

MEET THE ARTIST:

# Claire Parker

In May the annual Oxfordshire Artweeks festival returns, presenting colour and creative flair across the county. More than 100 artists, makers and designers are taking part, working with paint, clay, textiles, photography, wood, metal, glass, mosaics and more. Oxford artist Claire Parker, a freelance writer, tutor and translator, is one of 200 new faces taking part with a collection of paintings, *The History of Art as Told by Toothbrushes*. Festival Director, **Esther Lafferty**, met with her to discover what inspired her to rework these Old Masters.



Claire Parker



Self portrait, 'Theatre of Toothbrushes'

“It was during lockdown when I started developing this idea of objects being anthropomorphised,” Claire begins, “as they were the things with which we were all spending our days. For example, I sat in our tiny bathroom and drew the sink over and over again, and it started becoming increasingly human. From there, I started using the toothbrush as characters. I began animating them, taking scenes from iconic *EastEnders* episodes or classic clips of other soap operas, and recreating them with toothbrushes.

I particularly like using the toothbrush because it's such an intimate object. Everyone's got one and yet they are barely ever drawn or painted as subjects. So I had the idea of replacing the figures in famous paintings with toothbrushes. I loved the idea of translating art history from high art into something quirky that will intrigue people and appeal to an audience that would normally think, 'Oh, art history is not for me.' I hope it will interest people enough in the original works that they dig a little and discover a bit more.

There's often not a lot of humour in art,” Claire continues, “or at least if there is, it's then seen as lesser art. However, I think there's

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## I think there's always room for a bit of fun

always room for a bit of fun. As a teacher who often works with children who feel like giving up on school, I'm always trying to make things fun, and humour encourages us all to become interested and engage.

For example, if I am translating journal articles, I find myself completely absorbed in a niche topic that I had no idea even existed, and I discover fascinating facts about art, history and more. I have translated articles about the irony of communication in Tintin comics, and another on dairy cows in 18th-century Paris when coffee was first being drunk: although people discovered coffee was great with milk, fridges didn't exist, so there were cows housed in the back of coffee shops which caused a hygiene crisis. It wasn't a humorous article, but the idea is amusing – and I believe there's plenty of fun in life if you're happy to find it.”

Having studied a Masters in Art History at Oxford, during which she realised she was drawn less by the idea of being a historian than an artist, Claire is very aware that the way paintings were traditionally perceived by the establishment is hierarchical. “Paintings of historical, mythological, or religious scenes were seen as superior to landscapes,” she explains, “and still life paintings were usually at the bottom of the pack.”

She has thus enjoyed taking prestigious Old Masters and mixing them up with the lowest of the low, the toothbrush.

Claire laughingly describes that she also likes using toothbrushes in her art because she often feels like the toothbrush in the paintings: “I recently listened to an Irish writer on a podcast, who said that a good writer is someone who's a stranger in every room. I've always felt like that, as if I'm perhaps on the outside, an observer rather than a player in the thick of it,” she explains.

Claire's first reimagined classic work, painted in acrylics, was Fragonard's *The Bolt* (1777), also known as *The Lock*, which depicts a romantic scene between two lovers: these she switched to a toothpaste tube and a toothbrush.



After Poussin's Dance to the Music of Time



After Gentileschi's Judith beheading Holofernes

“I've also painted *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi because the original is a brilliant painting, with *chiaroscuro* [or light-dark, an Italian technique using strong, dramatic contrasts between light and shadow to create volume, depth, and emotional intensity]. It's incredibly dramatic, and it was really fun to translate that into toothbrushes, taking the lid off a tube of toothpaste with dental floss.” ▶

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Girl with a Pearly White Earring (after Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring)

Other works include Van Gogh's Sunflowers and a self-portrait of Rembrandt, and she is currently working on Pissarro's Jeanne Holding a Fan, the original of which can be seen in the Ashmolean.

“I'm really excited about showing in Oxford Brewery Tap House and I think I ought to make reference to it with a Toothbrush version of a Bruegel pub or tavern scene. People often make suggestions for additions to the collection like the Mona Toothbrush or Nicolas Poussin's A Dance to the Music of Time, and interestingly, this gives me a completely different insight into the history of art because it tells me about the way other people see a particular painting.”

For each of her paintings, Claire will first both sketch and make clays models of toothbrushes and toothpaste tubes in various poses to get a sense of how the light might fall on them. “I've got to find a way of telling the same story without facial expressions and shaping and positioning the toothbrush to mirror human body language as much as I can. For example, for Girl with the Pearly White Earring [after Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring], it took a lot of working out how to get a toothbrush to be looking back over its shoulder.”

Although the works on show for Artweeks are approximately 35 x 50 cm, Claire whispers that,



After Van Gogh's Sunflowers

having already drawn a six-foot toothbrush, she dreams of doing a giant painting to match the size of the works by many Grand Masters, in which the toothbrushes are human-sized. “I was thinking of the monumental Raft of the Medusa by Géricault,” she told me, grinning, “or Da Vinci's The Last Supper would be great. Maybe that's something for next year.”



The annual Oxfordshire Artweeks festival takes place from 2-25 May inviting you to visit artist studios and pop-up exhibitions in 350 houses and gardens, churches, manor houses and other interesting venues where you can experience art of all kinds in an easy, friendly (and free) way.

Claire is exhibiting in Horspath with two other artists as part of the Art on Tap Collective in Horspath during the first week of this year's Artweeks festival (South Oxfordshire week, 2-10 May: venue 169).

For more details, and further information on the other artists and hundreds of venues that are part of the festival, visit [artweeks.org](http://artweeks.org)