



MISTER CLARKE, DELIGHTFUL
TROUBLEMAKER AND SILVERSMITH

'A conversation with coffee pots,
cutlery, and silverware.'

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Words Sarah Fairman

ART I



'I believe in good food, good people, and good objects,' says David Clarke, 'and all of them need to do something.' This 'delightful troublemaker' and silversmith, otherwise known as Mister Clarke, brings everyday objects to life with charming — and sometimes risqué — details. From coffee pots to teaspoons, no utensil is safe from his imaginative experiments. And that's certainly the case with Stash, a recent work that earned him a Loewe Prize nomination. Its opulent (and somewhat cheeky) lids and fringes made from cutlery handles are not only decorative but interactive.

David's pieces are the result of a curious imagination let loose on household objects. In his London studio, a coffee spoon inflates like a bubble, gravy boats lean sassily on three legs, and spouts appear from unexpected places. Familiar shapes become shocking and surprising with David's additions and omissions, making these everyday items almost too anthropomorphic for comfort. Take Miss Decaff, a skinny coffee pot who seems to have been on a diet. 'She's slightly obsessed with her waistline, so she has been shrunk,' says David. 'I've just taken her belly out.' More than just a personality, his works have become characters in their own right.

Metals made an early appearance in David's life. His father, a priest, tasked him with cleaning the church silver. He enjoyed this work, which allowed him to spend time getting to know the objects as he polished them. One of the most important collections was a communion kit, which his father took to patients in hospital to perform their last rites: 'It was cut glass and silver — really precious, and quite mysterious,' says David. 'There was something really quite magical about this object.' Although his current works have a certain gutsiness and playfulness unapparent in delicate religious objects, the themes of rituals and community stayed with him.

David enjoys seeing his works becoming characters in peoples' lives. It is even better if they become shared pieces, allowing a family to congregate, start a discussion, and create memories. It could be a monumental dining table centrepiece or even a receptacle with wonky wheels that children push around the table. 'They use it, they reflect on it, they then have stories, implant memories, time, and occasions around these objects.' Sometimes, an item can alleviate awkwardness and help people have conversations they might not otherwise have had. He mentions a Dutch couple who had a piece on their breakfast table that sat between them. One of the owners once told him, 'Whenever we have an argument, I look at your piece and think of you.' These objects allow time to reflect and a mutual, neutral space.







Interaction with the work is absolutely encouraged. 'I want people to laugh, and I want them to comment on the work,' says David. Referring to Stash, he says, 'if you handle that work, you are rewarded.' Indeed, the piece features impressive lids, within which appear more lids, more containers. And the tinkling fringes of cutlery offer even more excitement. 'The fringes all move, so they play a tune... there's magic in there. It brings instant celebration, and I just think we need that.'

And the reaction doesn't have to be positive for David to appreciate it. Most important is the response itself. He tells the story of an exhibition in Sweden when an elderly couple proclaimed that his work was the 'worst silversmithing they'd ever seen.' So visceral was their reaction that they threw a piece on the floor. But David was far from offended. 'I was absolutely delighted with that response,' he laughs, 'that the work had impacted on them in such a way that they had to physically interfere with it.'

'I actively want to provoke, delight, irritate,' says David. This is equally clear in his recent works, which focus on metals from the Earth, their origins, and what this means for the future. His piece Poor Trait also incites a reaction. It appears in the Another Crossing exhibition at The Box Plymouth, which offers a new perspective on the Mayflower crossing. His piece is precisely the size of the only portrait of Pocahontas on display in the Smithsonian. It hangs from a butcher's hook, pierced at an uncomfortable angle, creating a sense of unease. 'It's really brutal,' says David. In this way, his creations allow people to discuss the things we don't want to talk about and begin to come to terms with them.

From David's perspective, a conversation can occur around an object, through it, and even with it. He is always pleased to open up a new discussion with broken pieces that have returned to him for repairs. Damaged and unwanted objects inspire him — he trawls eBay, searching for things he considers 'done with.' Rather than getting into a bidding war for the most highly prized item, he says, 'I want the most unloved pieces. I want the dead pieces. I want the stuff that's close to the knackers' yard. I then scoop those up and give them a new opportunity.' He sees the potential in old, dead objects and reanimates them, 'pumping life into these really tragic things.'

Finally, we return to coffee — is he a fan? Yes, absolutely. 'My day starts with coffee,' he says. 'I am an absolute addict.' It takes centre stage in his daily ritual, although please, save the caffeine-free brews for Miss Decaff.

