

Delaine Le Bas

Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding

Essay

Delaine Le Bas has engaged in a lifelong practice of artistic resistance. Her work draws on her biographical experiences as a Romani woman, deconstructing the stereotypes, images and language that have historically been employed to socially exclude Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities¹. Across her exhibition *Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding*, sculptures, paintings, embroideries, textiles, photographs, sound and film footage are melded together in immersive environments. Within a soft architecture of calico walls and tent-like forms, a dialogue between new and existing works articulates the powerful layering of personal histories and imaginaries with collective iconographies and forms of solidarity.

At the threshold of *Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding*, the exhibition visitor enters an enclosed vestibule with a glass ceiling, from which one of Delaine's soft sculptures *Mendacity* (2024) peers down. Facing the visitor, embedded in a wall swathed in calico, nestles a small brightly coloured painting of a Romanichal woman standing in front of a 'vardo', a traditional Gypsy wagon *My Nan* (1991). Painted in the artist's formative years/ when Delaine was twenty six, the portrait is of the artist's maternal grandmother, the matriarch of Delaine's family and the source of her ancestral knowledge. Despite these positive associations, the painting holds conflicting emotions for Delaine, as it was vandalised with the words 'Burn in Hell' and 'Witch' on the reverse by Delaine's mother after being given as a gift by Delaine to her father the date when this happened is unknown as the painting was in storage for some years. 'Nan' is a central figure in the artist's work, with the folktales, myths, and oral histories of the Romani people that she told to Delaine as a child woven through the fabric of the exhibition. At the entrance of *Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding*, the vandalised portrait serves as both a powerful totemic symbol and a reminder for the artist of the hostility she has faced from both strangers and family when producing art that explores her Romani heritage from her own perspective.

Forming one wall of the glass-roofed vestibule, two rudimentary outhouse-style structures stand to the side of the exhibition entrance. Delaine describes these structures as hybridised spaces representing both a sentry box and a confessional. Each contains a spoken word sound piece produced following the 2008-2009 Gaza War, made by the artist and her son as an early part of Delaine's ongoing project *Witch Hunt* (2009 -).

¹ Romani Gypsies are thought to have settled in the UK from around 250BC. They are one of the diverse ethnic groups that make up the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities in Scotland, including Eastern European Roma, indigenous Highland travellers, Scottish and English Romani (Romanichal), and Irish Travellers. The traditions, histories and cultures of these communities are distinct, while sharing ways of life structured around nomadism. Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people have formed a key part of Scottish and British culture and society for centuries.

Poetically echoing the declamatory tone of newspaper headlines, the work's text wrestles with the entanglement of power, resources, religion and colonialism. The cut-out jets on the two structures serve as a potent symbol of state and military power, suggesting acts of war and territorial enforcement, as well as the glare of surveillance. Bringing together many of the concerns that thread throughout *Delainia: 17071965 Unfolding*, the combination of elements in the exhibition entrance suggests forms of inseparable personal experience, political protest, and the critique of narratives of power, control and enclosure.

Moving further into the space, the viewer encounters an expansive soft architecture of calico fabric that evokes itinerant and temporary architectures. Delaine has used fabric in many of her installations as a device to interrupt the framing of the institution, creating a space within a space in which her work can exist on its own terms. She transforms Tramway's walls into a massive canvas, punctuated with the insertion of works from different eras of her practice, which together create an alternative retrospective of her four-decade long career. An introductory collage created from both recent and old work includes photographs, personal ephemera, garments and re-activations of her archive, and offers a constellation of personal and political references. This layering of elements gives insight into the influence in Delaine's work of her studies in textiles and fashion in London in the 1980s, with a punkish casualness meeting areas of intricate embroidery and applique. Pairing found textile prints and images with a recurring vocabulary of drawn and painted symbols and forms, Delaine critiques and absorbs the everydayness of British cultural stereotypes within the childhood memories, stories and mythologies of her Romani ancestry. This collage of works also contains small photographs of the artist and family members. One image shows Delaine performing *Romani Embassy*, an ongoing performance begun in 2015. This performance embodies issues facing the global Roma community who do not have a shared homeland or a national embassy to represent them in times of trouble.

