



John Clem Clarke > Comforts, Near Disasters, and Pentimenti

Allentown Art Museum

JOHN CLEM CLARKE: THE AMERICAN WAY

by April Kingsley

Born in Oregon and raised on a farm, John Clem Clarke lives in a SoHo loft surrounded by antique American furniture, art, and collectibles. Many of these objects have the simple, Pennsylvania Dutch earthiness we associate with Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he spends his summers with his wife of twenty-some years, his daughter, and his dog. The subjects of his eminently easy-to-read paintings of the last ten years are mostly food, modes of transportation, homelife, sports, and industry. They couldn't be more all-American or seem more straightforward. But they raise many questions. Why are there no people in most of the pictures? Why do we often seem to be viewing sets for a *film noir* or a disaster movie? Why do the pictures exist in a timewarp, an endless fifties? Is it because they are drawn in the elastic style of the modern cartoon and advertisement illustration, which were ubiquitous by then? And why that style, which we don't associate with high art. Anxiety hangs over many scenes. Is it because of the changes the artist has obviously made but not removed? Why didn't he? Finally, and definitely not least, why do Clarke's paintings look hand-painted when he goes to elaborate lengths to process them into existence mechanically?

Let's start with the process. It has been the constant in Clarke's work over four decades. Subject matter changes, the style or look changes, the intention, and even the level of abstraction changes, but, aside from some minor alterations to his way of working for health reasons, his process has been the same since he discovered it in the mid-sixties. Basically a stencilling procedure, it evolved during a two-and-a-half year post-graduate stay in Europe. After having seen Robert Rauschenberg's insertion of recognizable

printed matter into the Abstract Expressionist matrix, he wanted to do something similar with his paintings. In Ibiza in 1963 with no money for materials, he cut a stencil for the dog silhouette used in "No dogs allowed" signs and began placing it wherever he wanted that shape in his expressionist abstractions. This gave him such satisfaction that he wanted to make a whole picture out of stencils. But a picture of what? He wanted something with the instant recognition and clarity of an international symbol or a nursery rhyme, so he decided on the old masters. Not trying to personalize them or to either mock or exalt them, his aim was to recontextualize them in mid-century America. To accomplish this, he had the idea of encoding their visual material (hue, value, intensity, etc.) in holes in the paper stencil so that they became abstract pictorial units, like musical notes one could play.¹ He now compares these encoded elements of picture rebuilding in the stencils to information bytes in a computer.

While this all sounds highly intellectual, it is really about vision and how it changes over time. The way the resultant painting looked spoke of the present, of the time Clarke made it, while the subject matter recalled the past. As Clarke saw it, there were two realities: the actual experience of the painting and the experience of the reproduction of the painting. That second reality was more real to Clarke, who had, before going to Europe, experienced art primarily through reproductions, as do most people. Clarke's visual coding was a straight transmission of that second reality. In 1972 he told an interviewer, "It's like making a plan of lights and darks and colors that are going to stand for whatever it is and it doesn't really make any difference what it is."²

In the very heady mid-1960s, with Pop, Op, and Primary Structures on all sides, as well as Frank Stella, Color Field painting, and Minimal art, Clarke was exhilarated by this discovery of a liberating new, post Abstract Expressionist process. The possibilities for it seemed boundless. He explored both European and American old masters,³ first directly from books using an opaque projector, then by projecting slides of them to painting size for the stencil-cutting. He summed up the situation in this way: "These paintings have been transmitted to the canvas by a crude visual code, producing results with the precision common to a Ford Pinto, and hopefully created a kind of mechanical painterliness."⁴ A parallel might be drawn in this use of readymade, reproduced subject matter with the work of Malcolm Morley, who is a friend. But Clarke's primary concern, then as now, was keeping the personal touch of brushwork out of the picture,⁵ whereas, for Morley, the opposite is true. Both artists, however, were similarly unhappy about being labelled photo-realists, though from different standpoints, and both considered that kind of painting (laboriously filling in the outlines of a drawing made on the canvas of a projected photographic image), intellectually inferior and boring to execute.⁶

In the 1970s Clarke recreated old master compositions with posed models or depicted great works from the past by such artists as Caravaggio, or the Americans, James Peale, William Harnett, and Joseph Cornell, partially encased in semi-transparent wrappings as if they were being shipped. His own photographs of used construction materials and messy urban doorways were the sources for radically conceptual *trompe l'oeil* paintings and constructions at the end of the decade. Some of these constructed paintings were extremely complex, with each component a separate painting, but they were still spray-painted through stencils, so they were executed quickly. Speed is vital to the freshness of Clarke's work.

