

Delaine Le Bas: Stranger in Silver Walking on Air

Reading (into) the archive

“On the western side of the forest lived a gipsy colony. The gipsies were an industrious, quiet living set of people, and do not seem to have given much trouble to the forest officers. The women were held in some awe by the inhabitants on account of their reputed skill in fortune telling. From the gipsies are probably descended the plebeian natives of Chadwell Heath, whose dark eyes, tawny complexion and short, curly black all point to foreign descent.”

From Gypsies, Tramps and Strangers, Volume 2 – held at Valence Archive.

Text attributed to a local Vicar, writing in 1900.

In summer 2024, artist Delaine Le Bas began her White House residency with research at nearby Valence Archives. The official holdings of local Roma and Traveller history are scant. Some of its holdings include a small collection of early-twentieth-century photographs of families with carriages, descriptions of encampments at nearby Hainault Forest and Wanstead Flats and some records of family history in Dagenham and the broader historical Essex region.

There are possibilities and implied meanings in records that are less clear. Reports of ‘strangers’ to the town; details of blacksmiths and boxing nights; the name of the Three Travellers Pub. And then there’s the conjecture of a local vicar, as transcribed above, that many inhabitants of Chadwell Heath (the area in which The White House is located) may be descended from Romani people. A photograph of open space with the Three Travellers Pub inching into the frame is labelled with the flat and informative ‘Looking east across the Heath, 1931. The Fire Station and Brewster’s Shop are on the left. The Three Travellers is on the right’ – but a Romani carriage is half-visible through a gap in a side fence.

Le Bas has been interested in archives for many years, and in what makes its way into the official archive. Who decides what is kept? What is dismissed, ignored or removed? What are considered to be legitimate forms of record keeping and what is not? Historically, Roma and Traveller communities have not been considered to be viable authors or subjects of records – demonstrated by the scant presence in Barking & Dagenham’s archive. It is this absence that fuels Le Bas’ motivation.

In her 1994 text *Queer and Now*, the American academic and writer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick penned the term ‘overreading’, describing it with the following passage:

“I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit...”

This ‘overreading’, sometimes described as ‘reading into’ by later academics, is a strategy utilised by minoritised academics and artists to recognise what might be implied or unsaid within official records.

The academic Carolyn Lesjak described the approach as “*highly interpretive rather than descriptive*”, recognising the value of “*experience and feeling*” alongside “*thinking and knowing*” – ‘reading into’ what has been said might reveal what has been omitted.

Applying this to an archive which has minimal records of Roma and Traveller communities begins to reveal a number of alternative histories. Is the ‘Three Travellers Pub’ a reference to Traveller proprietors? The archive provides no clear answer, but presents a thread that unravels further clues if pulled. The pub was known to be attached to a blacksmith, an occupation for many Romani people, and held boxing nights, which were often organised by Travellers when visiting a town or village as an income stream. Archived photos relating to the Three Travellers show groups of men tending horses, stood over anvils and gathered around carriages piled high with leafy produce. Are any of these horse-men, blacksmiths or farmers of Roma and Traveller descent? If we ‘read into’ the photograph with the Romani carriage visible through the side fence, what might we imagine about its inhabitants and its journeys?

In ‘Stranger in Silver Walking on Air’, Le Bas delves into the archive in a way that actively re-/interprets historical material. Photo collages and painted textiles depict the artist and her analogue, the silhouetted ‘Stranger in Silver’, exploring both the streets of Dagenham and text drawn from its archives. By extending her central ‘stranger’ figure to be an active agent within the historical archive, she extends her own artistic reach as a ‘Time Traveller’. This idea emerged early in her residency process at The White House as a form of re-writing or ‘reading into’ the archive to position a new history in the gaps that she found. Playing with the notion of time travel, the artist has further discussed the notion of The White House as a ‘temporal atchin tan’. Within its walls of brick, calico and organdie, multiple overlapping histories come to stop, rest and re-form themselves.

With this experimental consideration of the passage of time and history, the ‘Stranger in Silver’ is a localised Orlando, the chameleonic literary character invented by writer Virginia Woolf, who Le Bas has noted as another inspiration for this exhibition. Le Bas can be viewed as an East London contemporary of Woolf, while The White House stands in for a diminutive Charleston House. Charleston House was a gathering place for the Bloomsbury Group, artists and writers in the early twentieth century who sought to challenge societal norms and traditional artistic practices. In likening The White House to Charleston, Le Bas creates a contemporary space where overlapping histories and alternative narratives thrive much like the experimental and intellectual exchanges that defined Woolf’s creative circles.

It is perhaps surprising that this rich, evocative and textured exhibition found its central inspiration in a photograph that is largely of empty space. ‘Looking east across the Heath, 1931’; even the Three Travellers is barely in frame, with a wall and part of a fence in view. Half-captured, accidental, largely ignored – the Romani carriage visible through a gap in the side fence is barely visible, but the corner of its frame in 1931 suggests a nomadic journey to new, rich and fantastic travelling in 2025.

This is one four essays produced alongside the exhibition.

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