

STITCHING A ROMA ARCHIVE: DELAINE LE BAS'S *WE HAVE A HISTORY* (2005)

by

Allison Lee Rhiannon Shearer

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STITCHING A ROMA ARCHIVE: DELAINE LE BAS'S *WE HAVE A HISTORY* (2005)

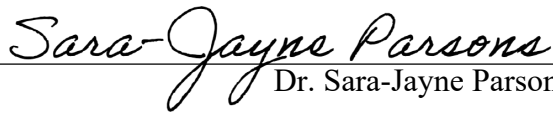
by

Allison Lee Rhiannon Shearer

Thesis approved:



Dr. Jamin An



Dr. Sara-Jayne Parsons



Alison Hearst, MA

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Introduction

In a performance entitled *Beware of Linguistic Engineering*, a figure draped in a black trench coat walks about a crowded East London gallery wearing a paper mask. The paper facade has been decorated haphazardly with red lips and a clownish nose, angular blue eyebrows, and jagged teeth that have been spray painted in black. The figure's red hair falls around the face of the mask as she surveys the room of gallery visitors. Her audience holds their hands in front of them as they wait for the disguised woman to speak. With a script in hand, she begins to address the audience as if she was retelling a tale passed down through generations. However, what she has to say does not evoke a nostalgic reimagination of the figure's past, but instead tells the history of a people discriminated by false and pernicious ideas made material by oppressive language and falsified imagery. The performer declares:

A British Romani gypsy is something quite particular. Linguistic engineering. The violence of language, the power of language, the written word. Who holds the power?¹

The person behind the mask is artist Delaine Le Bas (b. 1965). As a British Romani artist, Le Bas is no stranger to the “violence of language” and “power of language” encoded in what the artist terms “linguistic engineering.” Le Bas's work critically explores ideas of ethnic identity, language, and power in relation to the history of Romani people.

The Romani people have existed in history as an ethnic group marked by pervasive and dehumanizing stereotypes that dictate their marginalization and discrimination within society. The Roma have often been viewed as criminal, their culture and ways of being falsely deemed an uncouth or indecent lifestyle. Police organizations and European politicians sustain these unjust

¹ Excerpt from Delaine Le Bas's, *Beware of Linguistic Engineering*. Performed at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix Gallery, October 7, 2021.

prejudices, working anti-Roma sentiments into legislation. Even as recently as 2010, nations such as France have formulated plans to expel Roma individuals from their borders claiming that they pose a security threat to the nation.²

The stereotyping of the Romani is not a contemporary practice. Indeed, the Roma have been objectified in the visual arts for centuries. Constructed as subjects of desire, derision, and mysticality, the representation of the Romani has been shaped by outsiders. The harmful stereotypes and preconceived images of the community have severely misconstrued the lived experiences and culture of the Roma. As art historian Sarah Carmona argues, fascination with depicting the Roma body began as early as the fifteenth century in Europe not out of interest in portraying the Roma as members of society. Rather, the Roma were objectified as “other,” rendering their minority status meaningful for a dominant majority.³

A lack of written documentation about the lives and extensive history of the Roma predating the twentieth century further complicates the false notion that says the Roma exist as a “people without a history.” As a culture that has relied on an oral tradition in order to sustain memory and heritage, the Roma have been vulnerable to under- and misrepresentation by dominating groups outside of their transmitted histories. How does a community misunderstood to have no history become included in institutional repositories that claim to hold the broader telling of the past?

Across a wide range of artworks and curatorial activities, Le Bas answers this question and more by directing her work at history’s blindspots, oversights, and misrecognitions. Her

² Timofey Agarin, ed., *When Stereotype Meets Prejudice: Antiziganism in European* (New York: Ibidem Verlag, 2014), 31.

³ Sarah Carmona, “Decolonizing the Arts: A Genealogy of Romani Stereotypes in the Louvre and Prado Collections,” *Critical Romani Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 148.

artistic practice engages stereotypes that have been used to construct a false image of the Roma past. In doing so, Le Bas instead illuminates personal lived experiences that herself and members of her community have faced in social and political adversity. Le Bas holds a central place in the contemporary Romani art scene as a leading contributor to the field and as an advocate for historical reparation for the community she identifies with and represents in her work.

Le Bas received her formal training at the West Sussex College of Art and Design and St. Martin's School of Art. Her early artistic language revolved around fashion and assemblage that reflected her upbringing as a member of the British Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) community.⁴ Over time, Le Bas has articulated that her art is conceptual and a meeting point for “outsider, folk, and contemporary” styles.⁵ The artist moves across mediums, tackling large scale installations, extensively detailed textile works, live and recorded performances, and found object assemblage. Her multimedia practice reflects the conceptual and craft approach she defines her work by. The wide range of materials and processes showcases the diversity of her artistic practice both individually and within the umbrella of contemporary Roma art.

Le Bas has been an active player in a larger collective of contemporary Romani artists, often in collaboration with her late husband Damian Le Bas (1963–2017). In the last two decades, Le Bas has exhibited and assisted in directing large-scale projects that showcased Roma

⁴ Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) is a classification that is often used in English speaking European states, like the United Kingdom and Ireland. GRT is used as an identifier due to the unique distinction between Roma and Traveller identities. While the Romani identifier is primarily associated with ethnic communities in Central and Eastern European nations, the identifier of Traveller or Gypsy is much more distinctly anglo-European. However, the identity and stereotyping of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities have been historically grouped together due to their shared history of migration.

⁵ Timea Junghaus and Katalin Székely, eds., *Paradise Lost: The First Roma Pavillion* (New York: Open Society Institute, 2007), 100–01.

artistic production, such as *Meet Your Neighbours: Contemporary Roma Art from Europe* (2006) and *Paradise Lost: The First Roma Pavilion* at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007).

Outside of larger group exhibitions, Le Bas has mounted solo exhibitions, including recent projects with London's Whitechapel Gallery (2022) and the Vienna Secession (2022).⁶ Exhibiting both within her home country of the United Kingdom and internationally has allowed the artist to expose audiences to the imperative work she does for Roma representation within the visual arts.

As a category of art historical focus, Roma art remains a nascent and growing area of study. A drive to articulate the contours and place of Roma art initially emerged in 1968 with the examination of Romani Hungarian painter, Janos Balazs.⁷ Through Balazs, scholars acknowledged the efforts of Roma individuals in pursuing modes of self-representation that challenged the stereotypical image of the "bohemian" or "gypsy" caricature.⁸

⁶ Le Bas's exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, *The House of Le Bas*, positioned work by herself and her husband alongside personal archival material. The retrospective centered the artists' experiences as Romani artists in England, providing a glimpse into their shared lives as a family of creative minds. The artist's exhibition at the Vienna Secession, *Incipit Vita Nova. Here Begins The New Life/A New Life Is Beginning* took a much more conceptual approach. Combining textile installation, sculptural work, and performance elements, the artist responds to the emotions she experienced in losing her grandmother. Using figurative and imagined scenes, she thinks of the ways in which life is associated with grief, love, and temporality. Le Bas was recently shortlisted as a finalist for the 2024 Turner Prize for her exhibition in Vienna.

⁷ Timea Junghaus, "Roma art: Theory and practice," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica: An International Journal of Ethnography* 59, no. 1 (2014): 2.

⁸ Within this analysis of Romani representation, terminology and linguistics play an important role in discussing identity (as will be highlighted later within the essay). Words like "gypsy," and "Zigeuner," have discriminatory associations with the Roma identity. However, artists and people within the community may use these words in forms of reclamation and self-identification. My use of language will refer to the diasporic community as Roma or Romani, and where other nomenclature is used will be solely in reference to the artist's own language.

