

FEINKOST Interview: Daniel Baker



What is the cause of today's current interest in Roma culture?

I think that this new interest is no accident. There has always been the potential for the Roma cultural model to inform new ways of thinking about community and nationhood, but any clear awareness of this has been obscured by a pervasive prejudice against Roma groups and a preoccupation with the 'Roma problem'. It has taken an initiative like the Roma pavilion in Venice to shift ideas about Roma beyond this historic notion of a culture in constant crisis. So I would say that the new interest has been brought about by a conscious attempt by Roma to present new narratives about our community. This re-presentation of Roma culture has precipitated a re-evaluation of our culture.

The way in which the Roma pavilion was staged in Venice meant that it not only challenged perceptions

Left: Portrait of Daniel Baker by Karl Grady. Daniel Baker, gold rose looking glass, 2006. Mixed media on glass, 36 x 35 cm.

of Roma but also perceptions of nationhood at a time when Europe is hungry for new ways of understanding itself. It makes sense that the rapidly changing idea of Europe with its expansion and renegotiation of boundaries would be drawn to new models of community. The enduring sense of Roma as a people spread out across territories and with no historic attachment to a concrete place of origin seems unique amongst cultural collectivities. This absence of a point of departure – in effect a diasporic community without a strong idea of where their journey began, presents a new way of imagining community that is forced to address the ongoing present with less value placed on the import of geographic belonging. This suggests a mode of cultural connection that can be looked to for clues about stability and



cultural cohesion in the face of uncertainty. A community that possesses a robust sense of self whilst maintaining the facility for adaptation presents an appealing proposition for nations in flux.

How would you describe your Romany background and the current position you occupy within the culture's English constituency?

My mother and father are both Romany (English Gypsies). My father died when I was nine years old. My mother lives in the town in Kent where I was born along with my five older brothers and sisters. The family lived in trailers and caravans and for a time in a converted railway carriage until I was born when the site that they were living on was sold. They were offered state housing, along with a number of other Gypsy families from the site, in a road overlooking the newly developed land that had been their home. The street was effectively a ghettoised area but in quite an open way.

As my family had settled, I was able to get a stable education. Gypsy children and school is not an easy combination and my experiences in the classroom precipitated an interest in the negotiation of cultural difference and expectation that continues in my work today. Although I see myself primarily as an artist, my enquiry into the intricacies of Gypsy identity has led me to political activism. I chair an organisation in the UK called the Gypsy Council. We lobby for changes in law that discriminate against Gypsies and Travellers and are actively involved in the international landscape of Roma politics. I see my main use here as an advocate for change through cultural awareness and visibility, not just in the ways that Gypsies are seen by others but, possibly more importantly, how we see ourselves.

You played a significant role in the Roma pavilion in Venice in terms of being one of the most visible artists but also quite present from an academic and advisory standpoint. What would you say were the outcomes of this unique exercise with the idea of the national pavilion?

I think that the main outcomes are yet to be seen. The greatest impact so far has been the acknowledgement of a new way of negotiating the presentation of nationhood at art events like Venice. This in itself is a major achievement and has quite rightly

Daniel Baker, taken from the series "Wish you were here". Photographs with varying dimensions.



been seen as revolutionary. The impact of this approach on new ways of imagining, and so theorising society in the broadest sense have been unfolding since the pavilion opened. The potential for this was clear in the proposal for the project but the curation of the pavilion space was a crucial factor in realising the ambition. It will take some time before the full effect of the Roma pavilion is felt but I have a sense that its repercussion will be far reaching.

And if the result was a summation of a Roma aesthetic, how would you describe that sensibility?

There was always a danger that the pavilion could be seen as presenting an idea of 'Roma art'. This is tricky territory and as much as some critics, and probably more anthropologists, would like to promote such a categorisation, in my opinion the thing does not exist. Thinking in terms of a Roma or Gypsy aesthetic is more realistic and certainly less restrictive.

I would describe this sensibility as a preoccupation with a common visual language or set of themes that signal potential readings that include; freedom and mobility, fertility and potency, a close alignment with nature, and a cultural demarcation which can be seen as a self definition in opposition to that which is non-Gypsy. This is an historic preoccupation which was evident in many of the works on show in the Roma pavilion. Melancholia or a sense of ennui suffuses much visual product and can be

Installation view of "DANIEL BAKER: THE NEW GILT" at FEINKOST, Berlin.

seen throughout Gypsy cultural production. My ongoing research looks closely at these phenomena in order to gain a clearer understanding of the function of visibility in Gypsy culture. In context of this my artworks are made to function as objects of enquiry both during their construction and their reading.

What drew you to reverse glass painting?

