

Second Site¹

by *Thomas Acton*

This exhibition is an act of affirmation, not one of defence.

For some four centuries, Romani/Gypsy/Traveller communities lived in the aftermath of a social disaster. Although the details vary enormously from country to country, their image in Europe, and taken by Europeans to their colonies, has been one of problems. Consequently, any analysis of their situation by Europeans tended to be in the context of finding a solution, right up until Hitler tried the final solution – which failed as all the others had done. They failed, of course, because these communities had strategies of self-defence and survival, of accommodating to, rather than challenging, racism and ethnic cleansing. Some accepted slavery; others, more fortunate, became taxable collectives of traders; others, survivors of genocide, became marginal commercial nomads, especially in north-western Europe. Whatever public performance they put on, they had to play along with non-Gypsy stereotyped images that suggested they had somehow deserved the genocides and enslavements of the 16th century. Only after Hitler, only after the discrediting of racism, could the Roma challenge the self-serving silences of European historiography, and Romani nationalism emerge.

In a way, however, Romani nationalism was another kind of defensiveness. Built into its ideology is acceptance that nations are entities entitled to a selfish defence of their own interests – the very ideology that led to the Romani calamity in the first place, and seems to make prejudice against Gypsies/Travellers seem natural. Roma/Gypsies/Travellers who became educated were faced with a terrible dilemma. Either they could keep their ethnicity to themselves and “pass” to get on in life. Or they could become the new progressive miracle, the literate, educated Gypsy, the token ethnic minority member, the professional Traveller community worker helping the educational and planning agents of the state, who, however anti-racist they may be, are still trying to solve the Gypsy problem.

I do not mean to question either the goodwill or the courage or the necessity of the Romani movement. I have been involved in it myself since 1967, and we have made some progress. Visual art had a place in it. One of the heroines of the struggle, Ági Daróczi, used her position in the Hungarian Ministry of Culture under Communism to encourage dozens of Romani artists.² But their exhibitions were labelled naïve art. Progress came at a price. This marginal minority struggle made those in it, whether they are Roma/Gypsy/Travellers themselves, or non-Gypsy friends, become marginalised, obsessive and, in the older generation, even paranoid – in a word, defensive, still.

Daniel, Delaine and Damian belong to the first generation that has transcended this dilemma. They are not professional Gypsies; they are not Gypsy artists any more than David Essex is a Gypsy singer. They are definitely not naïve. They are artists who happen to be of Roma/Gypsy/Traveller origin. They are not part of any Gypsy problem. If you have a problem with their origins, that's your problem, not theirs.

This does not mean, of course, that they don't still have to face prejudice and misunderstanding. When The Sun tried to start an anti-Gypsy pogrom with its infamous "Stamp on the Camps!" headline, Delaine's own parents suffered vicious anti-Gypsy graffiti daubed on the fences of their (long-established, perfectly legal) site. But normal people will realise that it is not Delaine's parents, but The Sun's racism which is the problem.

"Ah, but!", exclaims the romantic ignoramus, the one who has read no serious Romani history but thinks he knows some hidden wisdom of the ages about racial purity, "are they really true Gypsies? You use this politically correct inclusive term 'Roma/Gypsies/Travellers' but what are they really? Are they Romanies or just Travellers?"

To deconstruct this question we have to look again at the disaster which befell the Roma about 200 years after they arrived in Europe. When the mixture of Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic feudal empires gave way to the fiercely nationalist states of the 16th century, the Roma found themselves, along with Jews and Africans, the victims of enslavement, ethnic cleansing and genocide. As capitalism replaced famine with unemployment, both migration and commercial nomadism became demonised as vagrancy. Within national boundaries, Romani traders often dominated commercial nomadic groups, even though the majority of Roma remained sedentary. A mosaic of groups was left behind when the tide of persecution receded a little, some still very Indian, some localised and acculturated, and some like Irish Travellers and Dutch Woonwagenbewoners starting their account of their own identity by asserting that whatever else they are, they are not Gypsies.

All of the groups, and all of the individuals in them or straddling their boundaries, are what they are, with their own history and culture, and no one does them any favours by asking whether they are really something else, whether the racial essence of Bohemia, or the wild deviant of non-Gypsy fears. Looking at those real histories and cultures means that we are no longer imprisoned by them, but can celebrate them as our starting point for the future.