It was not until 1979 that an exhibition was created to highlight Roma artists within Europe. Organized by Hungarian activist Agnes Daróczy, the *First National Exhibition of Self-Taught Roma Artists* was instrumental in gathering activists and artists across Hungary and Eastern Europe to discuss matters pertinent to Roma identity in the arts.⁹ This exhibition paved the way for future Romani artists and activists to center discussion of Roma identity through self-representation while combatting the canonical stereotyping of the community.

Past studies of Roma art and Le Bas have focused on the artist's own self-articulation of the Roma community through her representation of identity and social location. The 2020 book *The Roma and Their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe*, edited by Huub van Baar and Angéla Kóczé, and the 2013 volume *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* by Daniel Baker and Maria Hlavajova are two major studies in which Roma visual arts have been discussed at length. Both volumes highlight the art and activist work by Le Bas and present her work as a beacon of self-representation.

Within the discussion of Le Bas's artistic practice, the focus of analysis has revolved around the ways the artist appropriates stereotypes, uses irony, and explores political/social identity. Annabel Tremlett and Delaine Le Bas authored "A Gypsy Revolution: The Ongoing Legacy of Delaine and Damian Le Bas," a text that incorporates an overview of both Delaine and Damian Le Bas's career as well as a critical analysis of the state of Roma art. Tremlett charts key milestones in the artists' upbringing and career that led to their recognized leadership in the field of Roma art. Tremlett argues that both artists engage Roma identity and call for progressive

⁹ Agnes Daróczy, "The Birth of Roma Visual Arts-Hungary, 1979," in *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds. D. Baker and M. Hlavajova (Utrecht: BAK/Valiz, 2013), 140–51.

social inclusion within a social, political, humanistic, and artistic context.¹⁰ “They provide a deep critique of the social rhetoric of trans/national policies, and produce alternative ways of imagining the Roma as already a part of Europe,” Tremlett explains, “Inclusion is often seen in narrow, formulaic terms about the integration of a group from an (imagined) periphery who are encouraged/cajoled into an (imagined) mainstream.”¹¹ Instead of assimilation, Tremlett tracks how the Le Bas’s champion Roma inclusion by framing the Roma people not as political outsiders who must simply be brought into a “mainstream,” but as people who proceed from the powerful social and historical narrative of struggle that other marginalized and underrepresented groups have found their self-definition within. Tremlett extrapolates this current of solidarity in the politically circulated stereotypes and pejorative labels that Le Bas reappropriates in her work.

Huub Van Baar in *We Roma: A Critical Reader* examines how the Le Bas’s critique of absurdly intolerant Roma-sentiments has intervened in Europe’s social climate. Specifically, Van Baar examines *Safe European Home?* (2011), a joint installation by Damian and Delaine Le Bas. It was erected in Vienna and scrutinized the idea that Europe is a borderless continent which allows free movement across countries (Figure 1a-1b). On the structure’s plywood façade, graffiti text warned viewers to not enter, “Keep Out!” Viewers moved from seeing these bold deterrents to encountering lists of desires from Roma and Sinti communities pasted on the walls inside. Personal belongings such as clothes, trinkets, children's toys, and photographs were strewn across the interior of the installation. According to Van Baar, many of these found objects appeared defaced or altered to depict the violence that has seeped into the homes of Roma

¹⁰ Annabel Tremlett and Delaine Le Bas, “A Gypsy Revolution: The Ongoing Legacy of Delaine and Damian Le Bas,” in *The Roma and Their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe*, eds. H. Van Baar and A. Kóczé, 1st ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 320–22.

¹¹ Tremlett and Le Bas. “A Gypsy Revolution,” 322.

families as a result of ongoing housing and settlement discrimination.¹² Van Baar's interpretation of Le Bas's work delineates the ways in which the artist instills feelings of discomfort with the incomplete status of Roma rights into viewer's perspectives. He concludes by explaining how Le Bas's work aims for Roma equity, stating:

Revealing the abnormality and unacceptability of what has been generally normalized and accepted in Europe—Romaphobia, anti-Gypsism, and extreme poverty—is a prerequisite for humanizing the dehumanized, putting an end to inhuman living conditions, and affectively rearticulating citizenship for and by Roma.¹³

As these key studies help show, the discourse surrounding Delaine Le Bas is often tied to political activism for greater Roma rights and the broad representation of Roma identity. This past research prioritizes the relation between Le Bas's work and the ethnic group as a whole, framing and emphasizing her art at the level and concerns of the community. What this frame, perhaps, has been unable to attend to is the force of personal history and individual experience also at stake in Le Bas's art and her engagement with Roma representation and historicization.

Le Bas's 2005 work, *We Have A History*, serves as the basis for my analysis of the artist's intervention in how to tell a Roma history. Consisting of eight stitched collage panels, *We Have A History* is an intimate exploration into the lives of Le Bas's British Romani family. The work itself functions like a small-scale archive, documenting conversations the artist once shared with her grandmother and great uncle about life as a Romani family in the United Kingdom. Laid against colorful printed, hand painted, and quilted fabrics, the work holds family images,

¹² Huub Van Baar, "Homecoming at Witching Hour: The Securitization of European Roma and the Reclaiming of their Citizenship," in *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds. D. Baker and M. Hlavaiova (Utrecht: BAK, 2013), 69.

¹³ Van Baar, "Homecoming at Witching Hour," 72.

heirlooms, and text that documents information the artist gathered from oral histories passed through her family.¹⁴

We Have A History was commissioned for an exhibition titled *The Living Album Project-Hampshire's Gypsy Heritage*, organized by the Hampshire County Council for the Arts in 2006. Installed across multiple venues in Hampshire, *The Living Album* aimed to celebrate the southern English county's rich ties to Romani communities. Along with exhibiting artworks made by local Romani artists, the project especially intended to expand the local Romani community's access to archives and museums. The project sought to provide Romani families and community members with a better understanding of their place within Hampshire's history by engaging the region's historical repositories.

Towards a reading of Le Bas's *We Have A History*, my thesis interprets how the artist utilizes textiles, text, family portraits, and stereotypical representations to redress anti-Roma prejudices. Le Bas critiques the distortion of Roma identity and historicization by challenging the misconception that the Roma exist as a people without a history. I examine how Le Bas tells a Roma history from the place and scale of an individual family while simultaneously invoking a broader situation of the British Romani identity. In so doing, *We Have A History* constructs a counter-model of memory, distinct from the larger historic repositories that do not justly represent the lived experiences of the Roma people. I will argue that Le Bas's textile-based strategies, especially its inclusion of written text and personal photography, rejects the rigid structures of the conventional archive. Unlike the institutions that have failed to depict the Roma

¹⁴ "Artist's statement," Hampshire County Council. This statement is from the artwork's documentation and object file from the Hampshire County Cultural Trust who owns the work. I am grateful to Ben Murrey and the Hampshire Cultural Trust for making these documents available and allowing me to examine the work in storage.

beyond stereotype, Le Bas's work reappropriates those very stereotypes and fashions an alternative repository for not just her own family's representation but also for the Roma, more broadly.

The Living Album Project Exhibition and Overview of *We Have A History*

In 2005 the Hampshire County Council devised a multidisciplinary project which aimed to celebrate and uplift the southern English county's rich population of Romani families. *The Living Album Project* was realized in schools, libraries, and government council buildings.¹⁵ Thus embedded in sites where Hampshire community members might encounter one another, the *Living Album Project* also served as a tool for Hampshire's predominantly English majority to learn more about their Roma neighbors.