Landscapes of the American West followed next, and travel pictures from his own slides as well as travel magazines. Some of these reproductions were rendered in palette knife daubs that were crisp and rich in color

but necessitated numerous stencils. These palette-knifed paintings had thickly-textured, loose surfaces quite at odds with the smooth, focused look of their photo-derived imagery. Like snapshots, white borders often edged these pictures, which were painted on black surfaces, both shiny and matte as he had often done in the past. He explained why he likes to work on black in a 1972 interview:

It seems to make more sense to work light on dark because light has a different kind of shape than dark does. Dark is made from the areas that aren't light, so that lights are round and darks are like diamonds, like when you put several round things together and they come out that kind of shape. The shapes of the stencils, their rhythm. It's like rice, like the shape that water makes on a drainboard. It's an organic, kind of Mickey Mouse shape, that flows.⁷

Clarke also made some prophetic experiments in the mid-eighties using contemporary illustrations of kitchen appliances (a Cuisinart and Revere Ware) for his subject matter painted with the palette knife. But he wanted to get back to basics and build his own image world, one that spoke of his own lifetime. In rural, pre-television Oregon, that world was dominated by comics and by magazines like *Life*, *National Geographic*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. He poured over them, collected and treasured them. They became an immense image mine to explore. His grandmother's gift subscriptions to *Bugs Bunny* and Disney comics, *Donald Duck* and *Mickey Mouse* had brought immense pleasure every week to a lonely only child, which he never forgot. "I always loved them," he recalled, "because it looked as though someone could draw so beautifully and effortlessly."⁸ He found his future in his past:

The kind of drawing that was going on in the '40s and '50s . . . doesn't really happen anymore. It was a few hundred people that kind of invented a style of very clear drawing and presentation, first of all, to

sell products. It's really quite uniquely American. I often wondered if it could relate to fine art if it were formalized and done by an artist who is aware of the formal properties of art.⁹

The struggle to achieve this effortless look culminated, by the end of the decade, in his current system of using mylar maquettes,¹⁰ and in the work that is the focus of this exhibition. He began to stockpile the vintage illustrations, drawing from those that caught his eye, and stockpiling the drawings. Cars remain a special favorite, cars remembered from the days of his youth when rainy afternoons were whiled away counting cars. Their colors were undistinctive, but not their characteristic profiles — a wartime child could spot the year and make of just about any car in the 1950s. Trains, ships, and airplanes were drawn from every angle. Houses and their furnishings, kitchens and their appliances, garages and their tools, vacation spots and the paraphernalia of the pastimes practiced there; clothing, hats, toys, and food; parks, factories, shops, supermarkets — the list is endless.

It is the inventory of Pop art, handled with a distancing technique similar to those used by Pop artists, and tinged with irony as Pop art was. But where Pop depersonalized its subject matter, Clarke loves his. It is the stuff of his childhood. And where Pop made icons out of the artifacts of mass culture, Clarke weaves a kind of narrative with them. Or rather he juxtaposes images, creating a form of dialogue, and you make up your own story. "I like the subject that has implications you can dream up on your own," he said. "I'm dealing with ironic subject matter, but not using it to make a statement. I like art to be friendly and playful, something you really enjoy."¹¹

One drawing Clarke especially likes at the moment might stay tacked to his studio wall for months waiting for the right second image to come along and be its mate — the motorcycles and the bar window, the police car and the Coke billboard, the brightly colored barrels and the black and white steel mill. Then scale, lighting, shadows, and distances all have to be

made consistent so the action is believable. More importantly the elements have to interact, to talk to each other, to provoke thought, raise questions, or otherwise hint at some kind of significance. In making this happen, he establishes the rudiments of a Bakhtinian situation. Mikhail Bakhtin (1875–1975) and his circle of Revolutionary Russian linguistic philosophers believed that signification in social life in general and artistic creation in particular was formed in the process of social interaction, and was essentially dialogic and open to all.¹² By using the absolutely clear conventions of advertising art and the cartoon, conventions with which everyone is familiar and accepts, Clarke easily slips the viewer into his world, into believing it just the way we do the movies, and creating a dialogue or a story out of the elements he has given us.

