

Witch Hunt
Delaine Le Bas

Foreword

"He looked so odd that farm labourers would go some way to avoid meeting him, and children would call out after him 'Witch'. And some would call 'Gypsy', and to these he would sometimes stop and speak and give them a penny."

Brian Seymour Vesey-FitzGerald, *George Borrow*, 1953

The words we use can weave double-edged spells. Witchcraft was built around words: as much dependent on lost ways of speaking as on particular incantations. A witch, like a Gypsy, was known by the words she spoke. Both figures have provoked unmatched levels of hysteria, excitement and persecution with peculiarly British airs, and British anti-graces. Their tongues may not be forked, but they threaten invisible borders as 'outsiders' camped within.

The language that Delaine Le Bas casts into her large-scale 'Witch Hunt' installation emphasises the fear of unknown tongues and gives voice to those individuals historically designated as adversaries - reversing the roles of the hunted and hunter to celebrate in the chaos and revelry associated with those who exist outside of mainstream society.

'Witch Hunt' is an ever-changing multimedia project comprising installation, performance and new music. Evolving across a number of venues, Le Bas' installation incorporates found objects, textile techniques, performance and film and, as part of the UK Romany community (Roma being the largest ethnic minority in Europe), explores many of the experiences of intolerance, misrepresentation, transitional displacement and homelessness that the community continues to face.

A version of 'Witch Hunt' was originally shown at aspex Gallery, Portsmouth and was further developed for exhibition at Chapter, Cardiff; Context Gallery, Derry and Campbell Works, London, who have come together here to celebrate Le Bas' unique and dynamic practice.

We are extremely grateful to Delaine for her unflinching focus and dedication to the project, and to Damian James Le Bas and Angela Kingston for their insightful words. Additional thanks to Damian Le Bas, Tara Darby, Phil Babot, Galleria Sonia Rosso, Turin, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, James Colman and Kai Dikhas - Place of Seeing - Ort des Sehens, Gallery for Contemporary Art of Roma and Sinti, Berlin

Jo Bushnell, aspex

Hannah Firth, Chapter

Witch Hunt: Delaine Le Bas

In the case of weaverbirds and other avian species, it is the male who constructs the outer part of the nest, using twigs and grasses and other stiff materials. Then, once he has attracted a mate, it is she who furnishes it with its inner layers of softer lining. We humans are just as impelled as birds to make our own architectures — the construction done mainly by specialists. Then there's the work that we almost all do, of layering the hard outlines of these constructions with softer linings: using carpets and upholstered furniture and all kinds of fabrics.

In one area of Delaine Le Bas' multi-part installation called 'Witch Hunt', she has created a soft layer on the floor with a knitted blanket and a patterned rug. And then, around this arrangement on the floor, she has suspended all manner of appliquéd and painted fabrics, to suggest the outline of the four walls of a building. She has provided the soft lining of her building, but the building itself remains quite absent.

Yet this absence of a hard outer construction serves to give the strongest impression of a building. We bring it into existence, not physically but psychologically, because it's there in the template for a homestead and sanctuary that we are born with and that we carry with us, everywhere we go (like birds and their innate instructions for nests).

Diminutive in scale, the dwelling Le Bas has created is immediately folkloric and fairytale. Taking steps to avoid walking through imaginary walls, I look for an imaginary door to enter. I am playing now: Le Bas' art makes a child of me.

... first [she]...looked in at the window, and then she peeped in at the keyhole; and seeing nobody in the house, she lifted the latch.

They... came to a little house... and when they came quite near they saw that the cottage was made of bread and roofed with cakes, while the window was made of transparent sugar.

She ran as long as her feet would go until it was almost evening; then she saw a little cottage and went into it to rest herself. Everything in the cottage was small, but neater and cleaner than can be told.

Goldilocks, Hansel and Gretel, Snow White: all of them exposed, vulnerable, up against it. When I meet her, Le Bas explains that she has always, as a Romani-Gypsy, been drawn to fairy stories, with, as she puts it, "their tales of expulsion, itinerancy and invasion". When she was at school, she was badly bullied — and taunted with the words 'gypsy witch', a conflation of two kinds of absolute outsider. Her installation 'Witch Hunt' revisits this childhood trauma and points towards a fantasy of Englishness that has, over decades and

centuries, fanned the flames of this particular variety of prejudice.

I have entered Le Bas' fairy story building; inside, instead of edible, tactile delights (milky porridge, spiced gingerbread, brittle sugar) the pleasures are visual. Le Bas' use of colour in the fabrics she paints and assembles is exceptionally bold: there's every colour in collision, every clashing hue, and every kind of pattern.

