

Mr and Mrs Clark and Blanche

by Derek Tibbles

First published in *NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ART*, September 2011



The lady in the photograph is Celia Birtwell¹. She is standing in front of the painting² that she had posed for many years before. David Hockney thought she was tremendously talented, and “for a girl, terribly witty”. He’d completed several drawings of both Ossie Clark and Celia and had an idea that “they’d make a rather pretty picture”. Celia only remembers odd details of the sitting. For example, Ossie’s feet were difficult to get right, so Hockney partially buried them in the carpet.

“It stands as a monument to the sixties, or the early seventies maybe. A moment in time captured, packaged up and preserved forever. Like a badger treated by a taxidermist.”

¹ Celia Birtwell, British textile and fashion designer, known for her distinctive bold, romantic and feminine designs. I had just met Celia for the first time for a coffee at the Tate when I took the photo of her standing in front of the painting. Maybe I should have been a photographer? Too late for regrets, Tibbles!

² *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*, painted between 1970 and 1971, by leading British artist David Hockney. For a long time, this picture has been a personal favourite of mine. Seated with the cat is Ossie Clark, English fashion designer and major figure in the Swinging Sixties scene and fashion. Clark is now renowned for his vintage designs by present-day designers.

With those words, Steve Needham sums up Hockney's masterpiece³. Bearded and jovial, he recalled the progress of the work in the early seventies as being slow: "Like watching paint dry".

The Tate sells more postcards of *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* than of any other picture. Needham cackles in an infectious way as he confides that Ossie actually loathed the painting and was only interested in what it might fetch.

Ossie Clark was originally from Warrington, where he was taunted on account of his love of cats and effeminate walk. He was friends with Needham friends long before he studied at the Regional College of Art.

Ossie knew Hockney through college and the two went to New York on what Hockney described as "an inspirational trip". Artist Mo McDermott later introduced them to Celia at the Cona Coffee Bar⁴ in Manchester. Ossie was wearing a V-neck leatherette sweater, a rounded Victorian collar and long winkle pickers. Celia recalls that she looked like a cross between Brigitte Bardot and Audrey Hepburn.

"Ah yes, the Cona! It had this aura, this reputation," Phil Crookshanks⁵ remembers. "You could take your own records. And play them. I wonder if anyone remembers me from those days," he muses.⁶

Ossie was pretty sure that the night he met Celia coincided with the fifteenth episode of *Coronation Street*. As they chatted, Celia told him that she was studying textile design at the Royal Tech, Salford, where she'd befriend nude models on the top floor. Ossie was quickly introduced to Celia's mother, a seamstress who used to make all of her children's clothes. Ossie would ask her lots of technical questions about making textiles. Celia, easily bored, would slink away.

³ Steve Needham, school friend of Ossie Clark and later his personal driver. Steve and I met in January 2011 in a pub in Stoke Newington soon after I embarked on this research. Given the opportunity Steve said he might have studied fine art. In my view he has a natural aptitude as an art critic!

⁴ The Cona Coffee Bar was one of Manchester's trendier coffee houses. A couple of doors down was the entrance to the offices of CND where for a small fee you could join and get their badge (now the most popular peace sign on the planet). I was a CND member for a while before an extravagant falling out with their rather touchy membership secretary Brenda.

⁵ Phil Crookshanks, a semi-retired computer programmer and former patron of the Cona Coffee Bar. I was looking for someone, preferably in London, who could "paint a picture" for me of the Cona in those heady days. I met Phil, who provided one or two details in my flat over several cups of Lapsang Souchong.

⁶ His main theme however was that he mistakenly thought the Cona would be a good place to meet girls. Having wasted my whole evening, I had to throw him out of my flat. I have not returned any of his subsequent phone calls.

Celia, Ossie, Hockney and Mo formed a close-knit unit, young, carefree and ferociously ambitious. London beckoned. Celia recalled being lured by the promise of powder blue winkle pickers and false eyelashes. There was a heady mixture of pop art and politics and with Ossie's amazing graduation show success, the world appeared to be at his feet. The four were described as "the northern invasion of swinging London"⁷.