After all of the technical and psychological aspects are resolved in the maquette, which can take a very long time, it is clear, smooth, and swift sailing for him to project the mylar maquette and draw the stencils, for his wife or an assistant to cut the stencil and prepare the canvas,¹³ and for him to execute the painting. Because the actual painting shows no signs of the struggle that went on in the maquette stage, it is as fresh and clean as a painting can be. And because he cannot know exactly what it will look like full scale ahead of time, and cannot see it until it is done, the painting process is full of excitement and anticipation. He can hardly sleep the night before he is going to paint a canvas.

Peeled Potatoes, 1988, was the last picture he painted in the alkyd oil paints he had used for years before an allergic reaction to them caused him to switch to acrylics. Extremely simple, yet completely satisfying (like potatoes themselves), it is a single subject viewed two ways twice — peeled and unpeeled, in a pot on a table and piled on the ground — but nestled together as one. Farm kitchens, scout camp, army KP come to mind because of the huge number of potatoes.¹⁴ Each potato seems to have a personality all its own, as do the kernels of corn on the cob in the Allentown Art Museum's diptych. Skewered like a trophy and offered on a platter as if it

is a treasured object to be sacrificed, America's national food is given reverential treatment. The off-center split of the image into two parts brings to mind the arbitrary (and annoying) way paintings are sometimes reproduced across the binding gap of a book or magazine. It may also imply its reduction from another state as a triptych, with that form's religious implications. Separating the potatoes into two piles and the corn into two parts opens up a (Bakhtinian) dialogue which makes even such banal subjects as these interesting. What could be more banal than a drain pipe, yet the very large, *Landscape with Drainpipe*, 1989, is rife with potential meanings. The pipe protrudes menacingly, like a gun barrel. The tiny trickle of drainage points up the aridity of the surrounding land. Is it a pollutant and is the phallic intrusion of the pipe in the soft pink and tan sand a comment on mankind's rape of the land?

The dramatic use Clarke makes of contrasting light and shadow is nowhere more brilliant than in *Automobile Show Room* and *Bus Stop*, both of 1990. In the latter picture you can feel the heat on the front of the bus, the sidewalk, and the pink stucco building behind the bus, whereas in the former, the car on display emits golden rays of light in the darkening night. The facade seems streetlighted, with the reflections in the glass blocks (a favorite part of the picture for Clarke) given the attention of an abstract grid painting. The bus windows occasioned a glorious display of Cubistic stylization, while Piet Mondrian seems to have taken over the building's windows. Edward Hopper, of course, having come out of illustration, individualized the windows in his buildings, but no artist does it with so much panache and pleasure as Clarke.

Certain inconsistencies are consistent enough in Clarke's paintings to indicate purposeful practices, such as the absence of people in the vehicles, or for that matter, of doors. (Putting people in the pictures just doesn't usually work for him.) Much attention is lavished on the luggage in *Bus Stop*, which doesn't look like it would fit into the rather short bus in any case. (He takes a great many liberties with objects so familiar to us that we don't

notice what he has done.) The brilliant red car fills the showroom, but we see no way in for it or the potential buyer. Distances are carefully left ambiguous so that the car has a chance of beating the oncoming train across the tracks (*Dash Across the Tracks*, 1991) or the ship might not hit the powerboat in the fog (*Ship in Fog*, 1995). When this is not so, as happens in *Paradise Canyon*, 1994, where the train obviously won't be able to stop before crashing, the travel poster wording is especially significant.¹⁵

It is a man's world that John Clem Clarke depicts. Where women appear or are implied — hanging out the laundry or baking cherry pies — they are housewives, which is the way post-war business and government wanted them to be seen, so that everyone would forget that Rosie could rivet. Camping, fishing, hunting, riding motorcycles and snazzy convertibles, going to night games at the stadium, construction, heavy cleaning, flying freight planes and being policemen were not common activities for women when the images Clarke is appropriating were initially produced. His high comfort level with things masculine was an asset in 1995 when he was commissioned to design three huge, 40 by 80 foot outdoor murals for the Chelsea Piers sports complex in Manhattan. *Hockey Locker Room*¹⁶ in the exhibition is a gallery-size version of one of the selected images. We see no players, who are presumably in the showers from whence the steam escapes, but their animated clothing and equipment establishes their existence.