Le Bas has sourced many of her materials from charity shops. These soft inner linings are the turnings-out of all kinds of households. Taking these fabrics, she has cut at them, and torn strips from them, extracting the particular motifs and images that she wants, and leaving the edges quite raw.

The compulsiveness of this brings to mind a passage in Nathalie Sarraute's stream-of-consciousness autobiography:

I can't see myself, but I can feel it as if I were doing it now... I suddenly seize the scissors, I grip them in my hand... heavy, closed scissors... I aim them, the point upwards, at the back of a settee covered in a delightful silk material with a leafy pattern, in a slightly faded blue, with satiny glints... 'I'm going to slash it'... I'm warning you, I'm going to take the plunge, leap out of this decent, inhabited, warm, gentle world, I'm going to wrench myself out of it, fall, sinking into the uninhabited, into the void...

This description chimes here because there's a thrilling kind of breakthrough that occurs in Le Bas' artwork. Her seizing and cutting — and then also rapid stitching together — of different cloths, takes us beyond surface appearances to another, disturbing, reality.

It's the imagery on the different kinds of fabrics that Le Bas is after: there's a foxhunting scene, country cottages, and flowers and birds from dress and upholstery fabrics and scarves — and much besides. So much imagery is freighted on cloth: so much meaning is purveyed! It's something I haven't fully recognised before seeing this artwork.

Much of the printed and embroidered fabric that Le Bas uses concerns the beauty of nature and an idealisation of rural England — a fantasy of roses round the door, rosy-cheeked children and bonneted ladies. And there is cloth here that at least three generations have lived with and known: grandmothers, mothers and daughters. How insistent this fantasy has been, and how remarkably sustained.

I'm startled to recognise fragments of 'lazy-daisy' tablecloths embroidered with country scenes and flowers, of the kind my mother sewed in the 1950s for her 'bottom drawer', under the tutelage of my grandmother. This in turn connects to the nineteenth-century girls whose mothers entreated them to embroider — and to a peculiar obsession with pastoral imagery, born in the early part of that century, that stemmed from the upheavals of rapid industrialisation.

Both tendencies are manifest in these few lines of poetry by Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

... And last
I learnt to cross-stitch, because she did not like
To see me wear the night with empty hands
A-doing nothing. So, my shepherdess
Was something after all (the pastoral saints
Be praised for't), leaning lovelorn with pink eyes
To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks...

Stitch! Stitch! Stitch! Females from successive generations would seem to have had little choice but to take part in this activity, which served, it's been argued, to transmit what it is to be feminine, and what it is to belong. For sewing is done eyes-down and demurely, a chaste, domestic occupation. Being an embroiderer has long been associated with a particular status and aspiration: the following of a Kaffe Fassett needlepoint design signifies, even now, that one is a certain class of person.

But the real crux of it for Le Bas is that this pastoral, 'Home Sweet Home' imagery — cottages, shepherdesses, flowers — has served to convey a perfect, harmonious rural world in which realities such as the presence and persecution of Romani-Gypsies, are specifically denied. They are not part of the picture at all.

As a counter to all this, Le Bas sews urgently, piecing together all the motifs. Her stitches remain visible, like sutures repairing a wound, skin sewn to skin. She interjects all the flowers and cottages with child-like appliquéd and embroidered creatures of her own making, and also with scrawled words: 'hear her scream', 'hypocrisy', 'fear is control', 'hear her roar', 'the truth can be found where you don't expect to find it'. She mixes in richly patterned pieces of Indian cloth that stand for the origins of Romani-Gypsy people in eleventh century India.

She stitches it all on to silhouettes that are girlish versions of her adult self, and on to flags and banners. She explores her specific personhood, her subjectivity; asserts her presence in this country; describes pain caused her by the social fabric (a pertinent metaphor here); exposes fantasies that sustain racism, in seeping, unconscious, feminine form.

What she conveys extremely clearly is how bullying follows you home, penetrating the walls and your psyche. Le Bas' house without walls now takes on another, disturbing, aspect. The nest has been torn open and a fundamental, inner sense of sanctuary violated.

Le Bas explains that the process of stitching the elements together, the repetitious play of needle and cotton and fabric, means that she is half present, half absent while she works. Her unconscious is let loose and her imagination has free rein. Paradoxically, the

untrammelled nature of Le Bas' work seems to stem in large part from the limits and repetition and stillness of the act of sewing.

