

Delaine Le Bas: Stranger in Silver Walking on Air

The stranger

Roma and Traveller communities have many cultures, traditions and histories. Despite being pushed to society's margins, these have survived and adapted across generations. The resilience of these vibrant cultures – storytelling, craft and movement – persist through discrimination but have left their histories fragmented.

Within the history of art, Roma and Traveller communities have more often been subjects than recognised as artists. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, JMW Turner and Thomas Gainsborough embedded depictions of Traveller families and groups within their Romantic landscapes. Idyllic scenes of communities were painted in woodland glades, beautiful but static. They capture little uniqueness, vibrancy or personality of these communities. They are always in the middle distance, faces indistinct – strangers remaining unknowable. While these works were generally non-offensive, their subjects were perceived with anxiety and derision. Writing in the *Athenaeum* (a magazine published 1828-1921) in 1833, an anonymous responder described one of Turner's illustrations (*The Gipsy, for Rogers's 'Poems' c.1830-2*):

'in a sheltered spot, the vagrants have turned their asses out to graze; raised a rude, triangle over a fire, and suspended a pot, in which a venerable sibyl is preparing a stew, to which the neighbouring preserves and henroosts have doubtless contributed'.

In the second half of the twentieth century, artists began to work with these communities in a more ethically engaged way. Photographer Chris Killip, known for consciously immersing himself within communities to live alongside his subjects, worked for many years to earn the trust of Traveller communities in the north east of England and created the 1983-4 photographic series *Sea Coal, Lynemouth, Northumberland*. It consists of ten works that capture Traveller community members among other working class people living on the coastline. As Magnum Photos described, Killip specialised in “*recording those to whom history was done to, who had been disregarded and dispossessed*”. While his depictions of Traveller communities were more dimensional and distinct than his predecessors, they remain mired in an overall mood of despair – a despair from which Killip could depart, but his subjects could not.

It is not until more recent years that Roma and Traveller artists have begun to have a recognised presence within the contemporary art world. Delaine Le Bas is rightly recognised as leading a concerted effort to establish this presence. Her work was included in the first Roma Pavilion, *Paradise Lost* at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. This presentation was followed by biennales in Berlin, Athens and Gwangju. Over the past five years, Le Bas' body of work has begun to be more widely recognised in the UK for its importance. Her work challenges historical misrepresentations and asserts a contemporary space for self-determined expression, situating Roma and Traveller artists as active participants rather than passive subjects, reflecting both the evolving agency of these communities in reclaiming their own narratives and the institutional barriers that still persist. From JMW Turner's Romantic depictions to Le Bas' shortlisting for the 2024 Turner Prize with

Incipit Vita Nova, showcased at Vienna Secession in Vienna, the trajectory of representation is shifting, demanding visibility beyond the margins.

Across her career, Le Bas has focused on the detail and complexity of Roma, Romani and Traveller experiences, drawing from her own life. Speaking about her driving motivations, Le Bas has stated “*Whenever you say Gypsy, Roma or Traveller, people get an image in their head immediately – and I need to mythbust that*”. Here, in Barking & Dagenham, Le Bas began dialogues with Roma and Traveller community groups and researched into local archives of photography and writing, then extended that archival presence through writing. This took visual form with painting and into the streets surrounding The White House through photography that has been collaged and woven through this exhibition. Across all of these, the figure of the ‘Stranger in Silver’ has emerged.

A semi-anonymous figure, the ‘Stranger in Silver’ is part stand-in for the artist, part reimagining of Roma and Traveller depictions in art and part representative for communities who are otherwise often excluded. The figure shifts between the real and the imagined, embodying the tension between visibility and erasure, history and reinvention. The Stranger is a witness to the landscapes she moves through, a reminder of what has been forgotten or disregarded and a disruption to the dominant gaze that seeks to categorise or contain her. She remains partly out of sight and always out of grasp; elusive in collage exploring the estate or outlined in paint, cutting a journey between excerpts of the archive.

The complexity of what it means to be visible takes form in a number of ways through the exhibition. The positioning of sheer fabrics means that Le Bas’ painting layers over itself as we move through the house, and interpretation of its central images depends on your viewpoint. Glass panels reflect our faces as we view the artwork to play with dichotomies of observer/observed and public/private. The ‘Stranger in Silver’ embodies the tension of remaining seen yet unseen, observed yet unknowable. As architectural historian and theorist Beatriz Colomina has noted:

“that which is transparent, like the glass in our window, also reflects the interior and superimposes it onto our vision of the exterior. The glass functions as a mirror when the camera obscura is lit.”

From the exterior windows of The White House, one illuminated by neon, to the interior windows, collaged and painted – the barrier between internal truth and representation is complicated.

Through a range of techniques, Le Bas grapples with visibility and the question of observation. Her commitment to Roma & Traveller authorship and self-determination combine with an interest in reflecting what has been invisible in the official archive. In ‘Stranger in Silver Walking On Air’, these interests materialise through an installation that resists a singular narrative. Beyond the authority of her authorship as a Romani artist, these nuances make Le Bas’ work distinct from the depictions of Romani communities by Turner, Gainsborough and others – a dynamic that confined them to the passive end of the observer-observed relationship. Here, Le Bas tells detailed stories that at once bridge the gap while highlighting the distance; a complication that perhaps makes strangers of us all.

This is one four essays produced alongside the exhibition.

‘Stranger in Silver Walking on Air’ by Delaine Le Bas is commissioned by Create London. The project is supported by Art Fund, Arts Council England – National Lottery Project Grants, and Cockayne Grants for the Arts – a donor-advised fund held at The London Community Foundation.

Art Fund



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND

COCKAYNE

The London
Community
Foundation

