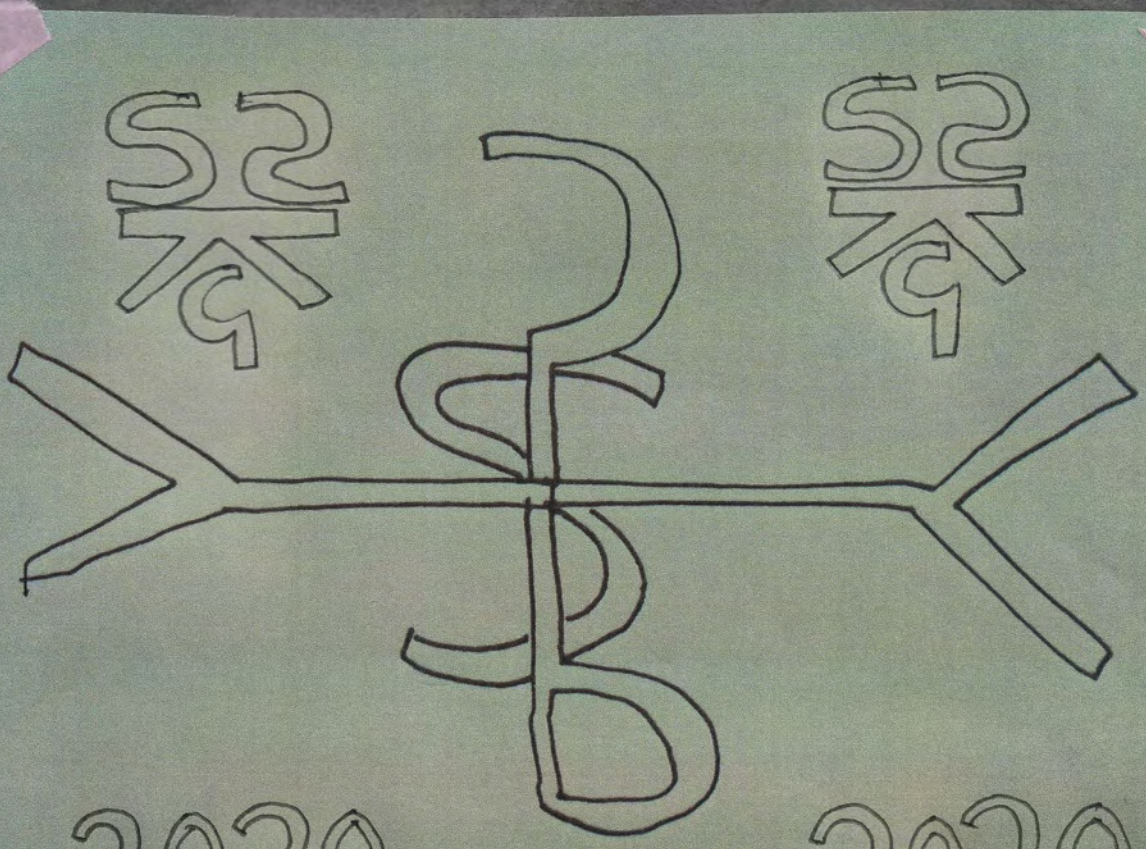
ST

SARA KALI

GEORGE



Saint George. No Dragon.

Keith McGowan, August 2020

The peace and tranquility of the water meadows make the Pulborough Wildbrooks a paradise for nature lovers. It's hard to imagine the Arun valley in its former existence when a pungent aroma of burning was carried on the breeze from the charcoal clamps, preparing wood for the extraction of iron, the Weald's main attraction from the time of the Roman occupation until the late middle ages. By the 1000's leprosy had taken a firm grip in the area and was becoming endemic. Although treatable these days with antibiotics, the mutilating course of the disease was then incurable, and the sad plight of the sufferers is still recalled by the narrow leper windows of the early 12th-century churches at Hardham, Burpham, Botolphs and elsewhere, where sufferers could receive spiritual and practical aid at a distance. The disease has also left its mark in several local place names like the Leper's Way, Inner and Outer Leper, and a junction still known as Heathen Burials on Maudlin Lane at Bramber, a memory of the graveyard of the medieval leprosarium dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene. If ever an area was in need of a hero, it was Hardham.