I have always been interested in vernacular forms of cultural production. More specifically objects that form the fabric of our everyday lives and that are often overlooked, a devaluation that renders these and cultural artefacts like them invisible. Modes of production employed to create these objects are similarly devalued, especially in the art world. Part of the intention of my work is to invite the viewer to consider again objects, processes and themes that seem to inhabit a previously overlooked field of production. Objects that they may understand in a particular way can be re-encountered to illuminate their function as art objects.

I am drawn to techniques used in the ornamentation of artefacts including gilding onto glass. Reverse glass painting (or 'vere eglomise') is the process of painting onto the back of sheet glass, which is subsequently gilded with silver or gold leaf. The application of the leaf metal produces a mirrored surface



when viewed from the front and it was the transformative potential of this process that opened up new ways of negotiating my art practice. That the process is employed in the manufacture and ornamentation of everyday objects such as the mirror, highly embellished versions of which are common in Gypsy homes, make it a useful vehicle for my studio practice, which seeks to navigate the area between Roma aesthetic and contemporary visual art language. The dual currency of these works is negotiated not only through the iconography and narrative content but also through the material physicality of production and process. The resulting mirrored works seek to question assumption and preconception in relation to object, subject and environment.

The symbols you use ride a curious and often disturbing line of universal and plain kitsch. Where do they come from and what meanings do they carry? I use found images that I come across in books, fun-fairs and advertising and other arenas. They are

Daniel Baker, *Mustang Looking Glass Diptych*, 2007. Mixed media on perspex, 120 x 180 cm.

generally devalued or throwaway images that I then monumentalise in my work. They will usually fall into quite a narrow repertory. I use flowers, horses, birds and other animals. I am always on the lookout for potential players. These motifs form part of the visual vocabulary within Gypsy visuality that I am engaged with. I look for motifs that have a particular quality, which I wouldn't describe as kitsch but maybe 'showy', an important quality in Gypsy culture that I aspire to in my work. This repositioning of the devalued object/subject is a recurrent theme in my work and is extended to the devalued mark, by which I mean graffiti or marks of defacement.

There is a marriage of many formal dualities in your work: use and content, form and function, destructive mark making upon traditional aesthetics, and even the basic position that a mirror creates between a spectator, subject or object and

its reflection. What does this in-between space achieve or mean for you?

The perception of this space offers an experiential reading of the works that can elaborate and amplify the juxtapositions that occur in the painted imagery. The painted and gilded surfaces produce illuminated and graffitied mirrored surfaces, or looking glasses, where images appear behind the glass but in front of the mirrored background, locating the subject in the liminal space that you describe. The viewer enters this space on encountering the work. The obscured nature of the gilded reflection allows the viewer to inhabit the landscape of the work whilst at the same time avoiding true recognition. These visual devices offer a sensory index of the ways in which Gypsy communities are positioned. I am suggesting that this state of obscured likeness and masked visibility has been internalised by the Gypsy over time and has made it difficult for us to fully see ourselves in the world. This difficulty in visualising the self has left stereotyped images relatively unchallenged, the result of which is a symbolic Gypsy that is ever present but never truly seen. Conflicted and fictitious, the imagined Gypsy has continued to haunt the popular psyche in the way that the viewer can be seen to haunt my works.

Can you describe your idea of 'use as content' as it specifically applies to your work and where does it originate in the larger socio-cultural dialogue of this sensibility?

By this I am referring to the way that the implied use of an object might propose a particular reading of that object and how this functional aspect can then enhance the narrative reading of the art object. For example my looking-glass constructions, which can be read as mirrors as well as paintings, marshal the narrative associations of the functional mirror in daily use (as a way of checking how we look – how we will appear to others etc), to articulate the failed endeavor of the viewer and the sub-



Catapults designed by Simon Lee and included in the exhibition "No Gorgios" curated by Daniel Baker at Novas Gallery, London. Below: Daniel Baker, *No Travellers*, 2006. Mixed media on glass.

ject to find a readable version of the self amidst the interrupted reflection. By employing the concept of 'use as content' these works subvert the duality of function and ornament prevalent in a Gypsy aesthetic by extending the utilitarian element of the mirror to exploit its narrative associations and endow it with a new function as art object.

My text works subvert the usual function of signs in order to create a sense of confusion or mistrust about the statements inscribed. These works employ the accepted 'use' of the monumentalized sign, which would usually be considered a tool to inform and advise and uses it to question the authority of statements and their originator. The use of text here is employed to articulate the possibilities for misinterpretation within a model whose function would seem to be the conveyance of clarity.

This interview was conducted on the occasion of the solo exhibition "DANIEL BAKER: THE NEW GILT". Occurring from February 10 until April 13, 2008 at FEINKOST, Berlin.

The text "No Travellers" is written in a large, bold, yellow font with a black outline. The letters are slightly irregular and have a hand-drawn feel. The background is a textured, cracked surface in shades of white, grey, and blue, resembling a wall or a piece of old paper. The text is centered horizontally and occupies most of the width of the image.