Le Bas does a lot of assembling of objects, too, with considerable impact. On the carpet of the fairy tale house are two child-sized, three-dimensional figures: one with a tiger's head wearing a long white dress and standing erect; the other with an elaborate headdress in party clothes who has fallen to the ground. Le Bas explains that the tiger-bride is herself as a child, with "a beast inside that's screaming to get out". The figure on the floor is another aspect of the artist when she was young, which has "had its wings clipped".

Looking over this scene from on high is another smaller figure with a mask and headdress. The arrangement puts me in mind of the ancestral shrines found in many cultures in people's homes, and I interpret this brightly decorated but stern looking goddess as the conscience and guardian of the two figures below, who jointly represent the artist.

And elsewhere in the exhibitions at aspeX and Chapter there are myriad other themes and concerns conveyed in the arrangements of figures and dolls, and in the cartoon fabrics designed for children that she incorporates. She outlines some of these: "neglected children suffering under our noses"; "if you don't care for children they might become something malevolent"; "children pulling strings, being too powerful". And also, I sense that there's a new chapter of work forming, about surveillance, which has begun to preoccupy her.

Le Bas has the kind of art practice in which there's a constant demand on her to keep up with her ideas as they proliferate. I am reminded of Annette Messager: like Le Bas, her whole house is taken over by different projects at different stages, as living space and studio space merge. And I think also of Louise Bourgeois, Paul McCarthy, Kiki Smith and Janaina Tschäpe: artists with unruly, autobiographical practices involving the human figure in many guises, who conjure often dark and chaotic worlds.

As the objects and materials Le Bas is working with give vent to still more possibilities, and as her imagination races on, there's always an excess that she is battling to catch hold of. And she has much to do, many people to speak up for. Le Bas' art is an astonishing, multi-dimensional project that is part protest, and part restoration of the psyche.

Angela Kingston is a curator and writer

Witch Hunt

by Damian James Le Bas

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Minister — A British Minister of State
Ghost — A Faceless, Wandering Guide to the Countryside

MINISTER and GHOST approach a camp in a wasted vale.
The camp stands behind a chipboard palisade.
They approach it slowly from a distance.

MINISTER:
This must be a dream.
I do not know this place.
And though there are signs of life I hear no voice
And see no face. What is this encampment scout?

GHOST:
Welcome to England,
And the Shire's premiere doll-shack poverty park,
the vale of spite-crimes' legacies:
An orphaning landscape's Scrubland World of Adventures.

MINISTER:
England?

GHOST:
This time, yes:
But in truth these places litter the now time world,
Prisons in open air, where souls grow bent and curled.

MINISTER:
Is anyone really trapped here?
These tents couldn't keep the rain out,
Let alone locked within themselves
An inmate under chain.
What sort of prison uses silks and rags for shackles?
Ridiculous. You have got me perplexed.
The compound walls are chipboard: cheap and short.
Smothered in cesspool speech. My guess?
This is a victim complex.

GHOST:
Might could free itself from here but
maybe innocence can't.

MINISTER:
Innocence? They've wrecked the place.
And why that's a cut out plane above that door?

What could an allied plane be a symbol for?
Is it a Harrier? Perhaps an F-15?

GHOST:
Who knows? They each drop death and fire,
Both accurate and keen.
These days, even out here in the woods,
The crucifix of the Western Orthodox has swelled,
Grown fat, it's angles broadened out
To a Harrier jump-jet's wings.
So what do you see in this shack, from way up here?
Does that door lead to nothing more than a broken outhouse,
Or is it a cracked confessional?
A penitent box for de-mobbed men to weep into children's blankets,
Confessing to pink and conscienceless cartoons?

MINISTER:
I can't see any evidence of penitence from here.
Graffiti, look they're vandals. Pykeys.
It's not even words, it's gibberish!
Destructive dolts. Ungrateful 'do-as-you-likey's.'

GHOST:
Is what you don't know 'gibberish'?
Those slogans are in their languages.

MINISTER:
Look, there!
They've strung up a virgin bride.
Too late now for bandages.
The scum. What this place needs is a hose.

GHOST:
Sir, don't choke on your sandwiches.
It's only an effigy, a hanging dress, reminding those
Whose great grandmothers long ago,
Your clergy drowned and choked
Under the good old English crown's duress
That some things ought to be remembered.

MINISTER:
Oh come on, it's three hundred years and more
Since Witches or Gypsy whores have been dismembered.
And the Welsh? Well that was longer still ago.
So why should I feel bad, today?
Me?
No.