The Holy Rider spurs on his horse to aim his lance at what is now little more than an enigmatic blur, an vigorous image that has transfixed visitors to Hardham Church near Pulborough since he was painted into the plaster almost exactly nine hundred years ago. True, the painting doesn't have the impact it had in the time of the Normans. Once it was the first thing you saw as you entered the church. The Rider's rapid response to those in adversity reassured the faithful as soon as the door opened, and sunlight from the original South doorway lit the cave-like interior.

Supplicants had for many centuries been making offerings to secure the Rider's aid for a quick recovery from illness, to ask his protection in pregnancy and childbirth, or simply to implore relief from whatever 'dragon' gave sleepless nights, before the

Reformation swept away such ‘superstitions’. As the workman broke up the shrine to Saint George to create a new entrance on the North side of the church, they can have had little idea how close their picks and mallets fell to the medieval Holy Rider fresco: by then the remarkable twelfth-century painted interior of the church hadn’t been seen for over three hundred years, concealed by disapproving whitewash during the thirteenth century.

The door swap brought an entirely new outlook to the church. The South door, which had looked out over the serene water meadows of the Arun valley, was bricked up, and the congregation now approached from Stane Street, the A29. The dedication of the church also changed, as the diocesan authorities steered the faithful towards the care of Saxon Saint Botolph, the patron saint of travellers, who might hear prayers for safety from the threat of highwaymen and footpads who stalked the London thoroughfare. The Syrian miracle worker lay dormant, and trust in his assistance was kept alive only in local memory. The changes, however, seem to have brought little good fortune to the church: by 1687 the diocesan report described the interior as ‘all green’ from the encroaching damp of the surrounding swamp. It was not until 1866 that the Holy Rider finally reappeared at Hardham, when Reverend James Munro Sandham approved the removal of the whitewash cloak that had hidden the medieval frescos since the 1200’s, a process of restoration which was to continue until the 1960’s. Architect Philip Mainwaring Johnston was one of the first specialists to inspect the frescos when he was contracted to carry out the first restoration. He viewed the Holy Rider with Victorian patriotic zeal, identifying ‘our patron saint’ engaged in ‘impaling paynim [non-Christian] knights’, and presumed the scene to celebrate Saint George’s mystical appearance to the Crusaders at the Battle of Antioch (1098). As part of the generation that had witnessed the Boer War and the Sudan campaign, Johnston saw ‘heathen armed figures’ in the indistinct cloud of paint at the end of the saint’s avenging lance. His imagination completed the lost areas of what he saw as a vindication of an English victory over the ‘paynims’, ‘caught in attitudes of fear and discomfiture’ at the sight of George’s swift lance. Perhaps Johnston saw in this medi-

eval fresco a foretelling of the charge of the 21st Lancers which had proved a decisive victory for the English against the Hadendoa at The Battle of Omdurman in 1898, the 800th anniversary of Antioch, memorably evoked in the refrain of veteran Lance-Corporal Jones in the TV series 'Dad's Army': 'the fuzzy wuzzies don't like it up 'em'. Johnston's interpretations have regrettably stuck. The church guidebook, written in the 1980's, titles this painting 'St. George in Battle against the Infidel', still encouraging visitors to see in this equestrian charge the origins of a very English, expansionist conquering hero, repelling the 'unbelievers'. As much as Saint George's lance was true, Johnston's aim, however, could not have been more off-target.

The Coptic Acts of Saint George

The Holy Rider was only one of a sequence of scenes created to fill the lower part of the North wall at Hardham, most of which survive. These pictures tell a less-familiar legend of Saint George's life, one which is closer to the narrative which circulated in his Byzantine homeland. This George faces an extraordinary trial of bizarre and grisly tortures at the hands of Diocletian, his Christian faith giving him the fortitude to topple the Emperor's many religious idols.

The ordeals would vary, according to the taste of both teller and listener: nails to pierce the iron boots clamped on his feet; molten metal to fill his throat; a chiselled stone casque to crush him until 'his brains poured from his mouth, white as milk'; rope to hang him upside down; a brimming cauldron of boiling lead, pitch and animal fat to immerse his dismembered body; a revolving machine inside a brazen bull to reduce him to 'specks of dry summer dust'; a wheel of swords. Like the frames of an action-packed superhero novel, after each assault on his body we hold our breath as our fallen hero stirs. His eyes blink, life returns. He is made whole again, and gathers his energy only to face the next imaginative assault launched by his nemesis.

