Tender Morbidity
The Medical and Funerary Practices of Mr. Clarke

BY GARTH CLARK

Miss De Caff, 2008
silver plated nickel silver coffee pot
6 ¾ x 4 ½ x 9 ½"

Brouhaha, 2007
silver plated pewter teapot, lead
17 ¾ x 9 ½ x 15 ⅜"

All the Usual Suspects, 2008
pewter, cast white metal, silver plated nickel silver
dimensions variable

Author to Artist: *Where in time does your work live?*

Artist to Author: *Dickens-period London, absolutely no doubt. The rich and the poor thrown together. Close proximity of unbelievable filth and poverty. Belching soot, raw sewage flowing in gutters. Street vendors hawking wares. Pickpockets, prostitutes, beggars and vagabonds add color. Gutsy, real and honest. It is what it is, not dressed up, no facades or fronts. What you see is what youget. It is a vibrant, breathing, living place. A place where you hustle, duck and dive, need to be a wheeler-dealer to survive. My kind of place!*

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE to comprehend the art of David Clarke without traveling back in time. It's not that the work is not contemporary, it is; but that context and perception is added by drifting back 150 years ago. The time travel I speak of is not the creature of early silent movies with mad professors, ingénues at risk, gurgling chemicals, sparking coils and shorting electricity. It is more a miasmic experience, allowing one's mind to drift into a dreamscape and become an integral part of the social fog that wreathed Dickens's London.

Clarke's metal objects are tied to the pathos of a period when human value was being revalued, on a shaky cusp between kindness and cruelty in early Victorian London. If you extract this emotional context, and indeed, its romanticism, and the moral dilemmas of the age, both brutal and uplifting, one is left with nothing more than mute assemblages of ornamental and functional elements. And while even this, just the object, is not glib, because Clarke's handling of material has inherent gravitas, objecthood by itself does not allow us access to his narrative of tender morbidity.

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I read the art of Clarke as one might a neo-Dickensian novelist who just happens to be a crafter and uses bits and pieces of metal as language, phrases or words. Each form carries with it a sense of personal human history, identity and personality, travails and hardships captured by metal in portrait or caricature. I can imagine walking the streets back then, passing by someone, his body treated none too well by time and circumstance, with an awkward gait, unfortunate proportions and weight, and recognizing him (or her) instantly as the model for a specific teapot. This is not as fanciful as it sounds. That is exactly what a novelist does: creates fictional people who become intensely real to the reader. Clarke just happens to pull off this sleight of hand with metal and the appropriation of style and ornament.

When asked to write this essay I had reservations. I don't like writing about artists who have already been extensively profiled. The danger is that one ends up "chewing old cabbage," rehashing obvious truths that have already been stated often with greater erudition than I might muster. Untilled soil is more fascinating to me. What convinced me was reading the extant literature about Clarke; the writers have almost all completely misunderstood what he is doing. I had a similar reaction to the commentary on Richard Slee (with the exception of Grayson Perry's perceptive writing about his ceramics). Slee actually slyly relished writers getting it wrong, aiding and abetting them in the process. I suspect Clarke may do the same.

One could imagine a *Roget's Thesaurus* entry just for David Clarke: enfant terrible, brutal, scarring, violence, torture, acerbic, troublemaker, destroy, maim, deface, mutilate, ruin, and most recently, terrorist. Any article about him contains several of these terms or similar. Consider it the Mr. Clarke Writing Kit. However, Glenn Adamson's article for *Crafts*, "Experiments in Speculative Violence" (March/April 2013) aside from the title, has a finely tuned edge, and recognizes a strain of caring in his art that few have acknowledged:

> *"He then told me his motivations for making the piece: his mother was being treated for cancer at the time. He'd made the work not in his studio, but his kitchen, 'a place that had very strong associations with my mother and her making of tea and cake for all.' Had the objects been sitting on a plinth or in an exhibition case, it might have been another story. But seeing them in this way, being told this story, was an experience rich in narrative implication. It was like walking into a film via the prop department—a film about ghosts, I suppose, as the objects' material losses evoke an unspecified familial past, returning to haunt the present. So while Clarke talks tough, and sometimes in tones of bitter irony, there is in him a deep well of sensitivity, even sentimentality."*

One other piece of writing that addressed the notion of felony and Clarke's bad boy image in a more populist vein was a fragment by Edmund de Waal that appeared in a paper for *Think Tank*:

"I started by thinking about decoration as stickiness, of Alfred Gell's idea of decoration as adhesive. Talking to David Clarke brought this alive to me [as] as a silversmith he has begun to find smoothness problematic. One way he found

I want more! Spoons, 2012
pewter, silver plated nickel silver
dimensions variable

below:
Feed Me! Spoons, 2011-present
pewter, silver plated nickel silver
dimensions variable

Chuffing Marvelous and Friends, 2008
pewter, cast white metal,
silver plated nickel silver
dimensions variable

of dealing with this was to attack the surface of the silver with salt and lead, to scar it.