Animation is the key to Clarke's style. Every line is alive. No edge is ever straight; it is activated by a faint curve or a waver. Even architectural elements are personalized, as is obvious in *Sheetrock (Moonlighting)*, 1991, a romantic, subtly-colorful rendering of what many artists do for a second job: construction. Though one would expect the wires, the can of joint compound, and the moon to have curves, everything in the room seems to bend. Even the vertical lines of the can, which should be straight, are slightly curved, in at the left and out at the right, giving it the look of a paunchy little figure in a beret, hands clasped around its belly. Cars, trains,

planes, and motorcycles are naturals for anthropomorphic animation with their headlight eyes, grill mouths, and wing/handlebar/fender arms. Billows of dust rise in their wake, rivers of steam or smoke pour forth, and reflections zigzag like lightning across glass. Watery surfaces of any kind bring out Clarke's highest flights of fancy in patterning, but steam more often enlivens his scenes. How coldly Cubistic the cup of coffee would be without its funnel of rising steam in *Coffee and Sandwich*, 1992, and how leaden the sandwich without its curved dotted line.

The relatively small size of *Coffee and Sandwich* seems appropriate to the subject's size — it is still huge in comparison to the real thing or to an illustration of it. Large size plays an important role in transforming Clarke's illustration-based style into high art.¹⁷ The largest picture in the exhibition, *Ship and Life Raft*, 1992, is one of the most dramatic. The rescue action, too late in any case, pales in significance beside the furious interplay of Eastern and Western graphic styles of depicting water that seems to be the real subject of the picture. Another large canvas, *Barrels and Factory*, 1992, pays general homage to 1930s Regionalism and to Charles Sheeler in particular, also a Bucks County resident in his day. Clarke's car pictures often resound with echoes of Edward Hopper.

Much more subtly now than when he worked directly from old master paintings, Clarke is nevertheless still making art about art.¹⁸ His fascination with pulp fiction illustration styles is evident in the shadowed lettering of *Jack's Camp*, 1994, and the apparently loosely handled brushwork of the stag and the landscape. The flames seem to be a fusion of traditional Asian and comic book treatments, however, and the pentimenti¹⁹ of the smaller, centrally-positioned deer is a ghostly reminder of all the changes artists have made in their paintings over the centuries. Unlike the legions of artists who paint out their mistakes, Clarke paints (or rather stencils) his in. Every blur or smudge is deliberately, mechanically placed. This play with the artistic decision-making process is the subject of the simpler "Pentimenti" paintings, but in *Heater and Tub—Pentimenti*, 1997, it occa-

sioned particularly lovely passages of apparent painterliness, and the ostensible subject — the incipient danger of the situation — retains its power.

The pentimenti add another layer of complexity to the "Modern Art" series he began this year, but here the subject is the idea of applying Picassoid Modernism to illustration (*Modern Art #1: Two Guys with Sun—Pentimenti*) and old masters (*Modern Art #8: Luncheon on Grass, Manet—Pentimenti*). The latter is a summational diptych in which he passes the visual information in the original Manet through two encoding systems, illustrational linear shorthand and Cubist diagramming. He loses much of the sumptuousness of the Manet in the process, and even alters the poses, but gains a clarity that borders on luminosity. The head of the man on the right is truer to the original in the pentimental "mistake," but the head Clarke gives us seems far more appropriate today.

John Clem Clarke's paintings are the manifestations of a running dialogue with visual art. They raise questions to involve you in that conversation. You are the missing people in the cars, the witnesses to the train wreck, the elopers, the game attendees. Their smooth, rounded cartoon style is so familiar, you slide right into the picture. It even makes "Modern Art" acceptable. The anxiety aroused in you by the "erasures" and "mistakes" he has left littering the canvas, echoes the artist's ever-present angst about choosing among all the things a painting can be. He doesn't put his emotions directly on the canvas the way the Abstract Expressionists did, but filters them through his multi-stage process. The handmade look is a deception, but one that effectively draws you into the picture. The illustrations he appropriates were designed to sell products. John Clem Clarke uses them to sell you on art. It's the American way.