There is a ‘dragon’ in this early version of the Saint George legend, of course, but not an oogly boogly beast of fire-breathing fantasy. In the Coptic telling, a very human Emperor Diocletian proclaims his evil plans for George, given repugnant characterisation as *o bithios drakon,* ‘the serpent of the abyss’. George does battle with a Diocletian who is a strangling snake, slithered up ‘from the depths’ (Greek *bithón* ‘of the deep’), the same dark abyss that also gave forth our asphyxiating ‘python’. No pantomime dragon here, nor any beautiful princess.

The locals never lost their ancient faith in Saint George and his ability to restore and bring fresh life, in spite of efforts to eradicate his memory at Hardham at first with whitewash, and then through the church’s rededication. Even as Johnston worked to reveal and conserve the frescos, neighbouring Fittleworth still eagerly anticipated the call of ‘Room, room!’ which heralded the arrival of Sussex tipteers in their Saint George mummers play of combat, death and revival. Like the story told in Hardham’s frescos, this Saint George doesn’t fight a dragon, nor does his love interest, ‘the King of Egypt’s daughter’, ever make an entrance. Death is overcome, and the Doctor’s flask of Golden Lossey Drops never failed to restore life to the tipteer actor. The remedy was shared with all who would spare a coin for the gypsy players, just as medieval Hardham had once found solace from disease and suffering in the restorative powers of the Eastern ‘undying knight’, now emerging from his long rest. From Antakya to Pulborough, Bethelhem to Mosul, the Rider is still known as the figure to whom anyone can turn in their hour of desperate need.

Abyzou, the Child-Strangler

In the 1960’s a figure appeared beneath the feet of the Rider’s horse. Conservators had found ‘a naked figure … his legs outstretched … and disfigured with bleeding wounds’. Following Johnston’s lead, the figure was presumed by the Courtauld Institute to represent one of the defeated ‘infidels’ crushed by the Crusaders at Antioch.

However, instead of Saracen armour, the flesh tints which fill the fragmentary remains of the body do not reinforce the impression of

a hauberk-clad ‘paynim knight’ fallen in battle. The figure’s nakedness lends an impression of vulnerability, the torso more suggestive of the injured body of a woman than a man. Her upheld hands recall the stance of the beautiful princess familiar in later artistic representations, but here she lies naked and injured beneath the horse, as if George’s rescue mission had gone horribly wrong, and Princess Sabra ended up trampled beneath the horse’s hooves.

This was no nice princess to take home to meet the parents. Feared across the Near East, she was the one who always lurked in the shadows, taking a sickening interest in young mothers and babies. ‘Fonder of children than Gello’ wrote the poet Sappho of indulgent parents who spoil their children. Her words recalled the popular belief in the myth of the woman who died childless, and whose envious ghost had ever since stalked new mothers and young children, waiting for her chance to snatch them away. Women in pregnancy and at childbirth always walked a path of anxiety and great risk during the middle ages, and fear of the demon who sought to suck the blood of infants was common to most communities of the Eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. Her many despicable titles point to the demon’s great antiquity. ‘Abyzou’ evokes the dank whiff of the ‘abyss’, the *apsu* of the unfathomable water that surrounded the Assyrian underworld, while Greek families even in the last century would scare children with the threat of ‘Gello’, a descendant of the Sumerian *gallû* demons, malevolent spirits who still lurk in the ‘ghoulish’ side of the English-speaking imagination.

A chilling encounter with the ‘woman with dishevelled hair’ is described in *The Testament of Solomon*, an apocryphal Old Testament text c. 100 CE that makes it clear how important it was to know her names:

'I asked her 'Who are you?' She replied:
'And who are you to ask? If you want to know who I am, go and wash your hands. When you're done, return to your throne. Then I will tell you.'
This accomplished, I asked her again 'Who are you?'
'Obyzouth. I do not rest at night but travel round the world visiting women. Divining the hour of their labour, I search them out and strangle their newborn infants. There's not a single night I don't have some success. Otherwise my work is limited to injuring eyes, condemning mouths, destroying minds and making bodies feel pain.'
'Tell me evil spirit, how are you thwarted?'
'Write my name on a piece of papyrus and I shall flee from hence to the other world.'

Like all demons, Abyzou would only respond if correctly addressed. For someone afflicted by apparently insurmountable health issues, the thought that their troubles could be reduced to a knowable formula might bring fortitude, and aid recovery. Some believed that the child-snatcher surrounded herself with as many as seventy-two names, though others considered that twelve and a half would suffice: as many names as the disciples with an additional fraction, a mysterious half-name that might make all the difference.