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Each of these artists looks to the future. As I have laboured in the long, slow struggle of Romani Studies to replace the Gypsy problem, coming across their work has been like a glimpse of life beyond that grind, a holiday from the constant duty to explain. Their styles are utterly different, but each expresses vital components of what it means to be Romani in the 21st century. I dreamt of seeing their work together in one place.

Damian's extraordinary stream-of-consciousness concrete poems embodied in images evoked Gypsy history and everyday experience, and spoke to me so personally as someone trying to make sense of Romani history that sometimes I wondered if anyone else could understand them as I did. But when I spoke to other people, I realised they did. I learnt the salutary lesson that an artist can put together in one image what a professor strives to say in a hundred lectures, and still cannot quite encompass.

Delaine's work both embodies the assertive spirit of all the Roma/Gypsy/Traveller children's art I have ever seen, combined with the hard-won self-reliance of maturity. I once heard a Gypsy preacher in his sermon say "Before I was converted, I lived what I thought was an honourable life – I earned good money and liked nice things around me, good cups and saucers and pieces – well I still like nice things around me – God doesn't take those away from you...". Delaine's creations, the soft figures and images, incarnate the spirit of those nice things. They are not the statuettes and Crown Derby themselves, but they are a commentary, both ironic and loving, on the Gypsy determination to create an environment with style. And also a warning about the threats to that environment from intolerance and ignorance.

In contrast to the intertwined lushness of Delaine and Damian, some of Daniel's earlier abstract works examined questions of identity and difference through the vehicle of process painting, exploring boundary formation as a means of protection and segregation. The non-figuration of these earlier works was partly a response to the absence of the human figure in traditional Gypsy decoration with painted scrollwork and motifs in contrasting colours set apart by strong outlining. Daniel saw this use of strong outlining as an attempt to maintain a clear boundary definition between diverse elements while at the same time seeking compositional harmony – a concern echoed in Romani people's desire to preserve their cultural identity from the perceived threat of assimilation. The works on display here, however, have moved on, from his concentration on the boundaries to a far less austere exploration of the imagined space within them, which, like the sites actually occupied by Gypsies, is marginal, and constantly under threat from ever more restrictive laws which undermine their own formal commitment to progress and equality. Because we find both parts of the

contradictory myth in this space, the romance and the deviance, the possibility is finally offered of transcending it.

All three artists have to refer to the visual vocabulary with which world culture has represented Gypsies, and so cannot escape the legacy of the past because they have to use it to enable their wider audience to know what they are talking about. Lemon³ has shown brilliantly how this worked for music, theatre and film for the Roma in Russia before, during and after the Soviet era. But among the arts, visual art has always been the avant-garde to take the past on board and then move on. This exhibition⁴ is staged as a curtain-raiser for the London International Romani Film Festival, with its mixed bag of bold experiment, historic stereotype and worthy documentary. For better or worse, those films show the concepts with which we think about the place of Roma/Gypsies/Travellers in the world, the challenging of stereotypes which is the first site of resistance. These three artists have reached a second site, where they transcend the stereotypes, affirm the value of their experience, and represent the future.

Notes

1 *Second Site – Daniel Baker, Ferdinand Koci, Damien Le Bas, Delaine Le Bas – An Exhibition by four artists from Roma/Gypsy/Traveller communities.* Compiled and edited by Thomas Acton and Grace Acton, London: University of Greenwich, 2006

2 Ágnes Daróczi and István Kerékgyártó (eds.), *The Second National Exhibition of Autodidact Gypsy Artists*, Budapest: Hungarian Cultural Institute, 1989. Not until 2000 was she able to catalogue *The Third National Exhibition of Roma Artists*, Budapest: Hungarian Cultural Institute. The change of name and publisher marks more progress.

3 Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2000. For further contextualising discussion of Romani aesthetics see Thomas Acton, *Modernity, Culture and Gypsies*, In N. Saul and S. Tebbutt (eds.), *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter-Images of 'Gypsies'/Romanies in European Cultures*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004

4 *Second Site*, Stephen Lawrence Gallery, University of Greenwich, 20th February - 3rd March 2006