“Bowie’s teeth were like everything else about him: different”

An interview with German tooth artist Jessine Hein

David Bowie was undoubtedly a major figure in popular music in the 1970s and 1980s. He is also one of the many celebrities who have undergone cosmetic dental treatment and had his characteristically crooked teeth replaced with a set of crowns in the early 1990s. Inspired by Bowie’s unique original look, Jessine Hein, a German painter and sculptor, made a reproduction of the singer’s natural teeth. Dental Tribune had the opportunity to speak with Hein about her denture sculpture and her perception of beautiful teeth.

Mr Hein, how did you come up with the idea of recreating David Bowie’s teeth?

Jessine Hein: Bowie’s teeth were like everything else about him: different! Not the aesthetic norm, not perfect, but they were strikingly beautiful in the context of his whimsical and miraculous being. His smile revealed an imperfection that made him seem more real, more human, someone to identify with even.

An imperfection worn confidently inspires sympathy. Bowie was a role model for so many people and I think his teeth contributed to that. The vast variety of talents, iconic style and incomparable physique that make up Bowie, and the different universes he created around himself, have always impressed and inspired me. I have been incredibly fascinated with teeth for a long time and have paid close attention to the worries of those I admire. Therefore, I was very conscious about the loss of the Ziggy Stardust choppers.

Teeth are an integral part of interpersonal communication. They are inevitably involved in laughing, talking, screaming and of course singing. Bowie sang to us through his crooked gaps and it was enchanting! So the idea for the sculpture evolved while I was nostalgically longing back to Bowie’s old teeth.

Have you done any other artistic projects related to dentistry that inspired you to create a denture sculpture?

The artist herself wearing a tooth mask. (Photo © Jessine Hein)

In the past, I have done small projects at a dental laboratory, such as a tooth pendant for my necklace, which I have worn ever since and never taken off, as well as another sculpture and her perception of beautiful natural teeth.

Hein’s hand-sculpted recreation of David Bowie’s natural teeth.

A photo from 2007 showing Bowie with his new smile. (Photo © Everett Collection)

Could you explain what drove David Bowie, who was celebrated as a nerd, to have his crooked teeth made into a “perfect” Hollywood smile?

I find it noteworthy that a pioneer of individualism, the archetype of “acting out one-self”, decided to “normalise” his mouth. It seemed paradoxical. However, the dental change was parallel to a change in his image and music. It accompanied his development and I assume that was not pure accident, owing to the Hollywood set of teeth that was chosen rather than recreating a natural look when medical intervention was needed.

I cannot imagine that a person like David Bowie willingly left the interior design of his mouth to someone else. So, I interpret the pearly whites he got as a bold statement that signalled a new chapter in his career—maybe a comment on the beauty obsession of our society. “You want regulated perfection? Here you have it!” The transformation was part of his development from alien hero of the heart to world star. My sculpture intends to underline this, as well as pay homage to the eras of the crooked-toothed miracle who fell to earth once upon a time.

I do understand how orthodontics can improve one’s self-confidence, as I went through years of tooth alignment myself in my teens. There are four teeth missing in my maxillae. Besides having had trouble chewing properly, I looked like a freakish vampire. It was not very helpful to have an odd-looking set of teeth in this awkward phase of adolescence. But then, I did not appreciate the beauty in the difference because I was too concerned with trying desperately to survive as a shy teenager at school.

Today, however, I celebrate teeth that are not the norm. I love the diversity and character they bring to the human head. I find it quite sad that these days almost every child undergoes some kind of dental treatment to align his or her differences solely for aesthetic reasons. Some of them might grow up wishing they still had their characteristic natural look.

I have heard Bowie talk about his old teeth in a confident way. He stated they looked fine to him. So, no, I do not think he felt uncomfortable about them at the time, quite the opposite; he was famous for celebrating his striking body in all its otherworldliness.

What do you intend to do with the sculpture? Have you been approached by collectors and fans of the singer who would like to purchase it?

The sculpture is currently with me and will be until an opportunity for exhibiting comes up. I have various kinds of sculpture and painting projects in the making that will need some more time to develop. Once they are completed, I envision the David Bowie dentures being presented in the context of the new pieces.

I have been contacted by several potential buyers, but the sculpture is not currently for sale, as I would like to have the option of putting it on display.

Thank you very much for this interview.