Archives and their historical contents held a prominent place in *The Living Album Project*. For instance, a travelling exhibition featuring items and ephemera from museums and archives were included in *The Living Album Project's* educational offerings. While documentation is limited, available records indicate that the archive was central in providing material to activate the project's mission. Romani families were invited to engage with the materials in the project's exhibition and encouraged to visit museums and archives in order to research family history.¹⁶

With these archival- and historically- based inflected strategies, the project especially worked towards educating the county's children about Roma heritage. For example, a short

¹⁵ "Gypsy Culture Project in Schools," *BBC News*, August 16, 2005,

¹⁶ Stewart Payne, "Lottery Will Fund School DVD on Gipsies," *The Telegraph*, August 17, 2005.

video was disseminated in schools, particularly in institutions where there was high enrollment of GRT children. Organizers sought to cultivate better understanding of the Roma “lifestyle.”¹⁷ Further, public libraries were supplied with “storybaskets,” containing a children’s book and accompanying cassette tape, as well as objects related to the book’s story of the Roma. The library showcased these baskets within a “Reading Wagon” which was designed to mimic the exterior of a Roma caravan.¹⁸

The educational mission of this project appears to have had sincere intentions to promote social inclusion for Roma communities in Hampshire. At the same time, the labelling of Roma culture as a “lifestyle” and the use of stereotyped objects such as the caravan arguably reproduced outdated notions of the Roma as a community out of time and place, from an imagined site of fantasy and bohemian wonder. The project’s proliferation of stereotypes, without substantive interrogation, reveals the limits of the *Living Album*’s goals and driving message.

Despite these issues, available historical evidence suggests that the project’s organizers consulted local Roma communities in adopting the curriculum and missions of the project. The consulting team for the project included, for instance, “Representatives from Gypsy communities in the north of Hampshire and in the New Forest; staff from Hampshire Record Office and the county Council’s Library and Information Services; St. Barbe Museum; the Travellers Education Service; HART Voluntary Action Traveller Project; the Romany and Traveller Family History

¹⁷ “Gypsy Culture Project in Schools,” *BBC News*.

¹⁸ Carolynn Rankin and Avril Brook, *Delivering the Best Start: A Guide to Early Years Libraries* (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 99.

Society and Viewpoint Productions.”¹⁹ The Roma community was also invited to contribute to a website dedicated to sharing family histories under *The Living Album Project* title. To the extent I am aware, there is no available website on view today. The Hampshire County Council government websites for their schools, libraries, art collections, and archives do not have documentation of the project, other than a copy of the DVD that was distributed to schools. It appears the *Living Album Project* did not maintain an archive of the events and programming that celebrated Roma heritage beyond the short campaign hosted in 2006.

Contemporary art also animated the programming and goals for the *Living Album Project*. Instead of relying solely on historical items, the Hampshire County Council invited Roma artists with ties to the region to create works that would serve as complementary materials to the exhibition’s larger offerings.²⁰ Le Bas, whose family had lived and worked in Hampshire, was commissioned for the project. What came of this invitation was *We Have A History*.

Eight panels of stitched collage fabric set behind glass frames makeup *We Have A History*. When installed, they are arranged to form a two-dimensional structure that mimics the arch of an entryway (Figure 3). The composition of each panel varies greatly but share many of the same visual elements to create cohesion between the individual components of the whole. While some panels are busy with glittering applique, roughly stitched paragraphs of text, and black and white photos, other panels only contain strands of text that have been embedded into dyed fabrics. The formation of the panels is organized not only by dimensions of the framed textiles, but also by the content found within the panels. This structure generates a form of

¹⁹ “Tackling Social Inclusion in Libraries, Museums, Archives, and Galleries,” *The Network Newsletter*, no. 49 (October 2005): 6–7.

²⁰ Provenance sheet and artist statement from Delaine Le Bas, 2006, Hampshire Cultural trust.

categorization which assists the viewer in retrieving information from the visually complex work.

We Have A History tells snippets of Le Bas's family history and arranges them through written text, photographs, drawings, applique, and textiles. These stories from the family's past were based on conversations that the artist recorded with her grandmother and great uncles nearly ten years prior to the work's creation. This stitched collage narrates the artist's family's oral history while incorporating modern visual aids that elicit comparisons between past and present experiences of the Roma in Hampshire.

Viewed separately, the panels might evoke the singular entries into a journal or a scrapbook of events. When viewed as a whole, *We Have A History* creates an archive of events, memories, locations, and emotions that Le Bas's family experienced in Hampshire. The viewer is tasked to closely inspect the intricate panels, searching for context within the scrawling text to draw out connections between the embroidered stories and the familial photographs or imagined scenes created through applique collage.

The central panel of the work (Figure 2f) speaks to the heart of the project, tying together the colorfully adorned cloth, shimmery beadwork, and faded portraits with the spoken declaration:

We are Not Just Subject Matter

We Have a History

We're Still Here.

While Le Bas's *We Have A History* was commissioned through *The Living Album Project*, the artist provided an altogether different means of intervention into British Romani history.

Whereas *The Living Album Project* presented a way for Roma community members to explore their general history through archival material, Le Bas's work mobilized her personal family

history to articulate a critical commentary on the presentation of Roma history. *We Have A History* asserted that the archive is not the end-all be-all site for historical reflection. Rather, the series demonstrated how Romani history can be recorded by means of a familial past, constructed through textiles, stitched oral histories, and family photos. *We Have A History* provides viewers an example of how Roma family history and tradition can be archived and documented while also challenging the circulated stereotypes that reimagine the Roma as a caricature of their own existence.

(Text)iles: Writing History through Fabric and Text

Fabric and the stitching of texts and photos are central strategies in *We Have A History*. Colorful prints and dyed fabrics that resemble watercolor paints serve as the material support on which Le Bas collages text, applique, and photographs. The fabrics have a homely appearance to them, as if Le Bas compiled scraps from past textile projects of hers in an effort to piece together a foundation for the history she builds. The text stitched into the cloth is scrawled across the panels in a quick manner, placing importance more with the content of the language than with the appearance of the hand. The artist has materially translated oral histories into written historical accounts, relying upon textile to turn ephemeral stories into a lasting visual documentation of the past.

In several places, the artist combines multiple textile elements to create an engaging portrait of her family. For example, in one of the top frames, scraps of faded blue- and cream-colored fabrics layer over one another filling the background of captioned photographs and stitched imagery (Figure 2a). Frayed edges of cyan cotton peak out from under a cropped family portrait, emphasizing the monochromatic figures within the photograph. Serving as the center of

this panel, the endearing photograph of a family in their “Sunday best” was affixed to the collage using a blue thread that nearly blends in with the base textile. Without the photograph’s original background, the subtle fabric base focuses our attention on the joyous expressions of the family. As if the photograph emerges from the fabric below it, the artist situates the textiles as a base for illuminating the history she presents.

If in this instance photographs are placed against fabric background, in other instances photographs are transformed into textile elements themselves. Within the same airy blue panel, a smaller family portrait is stitched into place just above the central image of Le Bas’s family. Unlike the larger cropped photo, Le Bas has printed the small sitting portrait on a scrap of textile that repeats throughout the various panels. The photos transferred onto the scrap fabric are more formally arranged, reminiscent of annual holiday cards that would be distributed to family and friends (Figures 2a-2c). Dainty orange and green florals are deposited over the faces and bodies of figures, altering the conventional appearance of the commissioned family portrait. In so doing, Le Bas fuses her family to the textiles. The photographs no longer stand as a collage element that is added to a textile base, but rather exist as integrated components of the quilted narrative. The artist’s varied strategies proposes that fabrics themselves hold as much history as the photographs that have been stitched or printed atop them.

Throughout the work, Le Bas frequently names the figures who appear in the artwork. Often positioned adjacent to photographs, the identities of the sitters are named in a dark grey thread. The artist uses her own vernacular for family members with names like “Nan,” “Pachie,” “Cissy,” “Great Granny,” “Mum,” and “Dad.” Instead of providing a formal or factual label of the figures to viewers, the artist prioritizes the language of a family to label the people important to her history. The artist offers an individualized and almost private glimpse into the history of her family through the endearments that are attached to the pictured figures. The particular use of

naming throughout the series allows viewers to relate and empathize with the picture of a family the work presents.