"We were all so innocent," Celia tells me, "but Ossie was a master. David remembers him stitching a glove in front of him. He could make you a dress just by touching the outline of your skin. He designed this lovely lace dress for me where you could just see the crease in my bottom."

At first Celia lived in Ladbroke Grove while Ossie was in neighbouring Westbourne Grove. But she moved in with him as her flat was infested with fleas. "We were a funny couple," Celia recalls. "But he suffered from terrible jealousy." In 1965 they moved to Notting Hill, where their flat overlooked a Carmelite Nunnery. They'd watch the nuns planting vegetables in their garden whilst tickling their black poodle, Beulah⁸. They didn't work professionally together until 1966, when they collaborated for the Quorum Boutique.

It's now almost a cliché to describe Ossie Clark as the man who dressed the Sixties: Mick and Bianca Jagger; Marianne Faithfull; The Beatles; Talitha Getty; Eric Clapton; Jimmy Hendrix; Twiggy... the list goes on. The fusion of rock music and fashion was a novelty and became essential to Ossie's work and lifestyle. Through his clothes, Ossie could heighten a woman's awareness of her body. His shows were everywhere, from Dingwalls in Camden to the Royal Albert Hall.

Around this time, Ossie discovered an amazing material in a dark warehouse bursting with leather. "I asked what it was and the answer was twenty six pythons. They'd been on a roller for years." Ossie bought the lot and snakeskin shorts and pants were soon being worn with Biba boots. Sharon Tate⁹ was photographed in Ossie's full length python coat with a mink not long before her murder. A journalist described almost falling over Warren Beatty in the Quorum. He'd arrived with Julie Christie.

Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell were married in 1969 and the following day Ossie flew alone to Barbados. He looked sad on the plane and explained to another passenger that he'd only tied the knot with Celia because her father had persuaded him to do so. She was pregnant and

⁷ I was also a member of this invasion from the north. I attended the same school as Hockney in Bradford (I didn't know him – he is several years older) and moved to London in 1969 to study at St Martin's School of Art. I remained there for many years as, at 21 years of age, they appointed me Junior Lecturer in Fine Arts.

⁸ Beulah, I've looked for photos and other references to the poodle Beulah but have unfortunately drawn a blank.

⁹ Sharon Tate, American actress, model and sex symbol. Tate married director Roman Polanski in 1968 and was murdered in her home, along with four others, by a group known as the Manson Family in August 1969. Horrible business.

the wedding had been hastily arranged at Kensington registry office. Hockney and Ossie's sister were the only witnesses¹⁰.

Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy was Hockney's wedding present to the couple. As it was finished in 1971, it was probably the last gift they received, but also the most valuable. In the event, Ossie sold the painting fairly rapidly to the Tate for £7,000, although it is now of course valued in the millions.

Hockney's intention with the painting was to achieve the presence of two people in a room and the trick had been to paint the figures *contre jour*, or against the light. Critics have noted the inversion of traditional 18th century portraiture. The man is seated and passive, and the woman stands, hands on hips, dominating the scene. Hockney has responded to this by saying that he painted Celia standing in order to show off her dress.

Steve Needham again: "You walk up to it and you're in the room with them! For me it's like stepping back in time, because I'd often enter a room and find Ossie and Celia in just those sorts of positions. It captures them both perfectly."

I have tried to imagine why Ossie never liked the picture and I asked Hockney whether it might have had something to do with the surly expression with which he characterised him. Hockney shrugged his shoulders in response. He'd painted Ossie's head as many as 12 times before he was satisfied. Clearly, Ossie never was.

There was somebody else who was also unhappy about the painting. Blanche, the Clark's other cat, believed that *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* was based on a lie that history had never properly addressed¹¹. It was Blanche who was sitting on Ossie's lap and not Percy. But Percy, who was the fatter of the two felines, was given the credit. According to Hockney, he was only informed by Celia some time afterwards that the cat was actually Blanche. Whereupon he told her to shut up about it as Percy sounded better.

