

Bossons is the story of a master printer whose factory mass manufactured hand-painted wall plaques from 1946 – 1996 depicting wildlife, Dickensian characters and indigenous people drawn from National Geographic magazine, and how his infectious celebration of different cultures tapped into the British working class consciousness.

In the 70s Leigh Clarke grew up with a group of the most produced and least collectible of the Bossons catalogue, that of a Syrian man, on the wall of his family home. For this work, Clarke has stripped back a larger number of heads, rendering them faceless and revealing the 'chalk' of the plaster beneath.

The removal of the identity of Bosson's Syrian makes reference to how British society has represented Syria, from the age of Lawrence of Arabia to news reports of the biggest humanitarian crisis since World War II, and alludes to Britain's iconic gateway to Europe, the White Cliffs of Dover.

THE SYRIAN

1946 – 1996

LEIGH CLARKE

– 2018

Leigh Clarke: The Syrian

A Pathé newsreel of the early 1960s features a segment on the Congleton W.H. Bossons factory, in Cheshire, northwest England, showing Ray Bossons (the son of W.H.) designer of the famous Bossons heads, and Fred Wright who modelled them in clay high-relief for casting and mass-production. To a jazz soundtrack, a clipped RP voice describes how these wall-masks "brought character into the homes of millions". We see the men employed as mould-makers, and women as 'paintresses', all hard-at-work. Bossons had not travelled, beyond his wartime stint in the army; his designs were drawn from photographs in *National Geographic*. The heads range from pirates and buccaneers, to American Indians, Chinamen and Arabs (I use these terms advisedly) – they are artistic cultural tourism – distant relations of Gauguin's Tahitian works and Orientalist Matisse – but the Bossons heads nudge into the realm of the grotesque; often caricatures and stereotypes. They are an exoticisation – whether this is benevolent, sentimental, offensive, or even dangerous in our 21st century world of identity politics, populist nationalism and wars on terror.

Leigh Clarke remembers the heads from his childhood in the 1970s, and considers them his first experience of art, mounted as they were, like hunting trophies, above the family gas-fireplace in South London. The faces are compelling – and must have been bewitching to a young proto-artist – with their detailed features and thousand-yard stares – they are "colourful", as described by the Pathé man, and invite narrative. It was perhaps the realistic rendering, the skill and craftsmanship displayed, that so impressed Clarke as a boy – but even then he felt a discord between the seeming celebration of foreigners, as objects of beauty, with their weather-beaten skin and twinkly eyes – and his father's attitude to real-life foreigners, and immigrants, and people of other races. The duality of an appreciative hetero-male gaze addressing the female form, and misogyny, is familiar (although then it is often the head that's missing rather than the body) – but this is not simply a patrician attitude at play here, the homes in which Bossons heads dwelt were certainly (evidence would suggest) white, but often working class. The heads are kitsch – indeed that is part of their cachet now, appearing as they do in hipster bars. They have a nostalgic appeal to the knowing – but not to everyone who collects them – they are still collected now, treasured as objets d'art, and therefore arguably exploiting a false consciousness, or at least 'bad taste'. How might class, racism, and aesthetics intersect? Such a question is mired in tricky assumptions. The sight of Thanet UKIPpers on the BBC in 2015, sat amongst a collection of ornaments not dissimilar to the Bossons heads, describing their feelings towards black people (who they term 'negroes'), gave Clarke fresh impetus to deal with this deeply controversial and personal subject.

It is the Syrian that always intrigued Clarke; the most popular, at one time, of all the Bossons heads, and therefore produced in the largest edition – so now conversely the least collectible. Still it has taken Clarke four years to find 100 on Ebay. The Syrian is dignified, handsome, like Jesus or Lawrence of Arabia – but without a name he is not an individual, but a noble savage. Lined up in multitudes – which of course was never the intention, one of each type being all that is required for a conventional Bossons collection – it becomes clear that the Syrians are in fact not identical; there are variations of colour (small rebellions from the paintresses or amateur restoration jobs?) and even of form, as the mould expanded and deteriorated over years. The Syrians become a crowd, a hoard, and – in Clarke's installation – a faceless mass. Their attitude, the upward trajectory of their glance, off to the left (an indication of honesty according to pop-psychology), becomes a portent when multiplied – what is it they all see? What has each one of them seen, over the years, gazing out at their British hosts from chintzy wallpaper and chimneybreast, as clocks ticked and cigarette smoke hung? Clarke has brought these Bossons Syrians together, migrating them one-by-one from the collectors market to the artist's studio; reuniting brothers from the production line, in