Historically, the use of textiles and text within art have both proved powerful vehicles not only for sustaining memory but also challenging canonical expectations of the arts. Textiles as an art form have sat in an uncertain middle ground between the high fine arts and lowbrow craft. The medium's association with craft practice is rooted in a deep-seated misogyny that dictates the needle and fabric as a woman's tool, and an elitism that associates textile production with utilitarian and not artistic value. More recently, art historians such as Julia Bryan-Wilson have upended these aesthetic prejudices and illustrated how textiles serve a critical social and political function.

In her book *Fray: Art and Textile*, Bryan-Wilson analyzes both “artist” and “amateur” textile creation in order to challenge the high-low binary that has marginalized the medium. Further, she explicates the imperative function that fabric arts have in communicating across class, culture, and political borders.²¹ Examining Chilean artists' contemporary renditions of the *arpillera*, for example, Bryan-Wilson shows how the supposedly rudimentary art forms communicate messages strongly with a culturally and socially familiar form. *Arpillera*, translated to burlap from Spanish, were pieces of fabric that were constructed by Chilean women and sewn into sackcloth backings. Contemporary Chilean artists in 2013, returned to this style of artistic practice from the 1960's and 1970's in order to convey political messages that were culturally coded and valued (Figure 4). By returning to traditional textile practices Bryan-Wilson argues that lowly or handmade objects gain value and visibility “by virtue of being patterned on recognizable principles of construction, yet at the same time [are] prized for their “one off”

²¹ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 30.

nature...”²² In other words, if the *arpillera* was once considered a lowly craft, the appropriation of its form was utilized in order to create a work that challenged artistic value and pursued political messaging.

We Have A History similarly prizes a popular medium of quilt making in a contemporary usage. With the familiar form of a quilted surface, the artist alters the context of the work to protest ideologies of hierarchy attached to artistic medium and historical documentation. The structure’s multiple panels and collage strategy mimics a medium of storytelling and documentation that many of us are familiar with: the scrapbook. Colorfully patterned screen-printed fabrics serve as the anchor for personal photos which have been labeled with descriptive embroidered text. Floral applique, sequins, and strands of ribbon have been added to the panels to provide a decorative framing of the stories and people that Le Bas features in her record of British Romani history. Conventionally-speaking, the scrapbook and quilt both function as heirlooms, passed down through generations as documents of temporality and familial past. The homemade and craftlike approach to constructing this series strikes familiarity with viewers as we can relate to the act of gathering our most precious memories into a keepsake format like the scrapbook.

Altogether, then, the elements of textile and text found within *We Have A History* are not meant to create a formal or official presentation of history. The somewhat messy handwriting used to label family members by their nicknames or the rapid blue stitches that lay down the family portraits present the past in a way that is not sanitized but rather relatable and personable. Some may view this presentation of the Roma past as a rudimentary form of textile production. However, I argue that the construction of *We Have A History* writes a self-represented Roma

²² Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, 144.

history in a manner that reveals the artist's intention of responding to institutional archives that negate Roma lived experiences.

The scrapbook and textile arts alike may be viewed as a lowly craft, compiling scraps of readymade fabric, glistening beads and sequins, and quickly jotted descriptions to join family photographs in a storytelling manner. However, as a society we are able to note the value of creating and keeping these types of visual aids. *We Have A History* relies upon the recognizable structure of homemade history documentation as a means of showing that the Roma, like other ethnic and cultural groups, have a history that can be preserved through artistic means. Le Bas's series leverages the nostalgic and amateur quality of the scrapbook to present the Roma past as a subject worthy of artistic representation and historical review.

The deeper stakes of Le Bas's prioritization of a non-elite, vernacular telling of a Roma history is clear when you consider other uses of textile in contemporary Romani art. Consider, for example, the work of Polish Romani artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. For her exhibition at the 59th Venice Biennale, Mirga-Tas presented large-scale quilted panels. Each of these panels blends cameos of historic folklore with portraits of the women who pass down the history of their culture through interactions in their everyday life (Figure 5). Reimagined scenes recount the initial migration of Romani people and butt up against a still of matriarchal figures engaged in a game of cards, illustrating one of the many ways in which origin folklores are sustained through communal gathering. Like Le Bas, Mirga-Tas utilizes personal fabrics and mementos to incorporate her personal history into the larger collective memory of the Roma.²³

²³ Wojciech Szymanski and Robert Kusek, "Aby Warburg, Ali Smith, and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas in the Palazzo Schifanoia," in *Re-Enchanting the World*, eds. M. Mirga-Tas, W. Szymański, and J. Warsza (Warsaw: Zachęta, 2022), 61.

At the same time, Le Bas's own textile making contrasts with the organized and idealized image of Romani women that Mirga-Tas configures through cultural lore. Mirga-Tas incorporates personal objects such as fabric or beadwork into the quilted surface as embellishment to figurative iterations of clothing or jewelry. Her stitches blend seamlessly between fabrics, almost as if the quilted surface was painted onto rather than sewn together. Conversely, Le Bas's technique of textile creation may not be pristinely sewn together as to hide the hand of the artist, but that does not detract from the objects painterly and artistic qualities. The quick stitches attaching applique to corners of the panels, the edits to text seen where she crosses out words with stiches or adds in letters to fix misspellings, along with the scrawling font of the stitched text speaks to the artists disregard of claiming "high art" status. Ultimately, Le Bas's visual mode takes on an anti-institutional charge. *We Have A History* rejects idealization and completeness, in favor of the improvisational and processual process of remembering and telling one's history.

While Le Bas and Mirga-Tas arguably diverge in the qualities of the textile medium, their stitching shares what curator Joanna Warsza has argued is a "reparative gesture." In her analysis of Mirga-Tas' works, Warsza argues that the needle and stitching literally and symbolically repair damage that has been done to the representation of the Roma and their relationships with European society.²⁴ A similar mode of repair threads through *We Have A History*.

Le Bas's act of stitching an image of her family's past also seeks to repair or redress society's false and prejudiced vision of Romani culture and history. By physically attaching family photos to the fabric of the panels with a deep blue thread, the same thread that is used to quickly jot down her grandmother's stories, Le Bas fixes her personal history into a permanent

²⁴ Joanna Warsza, "The Stitches Remain Visible: On the Works of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas," in *Re-Enchanting the World*, eds. M. Mirga-Tas, W. Szymański, and J. Warsza (Warsaw: Zachęta, 2022), 90.

place within larger historical discussion. The visible threads allow viewers to associate the content of the stitched collage with the artist's conscious decision to position her historical narrative against the grain of the misconceptions that associate the Roma as people without a solidified history.

Remembering Family, Speaking a Roma History

If textile is the reparative medium with which Le Bas records and speaks Roma history, it is family that constitutes that Roma history. Whether depicted throughout *We Have A History* or conjured by the sewn and quilted textile panels themselves, Le Bas centers her own family and the kinds of history that can be told from the family unit. In other words, what Le Bas's work does not do is present the past as a sweep of great events in British Roma history. By illuminating details of her family's everyday life as the basis for *We Have A History*, the artist asserts the importance of remembering family as a significant form of writing and reciting a Roma past. Relying upon the historic values of text and textile alongside photographic documentation, the artist vocalizes a familial centered Roma history.

How Le Bas speaks her Roma history takes many forms. One of the primary positions the artist speaks from in her work is from the first-person singular position. This point of view is represented clearly when the artist writes, "Dad to get me 2 spotty dresses, a blue one with white spots and a blue one with red and white spots," or, "Nan with Pachie, Mum, Dad, and Me at Wickham Fair." (Figure 2d, and 2a). In both instances, the artist's use of "me" asserts the importance of speaking from her own positionality. "Me" also constitutes her identity in relation to others, whether her father who gives or as she is in communion with the family's collective.