Damian James Le Bas in response to a conversation with Delaine Le Bas, February 2010

Human bodies slash 'n' burn in a hell across the room
Keep writing dante, the world is smaller now but it's not your fault
they burn
Witches' ladders: beanstalk escape routes or fast tracks to no such
heaven?
Weird madonnas display no emotion
What's she planning for the kid?
Joseph's not the dad, better keep that quiet
Whisper and spin an epic, vatican city-sized lie about it
The birds and flowers and colours and hedges that throng around
baby jesus, what would they have to tell us?
Birds and bushes line the paths of prophets and armies carrying vats
of fire, bursting to turn jungle and flesh into ash
Never mind
Imagine hell's in the afterlife, turn an (agent orange) blind(ed) eye to
it all
Does baby jesus see the life around him, birds and beasts, notice
them?
Jesus snubs his mother: 'who are my mother and my brothers?'
We want our totems, our milksop messiahs, our whore madonnas to
be as inhuman as possible, please: otherwise people might get the
dangerous idea they can make a change themselves
Which baby is going to spot the lack of clothes on our oil-fuelled
emperors?
Titian's infantile david beheads goliath and dances like a baby boy at
christmas: even his nappy looks too big for him
Bernini's david is a spiteful bastard, curly-lipped, dead eyed like a
cowboy, aiming for a target, not a human
The child is father of the man, said wordsworth-what's your
perspective? Whose perspective rules?
St. George and the dragon
The real st. George, a palestinian soldier taming chaos, the first
pressing of islamophobia, or crusader de luxe heroic white man in a
coincidentally bronze death mask?
St. George the english oppressor, trammelling the untamed?
Bloody good job too
Blood and bandages of the cross, the legacy of the balfour
declaration: st. George bites back at his middle eastern homeland

Flag of a lyddite palestinian stamped on the manhole covers of
jerusalem, covering up the shit below the surface
Is that a wedding dress floating down the sewer? Was ophelia from
gaza, from jericho or nablus by the wall?
This dragon's the beast from the east, look at its lying forked tongue
and lithe and lowly form, only gypsies crawl like that, roma or
hedgemumpers, spot the difference, take 'em out
Mulla sor mushes ta chavvies, sor juvels ta sheys, ker lenna dray e
bori devleski yog, alay akai, talla puv ta talla vesh, kai the beng ta
mullas besh
Either way, the usa has taken up good-time-george's lance of the free
Turns any man, woman or child who refuses to submit to its neo-
saxon yoke into cinders in the desert
Are these things happening?
Even while they're happening, they're not really happening
A poor death is of no moment, no consequence
The dead can't vote
The poor are less than stats
Let's believe this isn't true, kids'll do anything to believe they're fair
and free
Well done good ole boys, the admen sell the lies
Us foreign policy is 'almost witty', says pinter
Blow up a nation's children
Rape its resources
Imprison without charge
Then go before the cameras and say 'democracy has prevailed!'
'My god good, your god bad'
This is england: theft trumps death in court
Art is revered, fine art ain't secular, it's an extension of the church
Coincidence that we call the cultureless our 'philistines'-palestinians-
same fucking word
John berger saw the barriers round everything
Paintings imprisoned, their truths imprisoned?
Or are we imprisoned in the changing, unpredictable world outside
Locked out like christian's mutineers
Anyone got a witches ladder so i can get out of this circus???????

Nastiss

A-allo?

Kushti sala.

Del mandi bitti chairus. Mungava te jovva kana sig.

Sala-si-les a-kana, chal?

Penchava, ava, chal.

Sala-si doodla, salo-si kamla, salo-si yoosherda dray o nevvi dood, o sunnakayeski dood.

Sunnakayeski, aava, pensa mi-duvvelski tem,

pensa penchdom a-les a-wavver chairus.

Kana shannus a tikner, mandi.

Ta sunnakai si kushti.

Sunnakai si duvvelski.

pensa o kam, o purra Romno kam,

dray o tan kai beshova mandi akana.

(LAUGHS)

Hmm. Tatcha dosta.

Sar-shan?

Aa-

Allo?

(QUIETLY) Dordi, dordi.

Jinessa-tul' sossi les-te mandi's rokrin, so rok'rava katta tuti?

Mandi kak dikkava tuti, nastiss te dikkava, chavvi, tuti.

Kai shan tuti?

Allo?

Kai shan tut?

Ta, ahh.. Kon shan tut?

Maw av atrasht a mandi, chal. Maw av-atrasht, Jiness?

Shan tuti gorjia? Gorji shan tuti?

Aaa. Dikkava. Jinnava-kana.

Rokrava man kek gorjikaness. Murri dai, pendas-mandi ta-i gorji chib si bengali chib, chavvi. Kana shannus a tikna, shannas aladj te pukker gorjia lavior. Dordi, a-ladj, o bitto chal, ta tatchaness les, mush.

Nastiss te chivava gorji lavior dray m'i rokrapen.