Notes:

1. Ben-day dots are another kind of visual code, but one that was being explored by others, most notably Roy Lichtenstein. While Lichtenstein's work is undeniably relevant for Clarke, Andy Warhol's silk-screened product labels and packaging were of even more importance to him.
2. John Clem Clarke, interview with Paul Cummings, July 13, 1972, transcription, The Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 22.
3. Periodically, he returns to the old masters, particularly when exploring some new technique or approach, such as the recent series of Cubist "modernizations" of classics by Goya and Manet.
4. John Clem Clarke 1989 statement, *Art Now Gallery Guide* (February 1990).
5. He even went through a period of painting tiny abstractions, thick with automatically applied pigment, which he would photograph in a raking light to pick out the textures, then project and process in the same way. He called this work "Abstract Realism" and considered it a close look at how much variation there is in paint. The viewer would see a flat illusion of globs of paint so thick they cast shadows.
6. Clarke would spray thinned oil paint through the stencils to lay the colors down quickly. One of the things that thrills him about his working process is its speed. He began by using Flit insecticide spray guns, which he still thinks worked best, and only switched to airbrushes and palette knives because Flit guns were phased out. When the oil paint began to bother his respiratory system in 1989, he switched to acrylics, which he likes less, but which have the advantage of drying fast. He applies the paint with sponges. It is important to his aesthetic that he not use brushes and that he not intervene in the semi-automatic, stencil painting process. He finds that if he doesn't like something in a given painting and touches it up by hand, he won't go near the picture again. It is ruined for him.
7. Cummings interview, 24–25.
8. Emiliana Sandoval, "Clarke takes comic book art to new highs," *New Mexican Pasa Tiempo* (July 1995): 1.
9. Ibid.
10. Firm, transparent mylar provides a smooth surface that can be worked from both sides and readily erased, which makes it an illustrator's delight, and Clarke's as well. The finished mylar is his original, handpainted art which is projected to create the stencils he uses to make the painting.
11. John Clem Clarke, interview with the author, May 28, 1998.
12. An anti-Formalist Marxist, Bakhtin focused on Dostoyevsky's democratic spirit in his 1929 study, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. He praised the way Dostoyevsky let the characters in his novels speak in a plurality of interacting voices rather than merging them into a single authoritative voice. He saw Dostoyevsky's dialogic novel as a model for authentically Communist modern literature. Bakhtin's populist bias makes his concept a closer fit to John Clem Clarke's esthetic than other forms of Modernist criticism. Craig Brandist, "The Bakhtin Circle," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; available from:
<http://utm.edu/research/iep/b/bakhtin.htm>; accessed 14 June 1998.
13. Jane Clarke has developed a system of backing the canvas with a heavy sheet of mylar, so the resultant painting is thin and flat, but strong and self-supporting and easily rolled for shipping or storage. It needs no frame, which delights the artist since he hates anything which seems to cut the picture off. In fact, the canvas can be given any shape he desires, witness the *Broom and Trash Can*.
14. Further back in the mind may also be the European potato famine of the 19th century which brought so many of our ancestors to this country.
15. Because of the sense of impending doom and the animated handling of the vehicles in *Paradise Canyon* and *Dash Across the Tracks*, they recall Grant Wood's *Death on Ridge Road*.
16. Having played football in high school and on a college scholarship for two years, he was familiar with locker rooms.
17. This is also true for Valerio Adami and John Wesley, to whom advertising art and cartoons are as important as they are to Clarke, though they use them differently. Together with Steve Gianakos, these four artists could be said to comprise a mini international art movement of their own.
18. He was included in *Art About Art* organized by Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1976.
19. Pentimenti are the traces of former states of a painting left under subsequent layers of applied paint. Changes in the covering pigments over the years sometimes cause these rejected images to emerge into view. Modern artists such as Henri Matisse and Richard Diebenkorn (among many) deliberately left pentimenti on their paintings as a record of their process.