

Witch Hunt: Delaine Le Bas at Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth, and Chapter, Cardiff

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.ⁱ We humans are just as impelled as birds to make our own architectures – the construction done by (male) specialists. Then there's the work that women have traditionally done, 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.ⁱⁱ And then, around this arrangement 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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.^{iv}

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.^v

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... ^{vi}

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 fox-hunting 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 hadn'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...^{vii}

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*.^{viii} 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.^{ix}

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 are highly 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 feminine fantasies that sustain racism.

What she conveys 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 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 provides written notes for 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 Messenger: 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, May 2010

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ⁱ See James R. Gould and Carol Grant Gould, *Animal Architects: building and the evolution of intelligence*, chapter seven, Basic Books, 2007.

ⁱⁱ This type of rug, I later learn from the artist, is 'very popular among Travellers here and also throughout Europe: it is one of those items that you would recognise as being universal.'

ⁱⁱⁱ From Southey's version of 'The Three Bears', in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, 1976 (on p. 219 of the Penguin 1991 edition)

^{iv} 'Hansel and Grettel', in *The Blue Fairy Book*, edited by Andrew Lang, Longmans. Green and Co., 1905, p. 254.

^v 'Little Snow White', *Grimm: complete fairy tales*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948.

^{vi} Nathalie Sarraute, *Childhood*, 1983 (pp. 4 – 5 of the John Calder 1984 edition trans. Barbara Wright).

^{vii} *Aurora Leigh*, 1856 (pp. 51 – 52 of The Women's Press 1978 edition).

^{viii} See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine*, chapter one, The Women's Press, 1984

^{ix} It's true that the popularity of embroidery and tapestry kits has generally waned. The romance is far from over, however, taking other massively popular forms including television series such as 'Lark Rise to Candleford', and retail outlets such as Laura Ashley and Cath Kidston that purvey the fantasy of the rural homemade.