

LOCAL NAME: UNKNOWN ... GYPSIES?

Exhibition at Phoenix Brighton

26 April – 15 June 2014

www.phoenixbrighton.org

Essay by Ethel Brooks

*In the far north, wealth is measured in forests,
giant green treetops, red trunks spread over distances the eye cannot grasp
thousands of squirrels, snakes, leaping hares, elusive foxes.
My grandmother did not own even a small grove,
but wore a piece of shining coal on her finger,
a remainder of the forests destroyed before our age....*

Galit Hassan Rokem, Berlin Zyklus, 2005[1]

Galit Hassan Rokem goes on to say that these (diamonds) are the forests of the Wandering Jew, and that she, now, wears her grandmother's forest on her finger. In her solo exhibition, *Local Name Unknown... Gypsies?*, Delaine Le Bas opens up hidden histories of The New Forest, and of the generations of Romani people who called it home for much of its history. This is our forest, that of the commons. Our wealth has never come from owning the land, but from being part of it. In this exhibition, Delaine gives us an intimate telling of the Romani history of the New Forest, entwined with her own family history and with her place in the world – and on the South Coast – as a Romani woman and an outsider artist who, at the same time, very clearly and deeply belongs: to our community, to the land and to a collective project that takes Romani people – our history, our stories, our work and our culture—seriously.

Delaine draws from multiple sources and multiple media to tell her stories, and brings us to new understandings of areas, people and the importance of documenting that which is so often lost. She does this through careful research, intensive reading, creative and artistic courage and through an intimate engagement with all of our five senses. In her 2012 solo exhibition in Wales, Delaine placed lavender sprigs at the entrance of the exhibition space, which greeted visitors with the flower's fresh smell, while at the same time evoking the long history of Romani women selling sprigs of lavender across the British Isles to support their families and their communities. Along with the lavender's smell came the sound of Romani voices speaking the Anglo--Romani language, photographs, artefacts and documents of local Romani histories, and the beauty and critique of Delaine's embroidery, her fabric work and juxtaposition of personal objects belonging to her with larger political critiques and claims that come out of the collective Romani project – across the British Isles, into Europe and across the world.

This collective project is one that is central to Delaine's work, her sense of family and community, and to the political and cultural claims she makes through her artistic practice. While often site-specific art evokes large-scale sculptures, murals or installations in open space, I marvel at the ways in which all of Delaine's work combines intimacy with site-specificity. Sculptor Richard Serra said about site-specific art that, "the preliminary analysis of a given site takes into consideration not only the formal but also social and political characteristics of the site. Site-specific works invariably manifest a judgment about the larger social and political context of which they are a part."^[2] In her practice, Delaine continually and beautifully documents the social and political characteristics of the sites in which she is exhibiting, through references to Romani everyday life, to the home and to the ways in which Romani life is made invisible in multiple ways. She does this through her intimate engagement with Romani communities and local histories, and through her fine eye for the markers and meanings of everyday life.

These markers and meanings of everyday life are central to the story of this exhibition: *Local Name Unknown... Gypsies*, as it consciously evokes the local, and asks us to give name to people and practices that are so often overlooked. One history, in particular, is that of The New Forest and the Romani people who lived there, made their livelihoods from its flora and fauna, bred horses and gathered herbs, lived and met each other. Romani history in the New Forest and beyond is also a history of roundups and compounds, and of Romani people being forbidden from camping and living in the forest that they had called home for centuries.^[3] For while The New Forest had served as common land since the time of William the Conqueror, its Romani denizens, who had cared for the land and lived off the land, have been continually excluded from the commons.

This exclusion is documented most forcefully in two British Pathé documentaries, *Gypsies in the New Forest* (1947) and *New Forest Gypsies* (1948), both of which use similar footage of Romani encampments in the New Forest to underscore their point that, as the caption on the 1948 film says, "Gypsies live in primitive huts in squalid conditions in New Forest."^[4] The first film is silent, with heavily spliced footage of Romani families working, living and making home in the New Forest; the second has a booming voiceover that tells its viewers about the hardworking women living in "squalid conditions" and emphasizing the un-tenability of their living situation. Both films point out that the days of Gypsies in the New Forest are coming to an end, that they have no place in the modern world. There is no mention of the long Romani history in the New Forest, nor of the round-ups of the 1920s and the creation of Romani compounds (which, to my American Romani ears, has echoes of, at once, reservations and concentration camps). There is no mention of community or the deep history of Romani people across the South Coast, throughout Hampshire and into Sussex. The New Forest is 50 miles from Brighton, and both are nodes in this larger local history of Southern England. As part of that larger history, I see that my own ancestors were central to both to the history of the New Forest and that of Southern England—the Stanleys, Lees and Burtons^[5]—just as Delaine's family traces its own history to the New Forest and throughout the Southern Coast.

Romani people were part of the commons, belonged on common land, and lived from and in harmony with the land. The commons—and the place of Romani people in common land—provide a powerful critique of the institution of private property as conceived by John Locke in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*. It opens up the question of Romani belonging and calls into question the right of the nation-state to exclude its Romani citizens from its present, past and future. At the same time, even as Romani people are excluded, the image of the Gypsy as outsider remains; we see

this in the British Pathé film *Gypsy Artists* from 1956, less than a decade after the two films on *New Forest Gypsies*. The 1956 film depicts artists, Sven and Juanita Berlin, and their decision to live a “Gypsy” life in the New Forest while pursuing of their art. They are shown as Bohemians who reject the modern life: gone, however, are the references to squalor and primitive lifestyles. Actual Romani histories of and presence in the New Forest are, in turn, erased from the story.

Delaine has undone much of that erasure in her artistic practice; she has uncovered the palimpsest that is Romani history in the UK and beyond. Delaine was lucky to have grown up in a large Romani family that took pride in Romani customs, Romani language and Romani stories, in Romani everyday lives, but also in our histories and our place in the world. Her father would collect the older histories of Romani people, written, mostly, not by us, but which documented our place in the British Isles. She has taken her Romani heritage into other areas, always working to enlighten Romani and non Romani people through her artistic practice; true to her Romani heritage and to our cultural practice, Delaine works in collaboration with others, with her community, with her people and with the world at large. She brings the entire world around her into her practice, into her life and into her heart, and shares with others her committed politics, her knowledge and her talent.

I, in turn, am lucky to have come to know Delaine Le Bas as an artist, a comrade and a sister. This exhibition lays claim to our name, it emphasizes our local roots, and shows her deep commitment to Romani stories, to a feminist artistic practice and to our collective belonging as Romani people.

Ethel Brooks is Associate Professor, Departments of Women’s and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA

.....
[1] Galit HassanRoken, “Poems from Berlin Zyklus,” *Offcourse Literary Journal* (December 2005); available at www.albany.edu/offcourse/december05/hasan_rokem_Berlin_Zyklus.html; Internet Accessed 3/25/2014.

[2] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: SiteSpecific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London, 2002: MIT Press), 74.

[3] For histories, stories and more information about *New Forest Gypsies*, see *Remembering Our Family*, available at www.newforestromanygypsytraveller.co.uk; Internet, Accessed 3/25/2014.

[4] All films are available on the British Pathé website, available at www.britishpathe.com/workspaces/newforestnotes/NewForest1; Internet,. Accessed 4/15/2014.

[5] John Richard de Capel Wise, *The New Forest: Its History and Its Scenery* (London, 1867: Smith, Elder and Company), 159.