Art student, Nicola Singer¹², describes *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* as a picture that she's happy to look at and then walk away from. She wouldn't want it in her house because of its "Pinteresque menace". The room has a palpable tension but also a sterility.

¹⁰ It was around this time that I first met David Hockney at a school reunion. I told him that I was also an artist and that I was closely following his career trajectory (just a few years behind). A couple of years later I persuaded him to give a guest lecture at St Martin's School of Art. This fabulous coup gave me huge kudos as a young lecturer. Almost 40 years went by before I met him again, this time at the Tate as part of my research into *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*.

¹¹ About two months ago, Blanche began speaking to me in a series of vivid dreams. The words were so clear and memorable that I immediately transcribed them upon waking.

¹² Nicola Singer. Having waited almost 40 years to meet Hockney again, he left the gallery rather suddenly. There were so many more questions that I could have asked him. As I stood in front of the painting, a student in cut away jeans and T-shirt approached and asked if it was David Hockney that I'd been speaking with. This was

Tension? Menace? Sterility? A question naturally arises at this point. Should artists be emotionally detached from the subjects of their portraits? Should they in fact have any more inside knowledge than a stranger who happens to enter the room with paint brush and palette?

Hockney certainly wasn't detached. If anything, he was fatally enmeshed in his sitters' relationship. When he painted the picture, he knew that the Clarks' marriage was in trouble. Ossie's frustration had already overflowed into violence towards Celia. For his part, Hockney was leaning more and more heavily on Celia following his break up with Peter Schlesinger¹³. And things became increasingly complicated when Hockney purchased an expensive diamond ring for Celia. Ossie never forgave Hockney for this (as he saw it) blatant attempt to supplant him in Celia's heart.

It didn't help, of course, that Ossie's life was unravelling. There were parties, more parties, and drugs. Not to mention infidelities with younger men. Celia would frequently wait up until 3 am for Ossie's Mini to return home.

We may wonder the extent to which Hockney put this knowledge of Ossie and Celia's marriage into the painting. Did he deliberately expose their problems to the world? We can guess that he had mixed feelings about the union of two such close friends. Their shared home and marriage must have felt like barriers to his own friendship with them. And when painting the piece, Hockney may also have recalled his own sexual congress with Ossie in America. I doubt that Celia was aware of this when she married Ossie!

Did all or any of the above inform Hockney's work on the picture? Was he deliberately hammering a hefty nail into the proverbial coffin of their marriage?

The painting contains another inaccuracy, at least according to Blanche. It creates the impression that Ossie was a lover of animals. The opposite could be said to have been the case. *The Ossie Clark Diaries* are a litany of his abuses of animals. Goldfish that died because he couldn't be bothered to feed them. Rescued animals that needed rescuing from him. Blanche always preferred Celia's lap and was delighted to remain with her when the couple separated.

For another way of viewing our cast of characters, one could do worse than watch *A Bigger Splash*¹⁴ the pioneering film made by Jack Hazan¹⁵. Mo, Ossie, David, Celia, Peter and others

Nicola Singer. We began a conversation about the painting and she made many interesting points, some of which are included in the paragraphs that follow. Nicola is undoubtedly a brilliant student.

¹³ Peter Schlesinger, American born artist. Schlesinger was memorably captured in *A Bigger Splash*.

¹⁴ *A Bigger Splash*, a fictionalised biopic concentrating on the breakup of Hockney's relationship with Peter Schlesinger. I have the film on DVD, so contacted Nicola Singer (see 12) through her college to see if she would be interested in watching it. I was delighted when she accepted the invitation. She was amazed (but not made uncomfortable) by the large number of cats living in my property. I thoroughly enjoyed our discussion of the film, she was so completely on my wavelength in many ways. But not in all ways. Towards the end of the

all act themselves in the film. They recreate scenes which could have happened but didn't. They say things which might have been said but weren't. And their actions have inevitably become accepted as fact, and the things they say quoted as quotes. People think it's a fly on the wall documentary. But as Hazan points out, it is fiction. However, it charts an emotional journey. When Ossie saw *A Bigger Splash* he said that it was "truer than the truth". However, it practically caused Hockney to have a breakdown.