The sculptural work *Off Kilter* (2024) symbolises both a vardo and a circus carriage used to cage animals. Romanichal adopted highly colourful, decorated and expertly crafted wagons as living spaces in the mid-19th Century. The vardo is perhaps the most familiar and romanticised aspect of Gypsy culture in popular consciousness, solidified in the Victorian era when the nomadic way of life was a staple theme for novelists and writers. In literature, Gypsies were romanticised as part of a disappearing rural culture, while also being exoticized as dangerous outsiders, criminals, wanderers, or witches. Studies of the Romani language during this period indicated the origins of Roma people in the Indian subcontinent, with this knowledge being used to pursue racialised stereotypes of the Romani as the exotic 'other'².

The vardo sculpture is modelled on a sketch by Delaine, scaled up and given three dimensions while retaining the idiosyncrasies of the artist's drawing. At life-size, the wagon seems childlike and fantastical – at once a manifestation of the imagination and a powerful materialisation of feelings of being trapped, hunted and caged. Inside the carriage is a suspended figure made from straw-stuffed calico, bearing the menacing face of clown.

² It is thought that the Romani may have migrated from what is the modern Indian state of Rajasthan to the northern region of Punjab around 250 BC. Their subsequent westward migration is now believed to have occurred beginning in about 500 AD.

The figure's t-shirt bears the slogan 'Protest is in peril', referencing two different anti-protest laws introduced in 2022: the Policing, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Act 2022. Gypsy and traveller communities in the UK have for generations been severely impacted by shifts in public order legislation which have eroded a way of life that does not align with the rampant propertisation of land. Forms of environmental protest, land and anti-war activism in the UK since the 1960s have overlapped and aligned with the struggles of Romanichal. The work also speaks to the paradoxes of identity, subverting popular iconography associated with Romani Gypsy culture; the wagon, the horse and the boxing ring for example. Here the traditional vardo is transformed into a cage from which the female figure is breaking free.

Resisting stereotypes, Delaine's works often points to the ways in which Gypsy identity continues to be mythologised, performed and demonised through dominant popular culture and media. The use of language and text is a central aspect of her practice, from passages of her own writing to appropriated headlines or social commentary. In recent projects she has particularly addressed the ways in which language can be manipulated, twisted and weaponised. The stark painting *Beware of Linguistic Engineering* (2021), presented alongside the simplified silhouette of a rabbit running from a helicopter under a giant moon *Harvest Moon 200921210921* (2021), succinctly conveys how dominant discourse can feed into collective thinking and sentiment in ways that narrow and control meaning. Elsewhere in the exhibition, Delaine's use of language emphasizes both the capacity and the fear of 'unknown tongues', the bearers of which have been represented as a threat to invisible borders.

Beware of Linguistic Engineering was produced as part of series of works loosely grouped under the title *Zigeuner Sauce* (2017-21). In Germany, the word 'zigeuner' is used as a catch-all term for Sinti and Roma people and can be experienced as offensive and derogatory, carrying historical associations with other groups considered not to fit with 'majority' society and their persecution, particularly under National Socialism. In the wake of global Black Lives Matter and anti-racism protests in 2020, the decision was made by multinational Unilever to remove 'zigeuner' from the name of their popular brand of hot sauce. However, the closest English translation of 'zigeuner', the word Gypsy (which itself is a historical misrepresentation, falsely suggesting that Romani people are descended from Egyptians), has in Britain been notably reclaimed and celebrated as part of a self-identifying position. Delaine's *Zigeuner Sauce* series reflects on identity, self-naming and the reclamation of language that has been skewed by external forces. It references the artist Betye Saar's 1972 work *Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, which transforms the racist 'mammy' caricature of Jim Crow-era USA into a rifle-carrying Black revolutionary. In a parallel gesture, Delaine revisits the motif of the spicy sauce bottle, customising it into a Molotov cocktail-style tool for protest – or, in the artist's version, a 'pisslotov' filled with her own urine, that also owes a debt to the use of 'pupotovs' (bottles filled with water and faeces) in the 2017 anti-government protests in Venezuela. The pisslotovs invoke an act of resistance to the violence of linguistic categorisation.

Contrasting with the starkness of the *Zigeuner Sauce* works, an adjacent wall is densely and colourfully packed with urgent, frenetic and unapologetic large scale text works and collaged paintings on fabric, materialising entries from Delaine's journals, her thoughts, and critical views on politics.

The texts address policies and issues that have exacerbated the societal unease and inequalities affecting Britain today, intertwined with the injustices faced by Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. Within this wall of words there is also the presence of a number of talismanic and votive forms, from masks and flowers to the heraldic image of the three lions, historically associated with King Richard I and the crusades, yet in Delaine's version overlaid with the blue face of Hindu goddess Kali. In front of the wall hang two 'exquisite corpses' – composites of body parts from figures that have reappeared across Delaine's work over the years.

