

Than Hussein Clark

Design, deception, sexuality

BY MATTHEW MCLEAN



Waves (Das Glückliche Rothschild), 2013, exhibition view Mathew, Berlin; all images courtesy: the artist & Mathew, Berlin

Inhabited by outcasts, for Clark, the world of interiors is a forum for those excluded from more elevated creative pursuits. Décor is a means to articulate dissatisfaction, anxiety and aspiration – perhaps especially when it looks luxurious and aestheticized. Clark is currently adapting Graham Greene’s 1975 short story *May We Borrow Your Husband?* to serialize in *QX*, a London gay listings magazine, but from the perspective of the story’s villains: two predatory gay interior decorators. Clarke finds a sense of mission in reappraising this often suspicious or trivialized role and takes a fanboy pleasure in re-telling the stories of his idols: for example his series *Conversation Piece (1-55)* (2009-ongoing) where Clark takes rubbings from the gravestones of gay icons such as Marcel Proust and Jean Cocteau.

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It was a visit to Eileen Gray at her modernist villa E-1027 (1926–29), located on the French Mediterranean coast, which prompted Bruce Chatwin to undertake his 'travelogue' *In Patagonia* (1977). Chatwin's travel writing is notorious for its embellishments. Something not unrelated, for Clark, to Chatwin's disguise of his bisexuality and suffering from AIDS: Chatwin used his HIV-status as a ruse, for example, when he explained his sickness to friends as the result of ingesting guano in an Indonesian cave. In a series entitled *Java Nocturne* (2014), Clark revelled in this heady mixture of design, deception and sexuality, depicting Chatwin's fantasy as Gray might: commissioning a set of rugs woven with white torch beams and cascades of bat wings in inky blues and blacks. Subtling the works using adaptations from Oscar Wilde's essay *The Decay of Lying – An Observation* (1891), the series celebrated Chatwin's self mythology, style and mania – even as the wool they were woven from was partly from Chatwin's own flock of sheep, bred at his Welsh farm.



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This antipathy to authenticity betrays Clark's affinity with the stage. Studying acting years before he did fine art, Clark also writes scripts, designs sets and directs performances – both as a solo artist and member of the Villa Design Group which he formed with James Connick and William Joys at Goldsmith's College in 2011. For all their elegance Clark's installations and performances share the profusion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For one installment of the Villa Design Groups' project *Inauguration of the Russian Season* (2014), a dinner was organized at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London (RIBA) to announce the shortlist for a library commission to house the lost works of Nikolai Gogol. No guests were invited. Was this a performance, a play without audience, or merely a very odd meal? Video documentation shows waiters shifting awkwardly and speeches delivered to empty place settings – nothing is given by way of answers.

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This indeterminacy seems precisely the point. Many terms I reach for to describe Clark's aesthetic are used to excoriate the taste and behaviour associated with the identities of gay men: rarefied, erudite, decadent, hysterical (his performance at the Oslo gallery VI, VII this year featured two bewigged performers entwined in furniture declaring 'we are catastrophic people!'). In this way I empathize with the RIBA waiters: uncomfortable with my instincts, not sure how to react, uncertain what I'm looking at. It's this discomfort – the 'worry which can get established in a room', as a character in Greene's story puts it – in which the urgency of Clark's work resides.

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