

Turning the World

Upside Down

Maps, stamps, letters, and labels are playfully recast in collages of Peter Clark.

by Jessica Hommings

Maps tell us where we are in relation to the rest of world. Or at least they give us that impression. Anyone who has seen world maps for sale in Australia knows that location is a concrete but also entirely flexible detail. For instance, the common perspective that Australia is located “down under” assumes that North America and Europe are on top of the world. Just to set the record straight, Australia sells maps (most often to cheerful tourists) that place the southern hemisphere at the top of the page with Australia in the center, rather than the continent’s usual position: upside down, bottom right, distant.

“I draw with maps,” explains British artist Peter Clark of his collages that turn the world, as we know it, upside down. Rather than a political agenda, Clark’s formations look to be the constructions of unnatural worlds, places where Arizona sits beside the Ukraine and rivers flow uphill. But then we have to keep in mind just how artificial maps are in the first place. When

you fly from London to Los Angeles, you end up high over the northern reaches of Canada. Why? The quickest route is over the top, although it certainly does not look like that on the Mercator map most of us picture when we conjure the globe.

Geography aside, Clark’s creations speak of magical lands. He acquires the old faded maps he uses—along with stamps, letters, and various labels—from flea markets in England and Europe, which he scours with his wife, the textile designer Karen Nicol [featured in “Karen Nicol: Skirts Laced with Spirit,” *Fiberarts*, January/February 2006]. Treasures are often found where many would see only damp and mold. Old maps, Clark explains, are preferable because of the softness of old paper and faded beauty of the print. Also crucial is the paper’s tooth, something Clark exposes through tearing rather than cutting the paper. These qualities simply can’t be found in the varnished paper surface of new maps.

When I visit Clark’s studio on the ground floor of the home



LEFT: rome is where the heart is, 2005; 51" x 39". RIGHT: crinkly suit, 2005; 66" x 29".

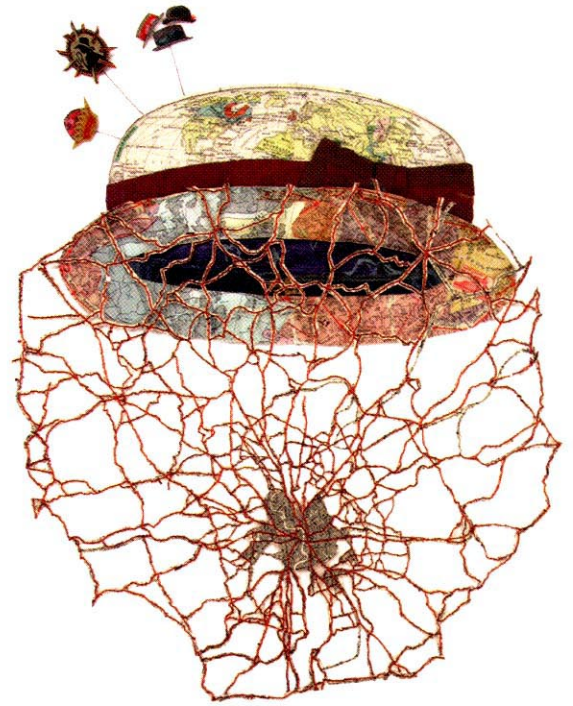


he shares with his wife and two teenage daughters just outside London, he shows me to drawer after drawer of maps, letters, paper boxes, stamps, and labels. I suspect that searching through the collection is a bit like searching for a needle in a haystack. But Clark rummages through the piles decisively, lifting out of these humble, if slightly eccentric, collections details that will become an eyebrow or nostril in a collage. Is there anything he has bought that has become too precious for him to tear into and use in his work? "Yes. . . . Well, honestly, no, not really," he answers. "When the right piece comes along, I will use anything I have." In addition to preparing for exhibitions, Clark spends much of his time today working on commissions. In these works he often includes elements that clients provide: letters, stamps, or maps

of a landscape that refer to the work's future owner or home.

Rather than glue each piece of paper to a perfectly flat surface, Clark approaches paper collage as a three-dimensional world. He rolls and sculpts specific areas, creating texture at crucial points, such as the eyes or muzzles of his dogs or a paper bow on the waist of a dress. The portrait *cocker* finds its feeling of curling damp hair in this way, torn and peeling up from the rest of the animal. The blue curves of a river provide a provocative outline to the bustier of a fitted dress in *where the heart is*, while Italy's well-known boot shape appears in several of the skirt's napkin-shaped panels. These moments are what make the works convincing, areas of incredible detail that make the rest of the figure feel real. But never far behind is Clark's sense of humor, perhaps most clearly epitomized in *smoking jacket*, fashioned out of old cigarette packages.

Clark has long been interested in the possibility of "making visual" that which exists in words. He explains that his



ABOVE LEFT: smoking jacket, 2004; 36" x 29". ABOVE RIGHT: hat pin, 2004; 23" x 21". LEFT: cocker, 2004; 31" x 37".



recent forays into collage work are similar in many ways to his first career as an illustrator and designer of animations and for television. Concrete poetry—in which the arrangement of the words on the page contributes to their meaning—springs to mind, although he is quick to point out that it really is the visual that drives this work. Nonetheless, narration certainly seems to play a part. Delicate ink handwriting, topographical lines, franked stamps—in every case new stories are built out of the fresh neighbors and new divisions the collage creates.

What once were hard-fought national boundaries can begin to resemble a patchwork quilt; topographical lines, the whorls of hair on a dog's coat. Aside from the literal connections of paper to fiber, the tearing and gluing together of paper edges has a textile quality to it—the process of building up small parts to make a larger whole. Cotton webbing used to bind books is also evident in areas of collages, often left to dangle free like a burst fabric seam. But while it is hard not to wonder the extent of a textile influence at play in this work, fab-



ABOVE LEFT: jacket potato, 2005; 36" x 29". ABOVE RIGHT: hand written, 2004; 47" x 29". RIGHT: british maid, 31" x 31".

Clark's collages incorporate varied found papers and other materials, such as cotton webbing and buttons, mounted with glue stick or PVA (polyvinyl acetate) adhesive. The base materials vary from heavy watercolor paper to off-white mount board. Photos of artwork: Peter Clark. Photo of the artist: Karen Nicol.

ric seems to be just one of countless influences Clark absorbs. His uncanny eye for detail has certainly not gone unnoticed. A troupe of three-dimensional collaged cardboard dogs, for instance, was commissioned for the opening of the Paul Smith flagship store in Milan. Other large commissions have included a ten-piece series for a London hotel, which, no surprise, included pieces of the maps of the surrounding streets. Humor, much like the mind behind Australia's reoriented map, is never far beneath the surface. But if you are not looking for it, the joke might just be on you. 📍

Peter Clark is represented by Rebecca Hossack Gallery of London. To see more images of his work, visit the gallery's website, www.r-h-g.co.uk.