The reoccurring appearance of female figures in Delaine's work spans forms of self-portraiture (in many cases created by drawing around her own body), and the presence of religious, spiritual and mythological icons such as goddesses, saints and witches. In her feminist practice, Delaine emphasises the emblematic power of female divinities in ancient religions, who were later obscured, replaced or morphed into patriarchal belief systems in historical moments of conquest, dispersion and colonisation. These figures also manifest the complex nature of global Roma cultures, within which different belief systems are held and sometimes melded, yet which are underpinned by shared aspects of a 'Rromanipé' – a 'Romani world view'. A frequent presence in her work (including in the masked three lions) is the constructed character of St Sara Kali George, a figure enacted by the artist that hybridises the patron saint of Romany people, Sara Kali, with the patron saint of England, St George (himself thought to have been a Roman officer born in the Third Century in modern day Turkey). In Romani culture, Sara e Kali (Sara the Black) is a venerated figure thought to have arrived in France with persecuted early Christians, but to have had Indian and Egyptian ancestry. Her name and identity has become connected also to the Hindu earth goddess Kali, associated with time or death, and often appearing in Hindu imagery as a blue figure. Meshing these identities into a new mythology, Le Bas conceived of St Sara Kali George as an "armour" which through costume and performance she uses to invoke protective powers, borrowing from the female divinities of the past to fight against oppression. A powerful protector of undetermined sexuality that resonates across disparate geographies, St Sara Kali George conjures the polymorphous nature of identity, history and tradition.

In *Delainia Unfolding*, the viewer encounters various other female mythological icons and versions of the goddess figure, from small, bejewelled forms reminiscent of pre-modern fertility icons, to embroidered and painted images of Medusa, and a towering statue of a Minoan figurine. The latter work, *Goddess* (2019), was previously installed in the garden of the Maxim-Gorki-Theater in Berlin, transforming the site into a scene of contemplation, encounter, and consciousness-raising, with workshops and rituals. The sculpture summons classical mythologies of the snake-handling priestess, variously depicted as 'raving ones' or oracles of the gods – an example of the transition in ancient Greek society from a spirituality grounded in dominant earth mothers, to their separation into lesser goddesses holding subordinate positions to male deities. The repeated representation across *Delainia Unfolding* of the snake-haired Medusa's scream at the moment of her beheading, serves as both an image of feminist rage and of men's narrative construction of the 'monster' as a response to female desire. Delaine's work pays attention to the ways in which patriarchal power has shaped historical, mythological and theological narrative, re-centring the goddess and channelling her power to address themes of contemporary emancipation and resistance.

The painting *Meet Your Neighbours* (2005) positions Medusa at its centre, as a form of shield floating in front of a portrait of Delaine and her husband, artist Damian Le Bas (who passed away in 2017). Alongside this double portrait, Delaine inscribes the words from a speech made by the Conservative Party leader at the time, Michael Howard, in which he proclaimed the need to rewrite Human Rights legislation to remove protection afforded to Roma, Gypsy and Traveller cultural practices, in order to prioritise property and planning laws. Delaine's projects and installations have frequently returned to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a text. *Delainia Unfolding* includes the large-scale work *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (2011-), in which the full text of the declaration is written out around a sequined graphic of Mickey Mouse. In pairing the text with an icon of 20th Century US cultural and economic dominance, Delaine articulates the complexity of a declaration that seeks to protect diverse lives, beliefs and practices, while being formed around a particularly Western conception of humanity and rights. At the same time, these works resonate strongly with and offer a critique of a present moment of erosion and selective application of human rights legislation. Hanging opposite the declaration is the work *I am a Thieving Magpie* (2018), speaking back to the Enlightenment notion of human rights as underpinned by property rights. The work boldly reclaims a slur levelled at Roma, Gypsy and Traveller people – in the context of Delaine's practice, the phrase revels in the artist's layering of materials, symbols and detailing. Positioned in front of the hanging textile, propped up on hay bales, is the soft sculpture of a black horse made from organza and stuffed with hay. Delaine describes horses as being like beloved members of the family in Romanichal culture, and historically a vital part of their way of life³. A small figurine of a black horse was a prized possession of Delaine's grandmother which originally belonged to her grandfather, and for the artist, the form serves as an icon of familial memory and heritage, and its precarity.