Toogno shom-mandi kana-shan tuti gorjia, numma-

Numma jinnava-man kak gorjia foki, na, kak mush ta kak juvel a doveski foki.

Ajior m'i rokripen o' gorji chib si kek buht kushti, toogno shom, murra pal-a-murri pen asa nastiss te dik.

Yekina "allo". Yekina les, "allo", ta lessi bonggo lav, jinova kak.

Nastiss te pukker kushtadair.

Ava.

Nastiss.

Sala-si-les a-kana, chal? Ta-akana, ta wavver divvus?

Penchava, ava, chal.

Sala-si doodla, salo-si kamla, salo-si yoosherda dray o sunnakayeski dood.

Sunnakayeski, aava, pensa mi-duvvelski tem,

pensa penchadom a-les a wavver chairus, wavver chairus.

Ta sunnakai si kushti.

Sunnakai si duvvelski.

pensa o kam, o purra Romno kam,

m'o purra amal

te nastiss-man' te dik.















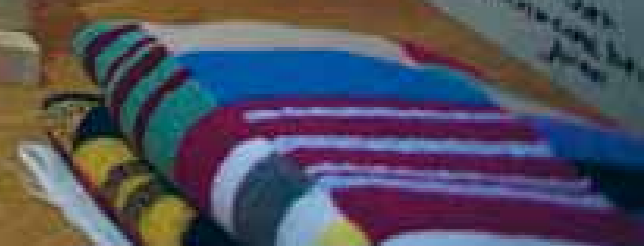
















Wyrn House
94 Mountebank Drive
Little Wellcoming
Saecswealden
WE10 R66

To whom it may concern

I am writing to inform you that your recent 'art' exhibition, WITCH HUNT, has succeeded in jarring the tranquility and happy mental stasis of several members of our community. Further to this complaint, which in your woven cocoon of artistic solipsism you are likely to ignore, I should like express my serious concerns about the legality of this show in relation to British planning laws.

I believe in fair play. It was with a heavy heart, therefore, that I suffered the trauma of exposure to the heathen psychological exhibitionism (in this sense alone might this mess merit description as an 'exhibition') of WITCH HUNT. Fairness, as you have obviously failed to be taught, is properly symbolised by both balance and harmony. When our children are taken on school outings to survey the Elgin Marbles, they are edified not simply by the content of the art, but by its pleasingly symmetric presentation within the gallery. Visitors to the Parthenon Galleries are thereby civilized by the balanced sense of harmony, of aesthetic justice, or virginal calm which surrounds them in the space.

I heartily agree with those visitors to your 'exhibition' that in contrast to such civilized and civilizing art, your own approach is best described as scattergun and, more frankly, crap. Your pitiful innocence of the importance of a sound teleological view was in evidence in the way your domestic garbage was strewn along the ~~XXXX~~ length of the gallery, ensuring the visitor's view of the end of their voyage was completely obscured from the start. This, however, was the least of the visitor's worries.

To say, as another of your visitors has, that this 'show' had about it the air of a ~~XXX~~ poisoned Ladybird book' does little justice to its harmful potential, particularly in relation to children. What do you think gives you the right to erect unchristian altarpieces and pseudo-tribal bivouacs filled with nonsense and use the paraphernalia of innocent childhoods as your bricks and mortar? The notion that children are implicated in the political vicissitudes of our fallen world is a pernicious one and it is sickmaking that you should utilise a public space to juxtapose soft toys with your cod-historical reading of British History as an extended exercise in the persecution of minorities.

Finally, as promised, I should like to tender a few words about planning law as it relates to your exhibition. Understanding my viewpoint here will require a touch of spiritual maturity which I am sure you are devoid of but I shall voice my thoughts nonetheless.

I am a proud supporter of the Green Belt legislation which, howbeit so late that our green and pleasant land already wilts under the weight of urban development, is a welcome legal trend. Even as I write, however, what remains of our Green Belt land is under threat from the cynical land-grabbing actions of Gypsies and Travellers who refuse to follow the same planning channels as the rest of us. Before you attempt to excuse this criminal trend with one of your cultural sleights of hand, consider the following appeal: that if you must insist on building these haphazard, hazardous and artless shantys that constitute your claim to be an artist, please do outside of public art spaces, and do the British public the favour of allowing these to flourish as the last unblemished verdant spaces on the island. It is a shame that the last bastion of uncorrupted rurality must exist only in the mental space of the arts, but in the name of Radio Four I beg you to allow us this final outpost of what was once a glorious identity.

Yours sincerely,

Mandi A, Sable

Witch Hunt: Delaine Le Bas

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