Speaking from the first-person point of view over and over, Le Bas makes her own position an entry point into the history of her family.

At the same time, *We Have A History*, also speaks from a collective point of view. Consider the title of the work. Beginning with the first-person plural, “We,” Le Bas brings into speech not just her, but her family, and arguably a broader Roma community. “We Have A History.” Here, Le Bas’s “We” expansively entails her family but also alludes to the greater Romani community. As she has used the first-person singular in past examples, we as viewers understand that history is being told through her own familial perspective. However, the present tense use of “*have*” with the collective “*we*,” suggests that Le Bas is moving out of the past into the present moment. Moving our perspective as viewers into the time of the now, the artist’s utterance can include figures from outside of her family that also embody a broader Roma past. This can be further supported when the artist states in the same breath, “We’re Still Here.” This statement indicates for the viewer that Le Bas’s family are not the only subjects at stake in the work. Rather, this creates an implication which asserts that there are people in the present, not from a time past who are affected by the process of telling and remembering a Romani history. By invoking the first-person plural “We,” Le Bas joins her family’s individual memories with a wider Romani collective.

This mixing of first-person singular and plural positions connects her single Roma family’s past to a broader history of British Roma communities. The artist’s depiction of the family could also call forth other Romani families. When Le Bas adopts the identity of her family in recounting events or memories, she often includes statements that involve Romani people outside of her familial circle. For example, the artist relays her family’s experience of summer work travels stating, “There use to be a six week sheep and pleasure fair and that’s where all travellers and ...would meet for horse dealing, chopping wagons and carts and then

you'd move from there, you wouldn't stop there for the whole six weeks" (Figure 2h). Here, the artist remembers her family past within a larger migration of British Romani. When she calls forth an event where many travelers gathered, Le Bas speaks of a history that is not generalized by Roma stereotypes, but instead is filled with the personal memories of a larger historical narrative that is distinctly Roma.

The ways in which Le Bas conveys her family's history in textile and through text speaks to a broader theory of the textile as a container for insurgent cultural memory. Theorist Carole Hunt discusses how the medium can serve as an archival object that carries both public and personal sentiment. In conversation with Mieke Bal's idea of "cultural memory," Hunt refers in particular to the ways textiles actualize cultural memory through their frame of exhibition and the assertion of untold histories in contemporary times. Hunt writes:

One purpose of this type of work is to intervene in the public sphere and offer, if only temporarily, the possibility of representing a community's history, where there is sometimes an absence of history.²⁵

Hunt's argument of textiles as a container of cultural memory clarifies how *We Have A History* provides on one hand a testimony to the artist's personal past and, on the other, a larger history of British Romani heritage. By presenting the series in sites of viewing where there is a large presence of Roma communities and centering the context of the work within a larger archival and historical project, *We Have A History* insists an attention to an otherwise overlooked cultural past. Including details of her family's travels through England alongside portraits of Roma families in their everyday life, Le Bas also presents a personal account of history that can be relatable to the cultural community it is exhibited in.

²⁵ Carole Hunt, "Worn Clothes and Textiles as Archives of Memory," *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 5, no. 2 (December 1, 2014): 213.

This gesture of intervention into a public sphere through familiar forms is apparent as well in the ways *We Have A History* invites viewers to consider their own personal histories. The scrapbook nature of the series features aspects of Romani identity but is also a relatable representation of the past for viewers to engage with, regardless of ethnic identity. Faded portraits of family members are framed by strips of fabric that the artist has roughly stitched passages from her family's verbal account of their past. In the central panel, the artist highlights a photograph of a woman dressed in a warm coat, gloves, and a wintery hat, who supports a child on her hip. Staring directly at the camera, the woman smiles as the child holds onto the lapel of her jacket. Surrounding this intimate photo the artist has stitched in a memory of the travels the family would make to sell their crafted goods around England. Just below this scene, Le Bas has positioned a group portrait where men and women dressed in fine overcoats and sweaters recede behind a flowering hedged garden. Overlapping the portrait, the artist inserts floral applique into the scene as if the glittering beadwork and mechanically produced embroidered trinkets were coming out of the photograph. To the right of the floral collage, the artist has included the quote, "Take the Home Sweet Home," playing with the common phrase that is pasted on entryway doormats and home décor (Figure 2f). While the text is specific to her Romani family's experience, the artist's collaged presentation of photographs, applique, and commonly used quotes allows viewers to connect more intimately to the idea of family in general. Regardless of identity, viewers can relate to the content presented and the manner in which it speaks of a fond familial past. Ultimately, the work's weaving of the individual and collective, specific and general implores viewers to engage with aspects of Roma history that are so often overlooked.

The tone with which *We Have A History* speaks is also significant. As Le Bas speaks with an individual or collective voice, she uses a didactic spoken tone. Instead of using flowering

phrases to recount events, locations, or people within her family's history, she relies upon a simple diction to relay information. Revisiting the central panel, the artist says,

Everybody had a particular area. We used to travel from Alton to Winchester, Loxwood, Fareham, Portsmouth, back and around through Easterleigh, travelling around Winchester down to Andover back to Newbury, Basingstoke, and back to Alton again.

Since Le Bas transcribes spoken word, the tone of the text is conversational, as if she is including us as viewers in her own familial history.

The messaging in *We Have A History* relies upon a system of interpretation that is not only linguistic but also tactile. When transcribing her ancestor's accounts of movement through England, the artist primarily uses a deep blue thread but switches to a crimson embroidery when listing locations of importance within these oral histories (Figures 2g–h). This method of stitching creates patterns of association for viewers to follow throughout the panels. Further, the repeated gestures create a system of organizing data much like an archive would categorize different objects within a collection.

The bottom two panels illustrate how the stories passed on by oral history serve as a foundation for preserving Romani history. Here, the text outlines the locations the artist's family would travel for fairs, the reasons they would travel there, and when they would be there. Within this descriptive text that details the Roma community and their movement, the artist adds distinctive memories or associations to these locations.

We use to all meet at the fairs when we'd finished hop picking...First we'd go to Stow, then May was Wickham fair, you'd meet all your family. Then some would go away fruit picking, Swanick, Southampton, around there (Figure 2g).

The artist here includes a factual account of her family's movement and involvement in trade. However, she personalizes the text by including aspects of her family history that are unique to their specific past. Such as when she writes, "Sometimes we'd go fruit picking, most times we'd

go back to Mitcheldean where me mum and dad were married and we'd work on the farm all summer." The artist interweaves a history of movement through the town of Mitcheldean with the memory of her relative's marriage in that city, thus framing a historical account through an ancestral narrative.

These foundational text only panels also reminds us that the driving motivation underlying the work, remembering history, is only possible through the spoken histories that were passed down to the artist. Without the spoken past being shared to the artist and valued as such, we would not have access to the beautiful and overlooked familial past that Le Bas makes into *We Have A History*. The history in which Le Bas speaks is one that is rooted in her own familial past. Yet, it reaches beyond the boundary of her own ancestors, inviting the perspective of a broader Roma community while also calling upon viewers of non-Roma descent to engage with the idea of history building through the family unit. Her use of text, textile, and family photography paints an intimate image of the Romani past while displaying information which situates her family's place in a larger British history.

Stereotype and Roma Self-Representation

Representations of the Roma in the visual arts have historically been dominated by stereotyped images, such as the Fortune Teller, the Beggar, the Temptress, the Criminal, the Outcast. Depicted in paintings and wider public media through caricatured imaging, the "face" of Roma identity has been plagued by the sustained stereotyping and stigmatization of their

culture.²⁶ *We Have A History* challenges this pattern of representation by providing viewers with a radically normalized self-representation through the family portrait. Le Bas targets the absurdity of the ambivalent nature of stereotyping that Roma endure by privileging the visual reality of her own family.

