

Delaine Le Bas: Stranger in Silver Walking on Air

Stopping place

Nomadism has long been a shared experience for Roma and Traveller communities, though it has played different roles across regional histories. While many community members are settled in permanent living spaces today, nomadism has often been a matter of survival. Particularly in Eastern Europe, it has been a way to escape systematic persecution, mob violence and oppressive regimes. Social persecution has also affected Traveller communities in the UK. The majority continue to embrace nomadism as a cultural practice, linked to heritage and tradition. For both Roma and Travellers, the practice of nomadism is deeply intertwined with survival, resistance and the preservation of identity.

The notion that Roma and Traveller communities remain constantly nomadic is a myth. In reality, many families and groups settle at specific sites for indefinite periods. They chose sites for their safety, reliability, with running water resources or nearby villages to sell goods or pursue short-term work. These sites – ‘atchin tans’ (stopping place, in the Romani language) have been used by communities regularly returning to the same areas, in groups or in smaller families. The knowledge of these spaces are shared and passed through generations.

For eight months leading to this exhibition, The White House has acted as an atchin tan for artist Delaine Le Bas. It has been a space for her to continue to return to think, connect, research and develop new work. She has extended the invitation of the atchin tan to fellow Roma and Traveller community members, hosting artists and curators in this stopping place. This approach is in keeping with The White House’s working format; regularly hosting creative workshops, community gatherings and artist events in a permeable and informal model. This model sees the building serve as another type of ‘home’ for the community. With the exhibition now open, The White House blends artist home, exhibition, communal work and event space to serve as a creative atchin tan, as a complicated domestic hybrid-space.

Questions of the domestic space have woven into the development of ‘Delaine Le Bas: Stranger in Silver Walking On Air’. Large-scale painted and printed textile works have characterised much of her creative work in recent years. At The White House these are fashioned as curtains; bleeding into domestic territory with layers of sheer and solid, stitched with off-the-shelf curtain tape. Manipulable, they can be moved and repositioned – enabling the visitor to refashion the space and its images, enclosing or opening up ‘rooms within rooms’. Almost psychedelic photographic collages, printed on sheer fabric, play with the curtain typology even further – the grid and brick repeating abstract imagery reading akin to print patterns on domestic window coverings.

Further into its rooms and playing in more depth with notions of the domestic interior, The White House kitchen is now home to artist-designed furniture. An irregular silver table, with textured surface, is stylised with warped angles to jigsaw into the kitchen layout – utilitarian in its consideration and playful in execution. Ceramic cups, jugs and platters have been designed by Le Bas to echo the aesthetics

of seventeenth and eighteenth-century slipware. While they sit comfortably in this refurbished 18th century farmhouse – on hand for hospitality at programme events, or for exhibition visitors to sit and enjoy refreshments – they also call to mind the type of antique ceramics now being unearthed in archaeological digs at former Romani compounds.

Outside of The White House, facing onto Green Lane, are iterations of Le Bas' 'rubbish dolls'. These figures have recurred in her work for twenty years as miniatures. Here, they are enlarged and sculpted in lightweight steel to inhabit the lawn like garden gnomes. With their rubbish bag aesthetic, they make complex allusions to the intertwining of Roma and Traveller communities and waste – found in Daily Mail headlines decrying fly tipping, and in the common dismissal of Roma and Traveller people themselves as 'trash'. This came to the fore as the 2004 Housing Act came into effect, requiring local governments to consider site requirements for nomadic Travellers; and the subsequent vitriolic Conservative campaign decrying their 'invasion'.

Traditionally the house museum is filled with tableaux and artworks that remind visitors 'hands off' and 'no sitting' through familiar wall labels and discreet placards. They preserve and historicise their interiors, telling the stories of former inhabitants through theatrical studio set-ups or museum-like displays of artwork and sketchbooks. The White House, however, remains a living, functioning home, not so much a house museum as a 'liveable museum' where *'presence and care is as significant as observing'**. Through the course of this exhibition, it continues to host its usual garden parties and community gatherings; painting classes every Wednesday night, coffee mornings for elders, gardening workshops that bring the planters to bloom with strawberries and tomatoes.

The exhibition exists alongside these, inviting the audience to engage through tactile elements. On your visit today, Le Bas' painted textile works may be drawn to the side to allow space for a recent painting workshop to set up easels; a stack of chairs against the wall may have been hastily rearranged from a weekend's community party. Artist-designed ceramics drying in the dish rack will have been used by another visitor, or perhaps you have one in your hand (please, make a cup of tea and relax). Visitors are welcome to draw textile works to and fro for better viewing – unprecious, tactile, liveable, this domestic space celebrates *'the banal, quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual'** elements that make the White House different from other house museums.

Here the domestic space becomes the artwork and the artwork becomes the domestic space. The exhibition insists on a gentle merging of private and public, suggesting these zones are intimately connected – a form of atchin tan where stories emerge and histories continue to live, defying erasure.

*The Artist's House, Kirsty Bell (2013)

This is one four essays produced alongside the exhibition.

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