order to transmogrify them. He carefully chips each face off, to reveal the white chalk plaster underneath, leaving only the collapsing piecrust of the *keffiyeh*. There is something disturbing about this methodical destruction; it is a book-burning, a destruction of cultural heritage (which brings to mind recent destruction of cultural heritage in Syria by Daesh) – but the fact it is faces that are being erased brings us closer to ethnic cleansing. Maybe a rise in value of the Bossons Syrian will result as the remaining stock becomes scarce – Clarke makes no apology – Baudrillard of course considered collecting a neurotic activity. To Clarke the Bossons Syrian has become material with which to make art.

Like Bossons, who trained in printing technology with the Manchester Federation of Master Printers, Clarke is a printmaker; he is drawn to reproduction, pattern and repetition of an image. Whereas Bossons repeated for commercial enterprise, the economy of scale, Clarke repeats (an image, an action) to discover something, or reveal something, to make trouble, to persist. Something repeated, over and over, becomes perversely less familiar and more strange; a mode exploited by artists from the age of mechanical reproduction onward, as explained by Walter Benjamin and exemplified by Warhol. Clarke's faceless forms aren't immediately recognisable as the Syrian anymore, or even as human heads – in the context of Whitstable they are reminiscent of oysters displayed on a restaurant ice-bed. The Europe-facing White Cliffs of Dover are evoked in the blank white plaster; a deeply symbolic image to refugees attempting to reach UK shores – this is what it means to be Syrian in 2018, according to the representation in British media at least. Obscured features can be unnerving – a western view of the *niqab* and *burka*. But the faces of Clarke's Syrians are not just veiled, but entirely removed, eradicated, along with their humanity, evoking perhaps both the horror trope of removing faces, but also how the passage of time works to remove detail as in the worn-away features of ancient *kouros* sculptures.

Modernists of the early twentieth century adhered to a Theosophical idea of 'evolution', which involved the destruction of the old to make way for the new – spiritually, and in art. Adjustments to found-objects has been a legitimate artistic method from Picasso onwards, exemplified by Duchamp and his readymades. Erasure as an art practice was utilised by Rauschenberg in his groundbreaking 1953 work *Erased De Kooning Drawing* – but whereas that can be understood as a metaphor for artistic generations superseding the achievements of their predecessors, and conceptual paradigm shifts in the development of art history, Clarke is erasing something un-precious, but more emotionally totemic to him. Defacing is a trope – the scribbling out of a disgraced relative in a family photograph – an obliteration, an expungement. Clarke's action is iconoclastic, but indicative of his own class migration, via art school, and rumination on 'working class taste' – not a violence toward the Syrian, or even towards Bossons particularly.

The critic Adrian Stokes established an aesthetic distinction of carving-versus-modelling, favouring the former; an artwork slowly revealed from material, as if it already existed in some eternal way, its form to be discovered by the artist – like a Michelangelo figure emerging from a marble block. This is contrasted with the 'lowlier' practice of modelling, the manipulation of stuff in service of a preconceived design. The Bossons Syrian is indeed designed and modelled and cast, and Clarke's practice, even though it is not quite what Stokes had in mind perhaps, is one of carving – and not just literally, but also as Stokes conceived the notion; it is a process of removing what is superfluous until only the essential remains.

Lucy Howarth

Lucy Howarth co-curated the Tate touring display, Marlow Moss, 2013 – 2015, and the exhibition Marlow Moss: a Forgotten Maverick at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv in Zürich, 2017. Lucy has taught at the universities of Kent, York and Plymouth, and has worked in the Tate Research Department as a post-doc. She is now the curator of Liddicoat & Goldhill Project Space in Margate.

Design: www.timhutchdesign.com

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