Another was to find sticky objects. He bids for objects on Ebay that have had no other bids. They arrive he says, literally sticky, smelling of cigarette smoke and polish wrapped in newspaper. They are sticky in that they are unwanted, commodities that have got stuck. And they function as traps: highly decorated metal birdlime. He cuts them up, elongates, foreshortens, wraps them heightened and truncated, so that dissonant patterns are created and decoration subverted. Their functionality is not so much borrowed as nicked. This is not a gift. It is a steal."

Generally this complexity is missed. Clarke's career is seen with both glee by his admirers and horror by his (many) detractors, as a demolition derby of silver vehicles with Clarke at the wheel.

First, let's dismiss the *enfant terrible* tag. It was fine in 1997 when Clarke first began to stoke the fires, but has grown old with overuse, and Clarke is certainly an *enfant* no more. Clarke is *not* in fact the perpetrator of violence, not the demon barber of Fleet Street. Rather, he reveals violence, takes those that society has treated with extreme brutality, attempts to patch back their wrecked bodies and lives, and administers to them until they are buried in caskets of his own design.

The craft of Clarke interests me not at all. It might well be virtuosic, but if so that is hidden behind a disheveled facade. What is shown is solid workmanship, blunt, lean and economical, a little coarse without even a hint of the decadence from whence it comes. It has always struck me as the skill of a surgeon's hand rather than a silversmith, the former also a craft but one that is sanguine and has no place for pretty or elegant. He repairs and extends life, whatever the cost to beauty, but the act is not intentionally destructive. Rescue is not elegant. But it is redemptive.

Upstairs silver has been sleeping with downstairs pewter and as a result has been demoted.

"Ever So Slightly Sloshed" series, 2011
pewter, cast white metal
dimensions variable

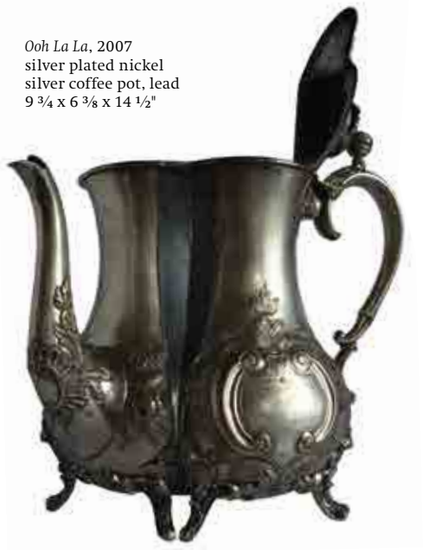
His vessels (I see them as society's vassals, if one might excuse the pun) are rarely bright silver, and even when they are, appear worn and soiled around the joints where feet or spouts are attached. They absorb more light than they reflect. The darkness is alluring, risky and mysterious. He also often uses a silver-pewter mix (the latter known as the poor man's silver and an early source of lead poisoning) that has complex and murky tonalities, distancing itself from the glamor and affluence sterling silver represents. It makes the vessel seem uncared for and a tad unkempt. The fascination for me is what his art means in terms of class. This is a potent thread of content. Materially Clarke combines upper, middle, and working class into an alloy of lesser, mixed stature. The work is no longer "pure." Upstairs silver has been sleeping with downstairs pewter and as a result has been demoted. None of his vessels feel ascendant in wealth or luck, and their social trajectory is downwards, falling through the safety net, losing style, income, limbs, health and worst of all, dignity.

I see all of the work, except for the coffins, as people. Let's begin with his spoons. They are his beggar boy clients, roaming the street in packs, numerous and unloved as feral cats, grouped together, as he shows them, in clusters for safety. Beggars often deliberately mutilated themselves, to increase empathy among their marks. Usually there was no damage to legs and feet or hands. They needed to be agile and swift to escape the law if pickpocketing was part of their game as well. Nothing is as useless as a slow-moving "picker." Facial scarring, particularly on an angelic face, was worth a good penny, causing Victorian conscience to tremble between shock, lust, and pity.

These are "asking" spoons, different to the teaspoon that helps itself to sugar at afternoon tea. These spoons request; they do not take. Each is unique; each is to a degree misshapen. None is truly elegant or beautiful according to the conventions of the Royal Guild of Silversmiths, although vestiges of a shallow, onetime prettiness do show through (an asset for a beggar). But they are strong, resilient from the scarring.