In the seventies, Ossie became friendly with George Harrison. Ossie would listen over and over again to the lyrics of *Isn't it a pity?*¹⁶ When love goes wrong, more than two people suffer. Celia was in love with Ossie, but unfortunately his sexual interests lay elsewhere. Finally, in need of more physical affection she had an affair with the illustrator, Adrian George. When Ossie found out, he broke Celia's nose.

Ossie's diaries are full of protestations about his attempts to make their marriage work. "I did everything I could. I knew she still loved me but she wouldn't hear of it. Right up to the very end, I was begging her, pleading with her to give me one more chance." But Celia refused to move into the new house that he'd bought. Instead, she was intent upon divorce.

The break-up hit Ossie hard. Steve told me that Ossie became unbearable. He would do stupid things like break into Adrian George's house and smash the television set. It was the pain of loving Celia so much that made him do it.

As if all this doesn't make difficult enough reading, there was more bad news for Ossie. A shift in taste meant that his work was no longer fashionable. As Lady Henrietta Rous¹⁷ says, "Ossie was an emotionally brittle person and fading from the limelight was the final insult."

Ossie remembered going to the Tate in 1983¹⁸. "It was on the same day they discovered a load of grisly human remains in a drain in Muswell Hill. Body parts of anonymous boys killed by that psychopath¹⁹." They'd re-hung *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* in a prominent

evening, I picked up the wrong signals and made an utter fool of myself. Why would she have been interested, physically, in a man some fifty years older than herself? Idiot!

¹⁵ Jack Hazan, British director who brilliantly captured the hedonistic gay culture of 1970s in his work. And it's not as if I couldn't have learnt from past mistakes. Oh Tibbles, Tibbles, Tibbles – only one life but fucked up in at least nine different ways.

¹⁶ *Isn't it a Pity?* George Harrison song from his triple album *All Things Must Pass*. It includes the lyrics, "Isn't it a Pity? Now, isn't it a shame, How we break each other's hearts, And cause each other pain." I contacted Nicola to apologise for my disastrous overtures at my home that evening. But she did not return my emails. I feel quite distraught that I may never see her again.

¹⁷ Lady Henrietta Rous, editor of *The Ossie Clark Diaries*, author of its introduction and friend of Ossie.

¹⁸ The Ossie Clark diaries again. I wonder, if they ever find my diaries, would they bother publishing them? I doubt it. I might save them the bother of thinking about it and burn the bloody things.

¹⁹ Dennis Nilsen, serial killer and necrophiliac, also known as the Muswell Hill Murderer.

position, complete with Hockney's preparatory drawings and photos. "And I stood in front of it. And nobody recognised me. I'd become anonymous too."²⁰

With poverty came resentment. In Henrietta's words, "fashion loves only success". In the end, Ossie had nothing, sometimes relying on the Salvation Army for food. But he had a different perspective. "Around this period I lost my love of the fashion world. My previous unreal lifestyle ended as I sought more genuine values."

My research into this subject has just turned up an incredible fact. In the mid 1980s, Ossie Clark broke into the Tate and stole the original Mr and Mrs Clark picture. He took it home by taxi and burnt the whole thing to ashes in a long and bitter drug fuelled night. Perhaps his dislike of the painting finally got the better of him? Maybe it was revenge on Hockney? The Tate kept quiet about the theft and asked John Myatt²¹, famous painter of fakes, for a replica. That's the one that you will now find hanging in the Sixties room. It seems to be serving its purpose. When David Hockney and I stood in front of it, he didn't notice that anything was amiss.²²

Ossie doesn't refer to this act of madness in his diaries, not even cryptically. He talks about having "the same ups and downs as most people". He continued to receive commissions into the 1990s but always seemed to be destitute.