Like most nomadic groups, Romany Gypsies have traditionally travelled around for work, usually following set routes and stopping places (called 'atchin tans') that have existed for hundreds of years. Many atchin tans were established by feudal landowners in the Middle Ages, when Romani people would provide labour to bring in crops such as peas, strawberries, hops and fruit, as well as the wheat harvest. However, with rapid change in Britain from an agrarian economy to industrial capitalism, and the resultant urbanisation and forced land enclosures – which saw swathes of land taken out of common use in the eighteenth century – the Romany ways of life and relationship to land were displaced. The use of lavender, straw and hay throughout *Delainia Unfolding* creates stages for sculptures or stuffs the fabric bodies of the cast of characters that populate the space. As such, these materials thread through the exterior and interior architecture of the exhibition. As hay bale structures they evoke road blockades built by protesting farmers in France, while becoming the substance of bodies and forms of support.

³ The true 'Gypsy Horse' is a particular breed, having been bred and used by Romany in Europe for generations. The horse was traditionally a primary means of travel and employment for Romany, and a source of companionship and pride.

The centre space of *Delainia Unfolding* houses the installation *Witch Hunt* (2009-), which was first exhibited at Aspen Portsmouth. *Witch Hunt* is comprised of a hanging tent made of painted calico and suspended embroidered fabrics, overlaid printed textiles and ribbons, alongside vignettes of mannequins, dolls and charity shop objects that have been garnered from boot sales and charity shops and date from the 1950s onwards. The carnivalesque installation offers up an excess of symbols of rural idyll, fairy-tale worlds, and aspirational 'Home Sweet Home' imagery and ornament. Delaine has spoken of the resonance for her in themes of "expulsion, itinerancy and invasion" that run through fairytales and children's stories, where the supposed safety of home is exposed. *Witch Hunt* is populated with found images of fox hunts and presided over by the hanging of a children's 'Action Man quilt', itself overlooked by the torso, head and hands of a werewolf costume (a presence within some aspects of Romani folklore). The work reflects the artist's own experiences of being taunted as a 'gypsy witch' at school, and draws links between the historical persecution of witches and Gypsies in Britain, as well as the loss of alternative, indigenous forms of knowledge, language, labour and tradition often held by women. The pastoral image of English country life is undercut by the accumulation of memories of persecution, hostility and enclosure. As explored in the writer Sylvia Federici's book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, which traces the links between the witch hunts and the establishment of capitalism, 'witches' were often women who traditionally kept pregnancy and childbirth in female hands: midwives, abortionists and herbalists who provided contraception. The killing of these women brought childbirth under the auspices of male-led institutions and cemented the formation of a domestic labour class necessary for industrial capitalism. The installation speaks to the witch hunts as a pivotal moment in which connections to women's knowledge, culture, and medicine were lost and the dominance of intertwined patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism was violently established.

Moving on from the space of *Witch Hunt*, the viewer enters a large circular tent, a performative space which simultaneously invokes the circus and nomadic, temporary architectures. Hanging from wires in this space are a series of early sculptural self-portraits, collectively titled *Pink Dolls* (2004). They are exquisitely detailed examples of Delaine's earlier practice which employed meticulous embroidery and applique, their legs and arms covered in highly decorative motifs and sequins that resemble elaborate tattoos. These three-dimensional self-portraits carry stories across their bodies literally stitched into the skin. Speaking about these works, Delaine has said: "*these are stories we cannot see or are those which are not often expressed. Sometimes words are not enough, sometimes stories feel like patterns or colour*". Self-portraiture is an important aspect of Delaine's work. She channels her emotional and political aspects of her identity through the creation of various personas, while asserting the presence of her body and selfhood in spaces that have denied visibility to Romani people.

Recently, Delaine has been painting on large hanging sheets of organza, creating translucent images which dissect space. An ongoing work *Running Figures* (2023 -) features a series of repeated life-size red female figures forming a circular loop around the circumference of the tent. The silhouettes are outlines of the artist, made by lying directly on the canvas and painting around her form. Resembling a zoetrope used to create early animations, the figure is caught in a moment of perpetual flight. A new film made for the exhibition by Delaine and Laszlo Farkas is projected on to a circular mirror on the floor of the tent. It features the artist, costumed in a floral garment that is a remaking of an outfit she wore as a 3-year-old. The work animates motifs from the artist's visual lexicon that appear across the exhibition, engaging with themes of self-love, re-birth and saying 'no' as a positive affirmation, as well as the importance of play in the process of making art.