The spoon bowls have elements of grotesquery, like a tumescent boil, swollen, distorted, uneasy. Again, it is not Clarke who hurts and sickens them; it is their life. He portrays

TerraGravyDaktal, 2007
cast white metal, silver plated
nickel silver
6 ¾ x 6 ⅜ x 7 ½"



Ooh La La, 2007
silver plated nickel
silver coffee pot, lead
9 ¾ x 6 ⅜ x 14 ½"

Dead on Arrival, 2011
sterling silver, lead
case 18 x 18 x 18"

their condition with a tender precision. There are hints of ancestry, of descent from a higher class to the lowest. This is seen in the ornate stem of some spoons that come from a world in which cutlery was laid out in the approved manner at a table, where the beggars' antecedents once sat and where the spoon would no longer be welcome. Indeed, its presence in a formal setting would be unthinkable, scandalous even.

One imagines that each morning a line of beggars, wounded by their pimps, Siamese twins (yes, he has made those too) and other sideshow freaks, those missing limbs and seeking prosthetics, line up to enter Clarke's premises. The work *All the Usual Suspects* (2008) is a police lineup of felons, con men, and ladies of the night. *Chuffing Marvelous and Friends* (2008) seem better off than most, happy habitués of a pub, if a bit more polished. The "Slightly Sloshed" series is a minimalist but hilarious depiction of inebriation and gin-soaked beer-swilling street life.

TerraGravyDaktal (2007) has a strong anthropomorphic presence; a prosthetic leg juts out rigidly, the third leg is a walking stick to balance the body, and the handle is a hand on a damaged hip. The pose is riveting, painful but proud. *Ooh La la* (2007) is also telling. Elements of the piece evince pomposity and privilege that this pot-bellied teapot once enjoyed, or at least imitated convincingly. Now that status has become a distant memory and seems a touch ludicrous, a little obese, and its wounds are coarsely repaired with metal that is flat, graceless, and without ornament. He may have been to the manor born, but now resides precariously in the demimonde.

Then there is Clarke's funerary practice. He receives his clients at the end of a painful, humiliating life, who require special containment or have corpses deemed too horrifying for other morticians to touch. Two coffins fascinate me: *Dead on Arrival* (2011) and *Brouhaha* (2007). The former is relatively affluent-seeming; satin and red velvet lines the interior but then one notices the scuffs and wear. A secondhand coffin is never a good thing. Inside is a matched set of teapot, creamer and sugar basin (a mother and two children perhaps), their bodies eaten away by some dreadful pox (actually Clarke has applied salt to eat away at the vessels) and yet is an open casket. Morbid indeed. *Brouhaha* is simpler, more stoic, no flash, all function. The casket is shaped at an angle to house a body that is not of normal shape. Its power as a form comes from two elements, its odd elongation and captivating, awkward drama of the lid left open, somehow seeming more monumental than the space it covers.

That is Clarke's interior world. When we drift back to the present there is instant relief from the darkness, seeing art in public, in white cube rooms, with intense spotlights highlighting every bruise, scuff, and scarred seam; but missing its Victorian setting, the sting is lessened. They are marks by an artist. Dickens's pen is no longer heard scratching in the background. Clarke's study of violence (social and physical) is less threatening when it becomes theater on the sophisticated art stage, faux theatricality for

One Day my Plinth Will Come, 2009
lead, silver plated nickel silver,
cast white metal
dimensions variable

the marketplace amid opening reception chatter and the clinking of wine glasses. The irony cannot fully reach us. We can laugh it off. His multiple footnotes tell the viewer the work is smart and this makes them confortable with his artistry, but its threat is lessened.

Clarke's skillful parody, his wit and satire and his outrageous banter lift the mood. The titles alone can be hilarious. A group of mutant forms, truncated teapots, vessels of various kinds and at least one spoon group is named *One Day My Plinth Will Come (*2009), and, on exhibition, of course it does. This softens the harshness of Mr. Clark's inner world. That changes when it's bought and placed in a domestic center. The banality of the everyday energizes the art. Living in someone's daily life, its potency and sobriety returns, much like the horror movie doll that, once removed from its retail setting, reveals more than the new owner bargained for.

Clarke is not a vandal let loose in a silversmith's workshop, but an artist of deep poignancy.

While this essay has been admittedly melodramatic, it is deliberately so, and that is the pitch-perfect voice to blend into the time warp in which Clarke's art travels. It is a device to reveal that David Clarke is an artist of extraordinary depth, that his narratives have the richness of good literature, and that the labels that have been so consistently attached to him—while no doubt amusing to this rabble-rouser and offering him some cover for his tenderness—fall far short of his true importance and emotional depth. Clarke is not a vandal let loose in a silversmith's workshop, but an artist of deep poignancy. Yes, he deals with hurt, but not of his own making. The perpetrator of the pain is our society.

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