At the beginning of 1996, Ossie and his lover Diego Cogolato²³ were fighting an appeal against a two month prison sentence following a fracas with the police²⁴. A neighbour in Penzance Street was quoted in the papers as saying Ossie would become deflated when his career was discussed. By that summer, Ossie and Diego had separated.

Ossie's flat was described as "organised chaos" and "artistically neglected". He liked smoking brightly coloured cocktail cigarettes. If he couldn't afford them, he'd just smoke any

²⁰ Welcome to my world, Ossie.

²¹ John Myatt, British artist and convicted forger who perpetrated what has been described as "the biggest art fraud of the 20th century".

²² Technically it may not be correct to refer to the above as my research. The information came via another visit in my sleep from Blanche and the words were transcribed exactly as before.

²³ Diego Cogolato, Italian who Ossie met in 1995 in Holland Park. Diego, 27 at the time, was searching for the youth hostel. Ossie invited him home. A close friend of Ossie warned him to remember Joe Orton.

²⁴ Ossie was high on Champagne following a dress fitting in Chelsea. He impatiently bumped another car driven by an off duty police woman who summoned help. Diego and Ossie were arrested and later charged with common assault. Ossie lost his appeal but avoided prison thanks to a clever barrister.

old cigarette. On 6th August, Diego stabbed Ossie thirty seven times and broke his skull with a terracotta pot. He then left the flat and crossed the courtyard barefoot.²⁵

Like a lot of people, Steve hadn't spoken to Ossie in years. "It was one of those things. I'm not proud of that but Ossie could be difficult at the best of times. And he was stuck in the worst of times." According to neighbours, Bianca Jagger had recently called round at Ossie's flat for a fitting.

The Judge²⁶ told Cogoloato, "You killed your friend in a frenzied attack, while you were in a psychotic state which may have been brought on by a combination of drugs, both prescribed and illicit."²⁷ Family and friends of Ossie, as well as members of the public, were shocked when Diego was later sentenced to just 6 years for manslaughter.

David Hockney described the situation as "a terrible, terrible shame. Just very tragic, really." Celia said, "It's something we've had to deal with as a family, in our own private way."

Recently, Celia has enjoyed some incredible successes. She has designed 4 sell-out collections for Topshop in the spring and summer of 2006, and a few years later a twenty five piece collection for John Lewis.

They were queuing round the block for the Topshop collection. Hockney was there, of course. "It is just like the sixties, all over again," he said.

Editorial Notes

Derek Tibbles was a life-long admirer of David Hockney and created whole academic courses around the artist's work. He was a lecturer for almost thirty years before his career came to a sudden end following a complaint about him by a female student. Rather than facing the ignominy of a full investigation, Tibbles resigned his post.

Tibbles continued to write about Hockney, and this article was his final word on a painting which had always been a personal favourite. The manuscript arrived in our offices right upon the final deadline for copy, and because of Tibbles' known authority on the subject was not fully checked for accuracy. It has since transpired that many of the quotes were invented by the author, although they could be said to represent the spirit of what the attributee may have been thinking. There also appear to be one of two deliberate errors of fact. For example, the photograph of Celia Birtwell in front of the painting was not taken by Derek Tibbles but by Gill Allen and first appeared in the Times. This casts doubt upon whether Tibbles actually met Birtwell. Or Hockney. Other deliberate errors will no doubt be easily spotted by the reader. New Perspectives on Art offered a fully apology in the following issue, but readers wrote in large numbers to protest that none was needed.

Derek Tibbles died of natural causes two days before his article was actually published.

²⁵ When I read this, I found the fact that he left barefoot somehow made it more shocking. What on earth happened to his shoes?

²⁶ Mr Justice Douglas Brown.

²⁷ And thus, Diego is now a small unattractive footnote in history. Better that than being lucky to get the odd mention in a future psychotherapy session. Oh, Nicola!