An equivocality between delight and derision marks the Roma and their stereotyped representation. Political theorist Timofey Agarin has described this ambivalent nature of Romani stereotyping, he writes:

While Roma are increasingly seen as a European cultural community *sui generis*, their presence is hardly treated as an asset worthy of acknowledgement or celebration. Rather, it continues to be an object for majorities' occasional, often romantic, delight, but in the main for derision, scorn and hatred.²⁷

Le Bas chooses to engage Roma representation through the very ambivalence of longstanding visual stereotypes as well as in the tone with which she speaks directly to the viewer.

When the work speaks in the second person position, “you,” the artist directly involves the viewer and their social location. “We’re where *you* won’t expect us.” Here, the artist creates a distinction between Roma and non-Roma viewers. The “you” in this case shows that people outside of the Romani community do not expect to see their Roma neighbors outside of stereotyped settings. Further, when Le Bas says, “My mother said *you* should ~~never~~ always play with gypsies in the woods,” the artist speaks a general sentiment, yet puts forward an intentional take on the ambivalent treatment of the Roma. The original sentence, “you should never play with gypsies in the wood,” sustains the fearful and prejudiced outlook that non-Roma people project onto the Romani. Le Bas’s editing of the phrase, negates this fear in favor of a sarcastic

²⁶ Anca Pusca, “Representing Romani Gypsies and Travelers: Performing Identity from Early Photography to Reality Television,” *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 3 (2015): 329.

²⁷ Timofey Agarin, “Angels with Dirty Faces? European Identity, Politics of Representation and Recognition of Romani Interests.” *Ethnicities* 14, no. 6 (2014): 859.

redress of the stereotype that paints the Roma as dangerous. As the viewer reads through the text of *We Have A History*, they are consistently reminded of their own positionality in relation to Roma identity. The artist specifically speaks to how “you,” non-Roma subjects, are implicated in how the Roma are represented.

The meeting of first and second person, Roma and non-Roma, mirrors the visual structure of key moments where the artist plays with representations of her family and visual representations of Roma from broader culture. In a signal instance, for example, a family portrait is put into dialogue with fabric drawings of women in caravans. Le Bas appropriates the caravan image as a contested sign of Romani identity. When Le Bas places the sign of the woman in the caravan alongside intimate accounts of her own familial past, the artist interrogates the ways in which stereotypes have overpowered lived experience. These kinds of juxtapositions in *We Have A History* not only reveal the dark history of continued prejudice that the Roma have faced but also, with the insurgency of the artist’s own self-representation, the work points the viewer to question the misrepresentation. Le Bas affixes the image of a fictional Roma woman in the caravan to the same sheets of fabric that detail her family’s worries of being surveilled by non-Roma onlookers. The artist contrasts the lived experience of her family with the historically prominent misrepresentation that dominates society’s perception of the Romani past.

Indeed, like the intersection of “me” and “you,” Le Bas balances images of self-representation in critical contestation with stereotypical imagery. And in a structurally similar way to the challenge posed by the reader who must confront the prohibition, “you should never play with gypsies in the wood,” Le Bas’s collision of Roma representations challenges viewers to pit signifiers of a true, self-authored past (text and photograph) against a false and exoticized portrait of the Roma (the woman in the caravan).

The artist is interested in appropriating stereotypes as a form “mythbusting,” but also looks at this appropriation as a form of militancy that draws directly from Black artists of the 1960’s and 70’s.²⁸ In particular, Le Bas has named Betye Saar and her work *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) in her performance *Beware of Linguistic Engineering* (Figure 6). Le Bas states, “Betye Saar created the revenge of Aunt Jemima. A revenge, a bite back, or a reactivation or an intervention.” This discussion of Saar’s famed appropriation of Aunt Jemima as a form of “revenge, a bite back, reactivation, or intervention,” inspires Le Bas’s own handling of the historic stereotypes of the Roma. Le Bas approaches the appropriation and reclamation of damaging stereotypes as a form of weaponization or militancy that symbolically transforms the stereotype and the identities represented.

In addition to her engagements with stereotyped signs, Le Bas fashions invented self-representations which also seek to repair misconstrued images of the Roma. Take, for example, when Le Bas represents her family with illustrated fabric applique. In one fabric illustration of a cottage labelled as “Aunt Betsey’s Cottage opposite the White Hart Holybourne,” a stitched picture of a cottage is the backdrop for a drawing of a girl in a blue and white spotted dress. The text next to this young girl describes how the character’s father would trade at fairs to retrieve the spotted dress she wears in the scene. According to the artist, this illustration visualizes the image of her grandmother as a young girl.²⁹ Tying the blue spotted fabric with her grandmother, then, the artist places her grandmother’s presence in other panels as the strands of blue and white reappear across the work. The ribbon repeats for the stories and memories being shared—accounts of a true lived experience—in a circulation that mimics and also replaces stereotype. Le

²⁸ Tremlett and Le Bas, “*Gypsy Revolution*,” 320–21.

²⁹ Artist statement provided by Hampshire County Cultural Trust.

Bas's use of signs instead of photographs, here, raises another important implication of *We Have A History*. Even if the documentation of Roma history cannot meet the written and documentary based evidentiary schema underlying traditional archives, it does not mean that Roma history is an imagined or non-existent past.

A final strategy that is a part of the artist's repair of historical and stereotypical representations of the Roma is the privileging of the family photograph itself. Throughout *We Have A History*, Le Bas' various portraits of her family and herself amongst the textile collage entail a counter-representational practice of documentary photography. The longer documentary impulse of Roma representation has been a tool used to perpetuate stereotypes of the Roma and weaponized in political campaigns for genocide against the ethnic minority.³⁰ While Roma communities surely had access to personal photography, as seen in Le Bas's family archive, examples of modern photographic self-representation of the Roma beyond ethnic documentary or fictional narrative practices are sparse.

The portraits found within *We Have A History* defy the documentary driven photographic presence that encompasses Romani misrepresentation. The photographs serve the purpose of showing the Roma family in England in an everyday or normalized setting. The portraits do not visualize projected myths of race, ethnicity, class, or social community, but rather focus on the family as an important structure. By using these photographs as defining visuals of the Roma history that Le Bas collects and archives within the series, the image of the Roma is not one based in canonical visual stereotype but is embedded in the everyday lived experience.

³⁰ Scholar Eve Rosenhaft has compiled evidence to analyze the place of erotic ethnographic photographs of Sinti women, taken by German photographer Hans Weltzel, which were circulated as "scientific findings" to the Nazi Party's Race Hygiene Research Unit. In turn, Nazi officers would utilize these photographs as a gross justification for the mass killing of Sinti people. See Eve Rosenhaft, "Exchanging Glances: Ambivalence in Twentieth-Century Photographs of German Sinti," *Third Text* 22, no. 3 (May 2008): 311-24.

Tina Campt has recently theorized the importance of the family portrait and album in her study *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*. Campt underscores photography's ability to document ideas of cultural identity and social belonging. And her focus on family photography analyzes how images of Black diasporic subjects in Europe taken by and within family structures put critical pressure on stereotypical practices of imaging the Black subject. In turn, family photography, according to Campt became a resource for memory and diaspora's historical past.³¹ Campt's privileging of family photography offers important models for other marginalized racial and ethnic communities that are not represented within the traditional or institutional spaces of the archive.

Indeed, Le Bas's material of family photography agrees with the terms of Campt's theorization. *We Have A History* draws from family photography to oppose the idea that Roma history is nothing but fantastical lore. Moreover, by placing these archived family photos next to caricatures of the Roma household the artist has shown how the lived history and experience of her family cannot be reduced to stereotypical images. Le Bas's images of familial history and self-fashioned signs of her and her family combat stereotype by circulating across the work, and, perhaps, beyond, offering new self-representations.

