that particular effect. The zoetrope is a kind of play on all that because it's obviously dealing with optics and illusions. More broadly, I like to create things that astonish, amuse and engage people. There's so

much art that is really very dry. The art world should not only be the privilege of the educated art clique, so it's great if you can get people wandering in off the street who haven't engaged with art before but are drawn to something that's visually astounding. Then, if they want, they can take things a bit further and ask, what's the work about? And what's the other work in the room about? You've engaged them at that point, and then you can move forward from there.

Do visitors see the actual mechanics of the installation?

Absolutely. They view the zoetrope from a bridge deck and can see it coming to life, then understanding that it's an optical illusion that fools your brain into seeing something that's not there. It's

in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour



Mat Collishaw. *Equinox* (detail). 2021. 3D zoetrope. Installation view at Expo 2020 Dubai. Image courtesy of the artist. Photography by Dany Eid

not an image, but a thing that becomes animated. Three-dimensional zoetropes like *Equinox* are especially convincing because they're tangible, part of the 'real' world. The advent of 3D printing has taken everything to a new level, because rather than making figures in clay or plasticine as before, each sequential frame is now modelled accurately enough to give a convincing fluid animation. You can design your little characters on the screen in virtual 3D, which is what I do.

What is the actual process?

Basically I create a virtual, three-dimensional, one-second animation of, for example, a praying mantis biting off a dragonfly's head. I then chop this one-second animation into 18 different clips. I export these 3D files and 3D-print them before hand-painting them all. I then assemble the painted 3D prints on a circular armature, which I spin at approximately one rotation per second. I then illuminate them with a strobe light, which flashes at

18 times per second. The resulting effect gives the impression of seeing 18 three-dimensional praying mantises biting the heads off dragonflies right in front of your eyes as you view it. In the early days of 3D printing the process was quite primitive, but as the technology is constantly evolving it is becoming possible to create increasingly elaborate content and effects. The central component of my zoetrope is a lotus flower and the installation is operated hydraulically and electrically from a control room. During the daytime the flower is in a closed position, with the gaps between the individual petals allowing the viewer to see the animation inside when it is rotated. In the evening, as the natural light levels reduce and are replaced by strobe lighting, the flower is lowered and the petals open out, so visitors can look right down inside it.

Why is the work called *Equinox*?

One of the basic requirements of zoetropes is that they are perfectly calibrated. If

anything is out of sync, then the whole thing doesn't work. You spend months on the computer designing and fine-tuning to reach the perfectly optimised position so that everything can function when you make the physical thing itself. That got me thinking about the calibration of Earth, how it's all about delicate and essential balances, including that between Earth and the Moon, between the seasons and between day and night, which is how I arrived at the title of the work. The installation has two phases, daytime and nighttime, part of this aspiration for perfect calibration, and *Equinox* reflects this element of balance.

How does *Equinox* speak to its setting within the Sustainability Pavilion?

I thought a lot about sustainability while considering this project, especially in terms of the ecological balance of our planet and the symbiosis between different elements of the ecosystem. In

terms of the installation, quite early on I was already thinking about the idea of a flower that could grow up out of the water towards the light, serving as a symbol of the finely calibrated nature of Earth's ecosystem. The lotus was perfect, with an internal architecture and its petals opening and closing like shutters, animating communities of insects and other invertebrates. It also embodies a sense of hope and of triumph over adversity as we seek to save our planet.

Why were you particularly drawn to insects?

Because they are in such steep decline. The evidence is terrifying, and I've seen data indicating that we might lose 50 per cent of our insect species within the next 30 years. They're a crucial part of the ecosystem, very important in the food chain for reptiles, birds and small mammals, and yet they are being decimated, primarily because of industrial-scale agriculture,



Students visit Terra – The Sustainability Pavilion. Image courtesy of Expo 2020 Dubai



Expo 2020 Sustainability Pavilion. Drone shot.

pesticide use and habitat destruction. The very delicate balance that they are part of could be totally destroyed, and with it the survival of the planet is at very real risk. I chose a range of different species for *Equinox*, including some native to the UAE, and didn't want to sugarcoat them. So yes, there are pretty butterflies but also a praying mantis grabbing hold of a dragonfly, a scorpion chasing the dung beetles and an assassin beetle trying to catch a caterpillar. This whole network of interrelations is taking place and some of them are not pretty, but they are all an integral part of the ecosystem and need to be protected.

***Equinox* also features poetry excerpts on the walls of the installation space. How were those selected?**

As part of the discussions about the work, it was suggested that we should have some text on the wall. I didn't want anything literal or descriptive, but something a little

more elusive that related to the work but not too specifically. The English poet William Blake seemed a natural choice, as during the Industrial Revolution he witnessed the devastation caused by people being drawn away from their rural existence and into the factories of the cities. He dedicated his life to re-engaging people into a communion with the natural world, which he felt they were losing. I chose four lines from Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*, which talks about the value of every small part of our environment, emphasising that we might not always understand the significance of the greater scheme of nature. The oversized insects and flowers in *Equinox* attempt to evoke this magical quality and to recall the essence of Blake's poem: to examine the nature of any one thing so that the riches of the Universe begin to be revealed; to see art and science as a quest for understanding our deepest nature; to see the sacred in the mundane and the profound in the prosaic.