Moving out of the tent the viewer encounters two earlier works: *Trashimos si ruzlipen, chavvy (Fear is contagious, my friend)* (2010) and *Lambs to the Slaughter* (2010), which both address ideas of nationhood, belonging and identity. The Romani text embroidered on the work translates to English as 'Fear is contagious my friend', while the Union Jack flag is displayed upside down – a sign of distress. The delicately embroidered handkerchief *Like Lambs to the Slaughter* (2024) reappears on the facing wall of the exhibition space, remade at a giant scale including outsize punkish safety pins. This doubling of the work amplifies its message, transforming the work into a protest banner.

In the open space between the two handkerchiefs stands a boxing ring which served as a site for a performance by the artist and her collaborator Hera S Santos on the opening night for the exhibition. The artists' costumes and remnants of the performance can be seen laid in the boxing arena, around a square of crushed eggshells. The performance featured the duo stamping rhythmically on eggshells reaching a climatic pace, with Delaine repeatedly shouting phrases such as 'We're not walking on eggshells anymore' and 'The world is on fire'. Masked in Delaine's signature white calico, the boxing ring continues the exploration of the paradoxes of Romani symbolism and identity, subverting and transforming it into a site for feminist performance and new forms of ritual. Also featured in this area are garments that stem from Delaine's creative roots in textiles and fashion, reflecting her formative years studying fashion and textiles at Central St Martins in London (1986 to 1988) and the ongoing influence of clothing and costumes in her work. Costumes in particular play a major role within her performative practice as a means to conjure various personas and enact rituals - costume becomes a tool of resistance, protest, armour, camouflage, as well as a signifier of belonging or difference.

A large-scale collage of works new and existing, created in situ by Delaine, occupies the end wall of the exhibition space. As a whole, the collage explores the artist's relationship to nature and themes of earth, death and re-birth. Featuring a number of panels and multiple figures situated in a pastoral landscape of sequined flowers and lambs, the work resembles a religious fresco. Trees morph into multi-limbed bodies and green nymph-like silhouettes covered in eyes hover above as though in an otherworldly realm. A central panel of the collage titled *Talay O Puv, O Zeisko Tan Part II* (2021) (translated from Romany to English as *Under Ground Is Where The Heart Is*) – evokes the artist's personal and artistic transformation. The work was executed during a period of lockdown resulting from the Covid pandemic, while Delaine was away from home. The textile piece brings together around the artist's painted figure her thoughts and cultural, spiritual, and imaginary universe through an exuberant cosmogony. The work also relates to earth as a mother entity, our relation to it, and our interconnection to each other within the context of current climate and political crisis. It was inspired in part by an earlier embroidery, *Fucking Hypocrisy* (2008), with the reappearance of the central motif of the tree – in Delaine's words: "the tree is a human body and within the earth is where our heart is or should be". The central Goddess figure resonates through the three other painted female figures covered in eyes: *Modern Witch II* (2021) and *Vigilant Observers I & II*, all again inspired by the artist's body. The work also features the form of the skeleton, another recurring motif in the artist's work, particularly in her early embroidered collages. Death rituals are important in Romani culture – the supernatural is very much internalized in daily life and the bonds between the living and the dead are considered palpable and ever present.

As a dramatic environment of vignettes, layered artworks and new constellations of images, texts and materials, *Delainia Unfolding* can be experienced as a 'gesamtkunstwerk' – a total work of art. Weaving throughout the exhibition, a soundscape intersperses the experience of individual works and spaces. Produced in collaboration with sound artist Justin Langlands, this soundtrack merges various audio works that have accompanied Delaine's installations over the years. Featuring sounds from horse hooves and bird song, to singing by Rajistani vocalist Raju Bhopa, and Delaine's own sung and spoken voice, the work is an acoustic accompaniment to the layered, polyphonic exhibition which traverses many eras of the artist's practice. Bales of hay also serve as a symbolic and structural continuum throughout the exhibition, serving as plinths, framing devices and areas of seating for viewers to relax, listen, read and inhabit the exhibition.

In Delaine's recent work, radical optimism, joy, regeneration and rebirth have become central themes. As if to acknowledge the need for rest and sensorial recuperation, amid the hay bale seating area at the end of the exhibition the artist has positioned a mattress sculpture stuffed with hay and lavender to be lain on. Alongside the drama of the boxing ring performance conducted on the exhibition's opening night, Delaine's partner and collaborator Lincoln Cato quietly occupied an adjacent corner of the gallery, stitching a large vibrant piece of sunshine-yellow fabric – an act described by Delaine as one symbolic of joy and hope.