Conclusion

As *We Have A History* suggests within its title and through the context of its creation for a larger historical and archival project, the focus of Romani history remains central to the

³¹ Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

messaging that the artwork presents. Documenting oral history through transcribed text and paired with family photography, this series acts as a counteragent to the traditional and institutional British archives which often exclude the lived experiences of GRT communities within England.

The Romani have continually been marked as an ethnic community that exists without a history. In her critique of Western narratives that labelled the Roma as “historyless,” Katie Trumpener argues that as the Roma are both feared and desired, their documented history or lack thereof has been painted as an idyllic and ignorantly blissful existence.³² The false assumption that the Roma exist outside the bounds of historical account is furthered when the issue of the archive and institutional repositories are examined in their handling and documenting of Romani history. As institutions that are based in systems of collecting and constructing the past, archives are a place where knowledge and power are exerted through the decisions of what and who is present within the constructed history of the archive.

Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot critically examines the ways in which archival practices exemplify the staged process of narrating history, and how these repositories do not feature the complete image of a history. Trouillot intervenes by suggesting that power imbalances create silences in the archive which alter the outcome of historical narratives. The author explains that these silences may have resulted as a lack of evidence or as an act of appropriation to shift narratives, but in all instances, silences reveal where and how power alters a historical story.³³

³² Katie Trumpener, “The Time of the Gypsies: A ‘People without History’ in the Narratives of the West.” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 853.

³³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 36.

While the presence of the Roma in British institutional archives is not completely silenced, the instances where Roma history is heard is based in either stereotype or trauma. Jodie Matthews is a scholar who has focused much of her work on the presence of the Roma in British Archives. In “Where Are the Romanies? An Absent Presence in Narratives,” Matthews argues that while the Roma are not entirely excluded from a broader historical narrative, their presence is not clearly evident. Matthews writes:

In most mainstream narratives of Britishness written this century, and at the end of the last one, however, Romani people are only there if you already know where to look (for example, as part of particular events or practices), hence my titular insistence on ‘absent presence’, as opposed to just ‘absence’. They are there, because they fought, worshipped, and worked alongside others; they traded and talked with non-Romanies every day. Their presence is not, though, made explicit.³⁴

Matthews suggests that the best way to approach archival research pertaining to Romani history is to not search for a clearly defined “Gypsy Archive” but instead look for traces of Romani heritage in all archival spaces. In other words, the purpose of the archival inquiry is to comprehend how Roma voices were eradicated from institutional spaces as a deliberate form of continuous cultural genocide.³⁵

In my own experience entering the London Metropolitan Archives with the purpose of consulting historical accounts of the Roma, I would agree with Matthews that while the Roma are present, the traces of their past are linked to hegemonic power displays of stereotyping. Amongst the vast majority of physical documents I examined, the collections were catalogued under, “Gypsy Encampment,” “Gypsy Caravan Dwellers,” or “Gypsy Problem.” Within these

³⁴ Jodie Matthews, “Where Are the Romanies? An Absent Presence in Narratives,” *Identity papers: A journal of British and Irish studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2015): 79.

³⁵ Matthews, “Where Are the Romanies?,” 85–86.

documents, there were court orders demanding the removal of the “van dwellers” from county public property, letters to councils about Romani “nuisance,” and newspaper clippings warning the community that “They are Back! Gypsies Camp on Vacant Site.”³⁶ The only space within the archive that represented the voices of the Roma was from digital documents produced by the Roma Support Group, a forum that publishes oral histories of Roma individuals.³⁷

Matthews, myself, and other scholars who have entered the traditional archive searching for voices of the Roma have been met with the sound of colonial figures speaking about and disparaging the Roma. The strongest places where Roma voices ring are in more informal and interventionist spaces where Roma communities have collected, presented, and preserved their own accounts of the past. In *Beware of Linguistic Engineering*, Le Bas calls efforts such as these a “forced institutionalized home archiving,” reminding us that while Roma-led historicization resists the archive's silences, they also compensate against a deeper inequity of historical representation.

In her work *We Have A History*, Le Bas intervened on the status and documenting of British Romani history. With textile’s mnemonic materiality and its relationship to voice and text, the work conveys the powerful message: Roma history is neither in a historical blindspot nor defined by stereotype and myths created to foster desire or fear. Le Bas proposes Romani history can be found in the stories passed down through generations and framed by family. Family photography, stitched oral histories, and illustrations of a self-represented past are scrapbooked together to champion a history that is centered around remembering family and

³⁶ Caravans Gypsies and Itinerant Caravan Dwellers with Minutes of a Conference Held at Middlesex Guildhall on the Gypsy Problem, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London MCC/PL/GEN/1/76, from the Middlesex County council collection.

³⁷ Roma Support Group, London Metropolitan Archives, City of London LMA/4761.

speaking a Romani past. As the work declares, “We’re Still Here,” Le Bas’s *We Have A History* excavates the past for Roma presents and futures yet told.

Figures



Figures 1a-1b. Damian and Delaine Le Bas, *Safe European Home?*, 2011.



Figure 2a. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.



Figure 2b. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.



Figure 2c. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.

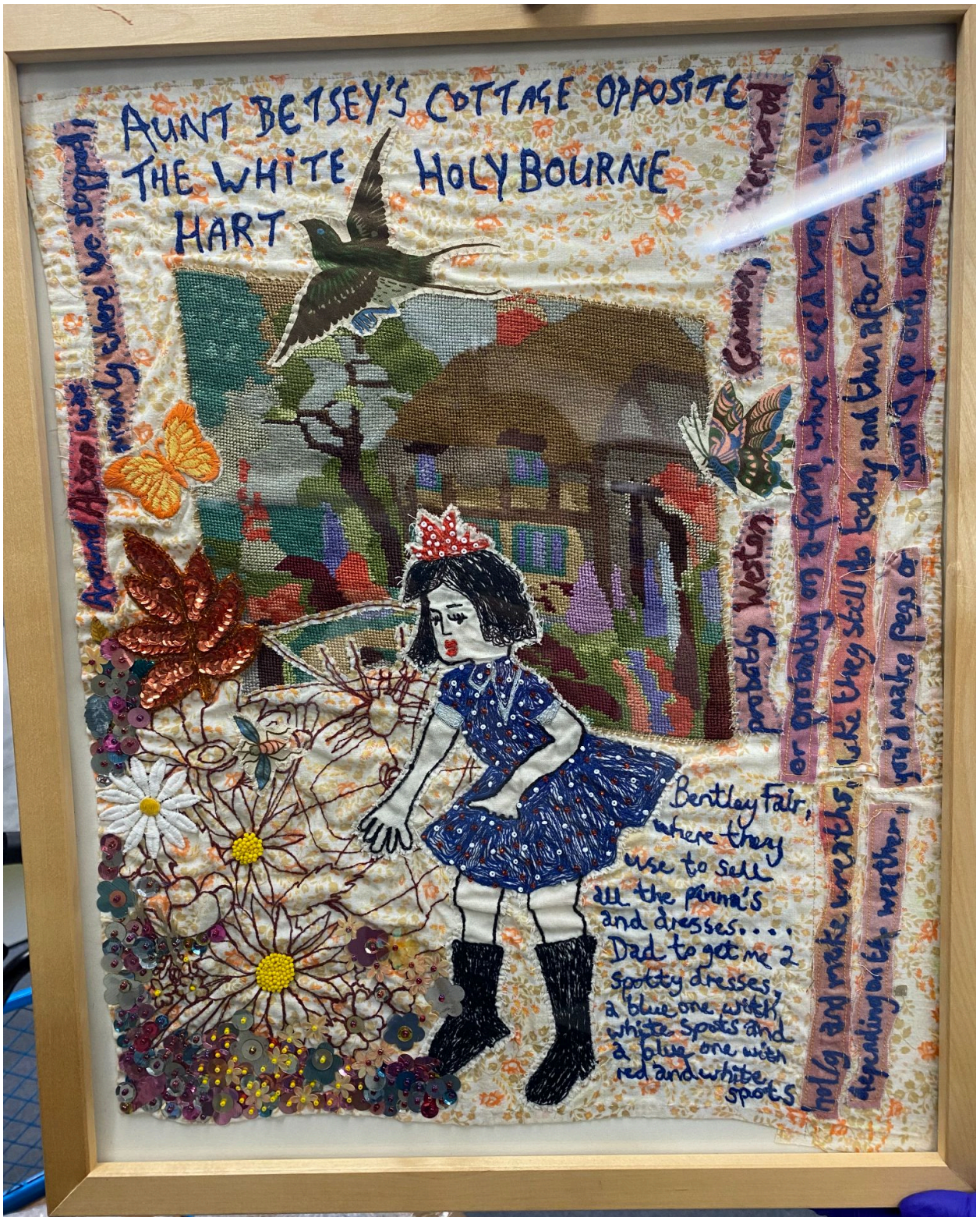


Figure 2d. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.



