

Collage education

This artists' house is a lesson in the inventive use of everything from cigarette packets to old Ordnance Survey maps and doilies. **Dinah Hall** visits

Photographs by James Merrell





LEFT PETER CLARK'S COLLAGE COCKTAIL DRESSES HANG IN THE UPSTAIRS DRAWING-ROOM, WHERE PILES OF POTTERY VASES PERCH ON THE MANTELPIECE. THE CHAIRS ARE DRAPED WITH

FABRIC ART PIECES BY KAREN NICOL. ABOVE A STONE BUST, A CHEST OF DRAWERS AND ASSORTED MIRRORS, ALL ANTIQUES-FAIR FINDS, IN THE HALL BELOW A DISPLAY OF COAT HANGERS ON THE STAIRS



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eter Clark suggests Tuesday for this interview. Hmmm, Tuesday - that's Kempton Park antiques market day and no way is earning a living going to get in the way of that. Fortunately, it turns out that he, too, is going to Kempton - the difference being that he will have been and gone by 8.30am. For Clark, an artist who specialises in collages of clothes and dogs made from 'found paper', and his wife, Karen Nicol, a textile designer, are serious scavengers. Car-boot sales, antiques fairs, bric-à-brac markets in France, Spain and Italy - they do them all. By rights, then, their house in East Molesey, Surrey, should be stuffed full of junk. And yet the overall impression as you step inside is of space and light and very little in the way of possessions.

The absence of possessions is, in fact, illusory. What they have is multiples of objects, artfully arranged in an interior pared down to bare floorboards and flawless white walls. An upstairs wall hosts a graphic display of assorted coat hangers in all shapes - some like punctuation marks, some like aeroplanes. 'We got the idea from an exhibition at the Louvre - you suddenly realise, when you see them like this, what fantastic characters they are,' explains Nicol, whose embroidered and mixed-media textiles have featured in the designs of Matthew Williamson, Clements Ribeiro and Marc Jacobs. On the mantelpiece in the upstairs drawing-room, which doubles as

their showroom, is a display of 1940s cream moulded pottery vases piled beautifully, if hazardously, on top of each other. Much more than the sum of their parts, 'they work together, and become sculpture'

like this, points out Nicol, who explains that she and Clark are not interested in the objects themselves so much as in what they inspire. This becomes even more evident in Clark's basement studio, where he has been working on collages for his latest exhibition. The studio is lined with plastic drawers ('God bless Muji') filled with maps, cigarette packets, airline tags, rosettes from dog shows, enclosure tags from horse races,

'You suddenly realise, when you see the coat hangers like this, what fantastic characters they are'



LEFT WORK IN PROGRESS: A POODLE MADE OF GRAMOPHONE RECORD SLEEVES, LABELS AND OLD LETTERS TAKES SHAPE IN PETER CLARK'S STUDIO ABOVE THE KITCHEN SIDEBOARD BELOW CLARK'S FIRST COLLAGE JACKET HANGS ABOVE A SOFA FILED WITH CUSHIONS BY NICOL





sheet music... all the raw ingredients for Clark's work. It's like a grown-up version of the junk modelling corner at nursery school. Only, instead of cornflakes-packet robots, what emerges is an amazing ball dress with black bodice made from French mourning envelopes, a suit created out of postage material, a Bedlington terrier made from dollies... Paper, in all its forms, is his paint and is used with the same freedom and fluidity.

On top of the chest that houses this paper alchemy is a pile of old books, which Clark rips apart to make his works of art. He once made a hell's angel's jacket out of old bibles and prayer books. At this I begin to feel a bit queasy - creating a dress out of old Ordnance Survey maps is one thing (though sacrilege to a cartographer, no doubt) but vandalising books...

'It's much easier to do things now our daughters have left home. They used to hate the fact that we didn't have carpet'

There are no paintings on the wall, no art other than Clark's pieces, which are only temporarily displayed there. 'It's partly because we can't make up our minds about things, but it's also just boring to have the same things around for a long time.' And that seems to include their children. 'It's much easier to do things now our two daughters have left home,' says Clark. 'When they were younger, at that stage when they just wanted to be the same as everyone else, they hated the fact that we didn't have carpet.' At this point, before their daughters disown them, it should be noted that the only permanent works of art they do have around the house - a rough pottery animal, childish scribbles and some very assured GCSE work - belie the professed lack of sentiment. But otherwise Clark and Nicol's attitude to objects is strangely ruthless. Both are interested only in things that inspire their work - so, however fabulous those cream vases look on the mantelpiece, they won't be there for ever. ●

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE THE KITCHEN WITH METAL TREES BY PETER CLARK; TWO PUPPETS HANG ON THE WALL OF KAREN NICOL'S STUDIO; DRAWERS HOLD EMBROIDERY SILKS, BUTTONS, OLD FABRICS, LACE CORDS AND RIBBONS



'What Comes Around Goes Around', an exhibition of Peter Clark's work, is at Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London W1, until 19 January (020 7436 4899); peterclarkcollage.com; karennicol.com