Figure 2e. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.



Figure 2f. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.

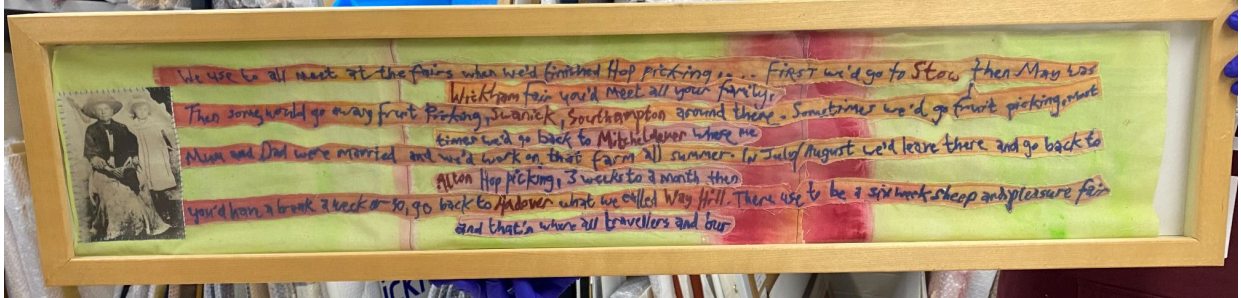


Figure 2g. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.

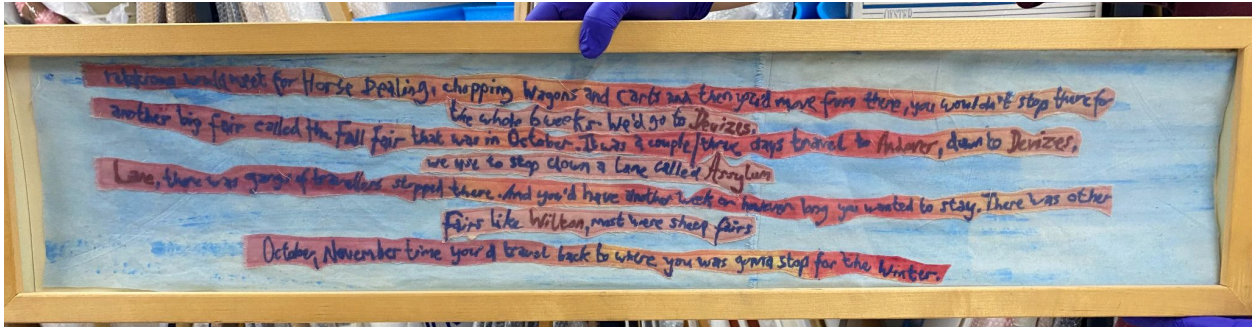


Figure 2h. Details of Delaine Le Bas, *We Have A History*, 2005. © Hampshire County Council.

Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, 2023. Photo taken by author.

Artist's layout for 'We Have A History'

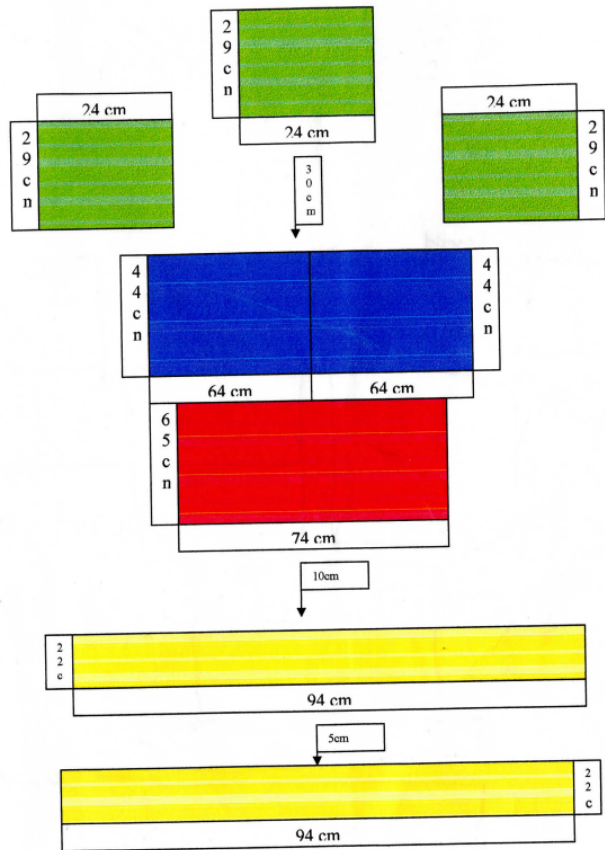


Figure 3. "Artist's layout for 'We Have A History'," © Hampshire County Council. Provided by the Hampshire Cultural Trust.



Figure 4. Irma Müller, *Donde están los detenidos desaparecidos*, 1980.



Figure 5. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *July, 2022, 2022*.



Figure 6. Betye Saar, *Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972.

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VITA

Personal Background

Allison Lee Rhiannon Shearer
Born in Dearborn, Michigan
Daughter of Angela Clark and Sean Shearer

Education

Diploma, Adlai E. Stevenson High School,
2018
Livonia, Michigan

Bachelor of Arts, Political Science and Art
History
Eastern Michigan University, 2022

Master of Arts, Art History
Texas Christian University, 2024

Professional Experience

Curatorial Assistant
The Art Galleries at TCU
January 2024 – Present

Curatorial Intern
Kimbell Art Museum
April 2023 – August 2023

Social Media Assistant
The Art Galleries at TCU
January 2023 – May 2023

Generalist Gallery Intern and Assistant
Eastern Michigan University Art Galleries
May 2021 – May 2022

Intermedia Gallery Group Director
Eastern Michigan University Art Galleries
December 2020 – May 2022

ABSTRACT

STITCHING A ROMA ARCHIVE: DELAINE LE BAS'S WE HAVE A HISTORY (2005)

by

Allison Lee Rhiannon Shearer

Bachelor of Arts, 2022
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

Jamin An, PhD Assistant Professor of Art History and Deedie Potter Rose Chair of
Contemporary Art History

British Romani artist Delaine Le Bas (b. 1965, United Kingdom) confronts anti-Roma prejudices and stereotypes in her multidisciplinary practice spanning assemblage to performance. This thesis focuses on the artist's 2005 work *We Have A History*, originally made for the Hampshire County Cultural Trust's exhibition *The Living Album Project- Hampshire's Gypsy Heritage*. I analyze the ways Le Bas utilizes textiles, text, family portraits, and contested visual representations of the Roma to challenge the false notion of the Roma as a people without a history. I argue that *We Have A History* constructs a counter-model of memory, distinct from the larger historic repositories that do not justly represent the lived experiences of the Roma people. This thesis examines how Le Bas tells a Roma history from the place and scale of her individual family and, in so doing, creates a renewed context for seeing and recognizing British Romani identity.