A significant number of Byzantine magic amulets of haematite survive from Syria and Egypt, made during the early centuries of the first millennium, bearing an incised image similar that shown at Hardham where the horseman pins down Abyzou. These talismans are presumed to have been held close, in particular by women during pregnancy and labour, calling on the conquering saint to drive off the demon who waited for the vulnerable. These amulets were sold by healers not only for their patients to wear and clasp for spiritual comfort. Some were intended to be broken up and applied externally, or taken orally. A *sphragis* or 'seal' would typically be stamped on one side with an image intended to reassure the patient of the power of the remedy, but also confirmed its intended use, in the case of the Holy Rider to guarantee efficacy in cases of the maladies of pregnancy. The reverse side of the pastille might reinforce

the image with a written incantation in Greek (or at least what might pass for Greek), with such resonant formulae as *hystéra meláni melanoméne* 'womb, black, blackening…', or simply *pauson,* 'stop!' The message might be linguistically inaccurate, but the use of Greek or Hebrew *charakteres*, invoking an Eastern diety, offered a proof of Byzantine or Egyptian authenticity, the source of the most effective remedies.

What place did this Syrian image of Abyzou have on a wall in a church in West Sussex? Although many Byzantine amulets survive showing Abyzou pinned down by the horseman, talismans carried for personal protection, only three examples are known in mural art, created to bring a building or community under the Holy Rider's care. An important 'Abyzou' fresco comparable to the Hardham scene, sadly now lost, was carefully recorded at the entrance to a church of the 6th-century Bawit monastery complex, 170 miles south of Cairo, while excavations in Central Sudan recently brought to light an example from Banganarti, about 200 miles North of the fateful site of Kitchener's suppression of the Sudanese at Omdurman. The third is at Hardham.

Roman Hardham and metal slavery

By the time the frescos were painted, Hardham had been home to West Asian migrants for several centuries. The Romans didn't come to Britain for the good weather and fine food, but were attracted here by minerals. Lead for baths and roofs from Somerset; gold for adornments from Wales; tin as an alloy in bronze from Cornwall; good quality ragstone for civic buildings from Kent; and iron for nails, weapons and ship fittings from the Weald of Kent and Sussex: convicts and labourers from captive states were transported to carry out the back-breaking and often dangerous methods of extraction and processing to win these precious resources. The mosaics of the villas at Bignor and Fishbourne record the wealth and fine taste of the Anglo-Roman administrators, but almost nothing remains to recall the presence of the tens of thousands of slaves who worked at the Roman *metalla* or mineral sites in Britain except

for a few eerie man-made valleys and mine shafts, created only with pick and shovel and extending in places over miles.

Slavery under the Romans could take many forms: at its most benign, a household slave could aspire, by good service, to work their way to manumission, liberty and even social success. Mineral slavery was altogether different. *Damnatio ad opus metallicum* or a 'condemnation to mineral work' was a virtual death sentence of the greatest cruelty, considered by some to be more fearful than the mercifully brief ordeal of *damnatio ad bestias* in the arena. Diodorus Siculus described the life of Egyptian gold miners under Roman rule: 'Consequently the poor unfortunates believe, because their punishment is so excessively severe, that the future will always be more terrible than the present and therefore look forward to death as more to be desired than life.' Syrians and Egyptians formed a significant part of the *metalla* labour force. The province fell under Roman rule from 30 BCE, and enterprises like the legendary copper mines of Phaeno (modern Faynan) could provide workers
with the skills and techniques required, with the bonus that when transported to Europe, their specific language ability isolated them from contact with locals, reducing the risk of escape.

Heriedham: a place of rejuvenation

Located on the floodplain of the River Arun where it was washed by the tides and navigable by large boats, Hardham was shaped by the Romans to be a hub for this infrastructure. The same slave labour which processed the minerals was deployed to build roads. Immeasurable quantities of stone and slag from the local smelting of iron were sunk into the swamp which surrounds Hardham to create a causeway across the marshes, allowing resources and administration to flow along Stane Street, from the South coast to London Bridge.

Hardham's unique topography was both its curse, and its blessing. As the Arun comes down to meet the clay at Pulborough it is joined by the River Rother and sent eastwards, encircling Hardham to make a tiny peninsula, about 1.5km across. With a gateway securing the isthmus at the Western entrance and guards protecting the new causeway at the Eastern entrance, the Romans effectively locked down Hardham, using the rivers to create a secure holding-place for both iron goods, and for the smiths who made them. The Roman legacy of slavery endured in England until 1066, when the Norsemen's dislike of human chattels gradually saw the residual corpus of unfree labour given manumission.

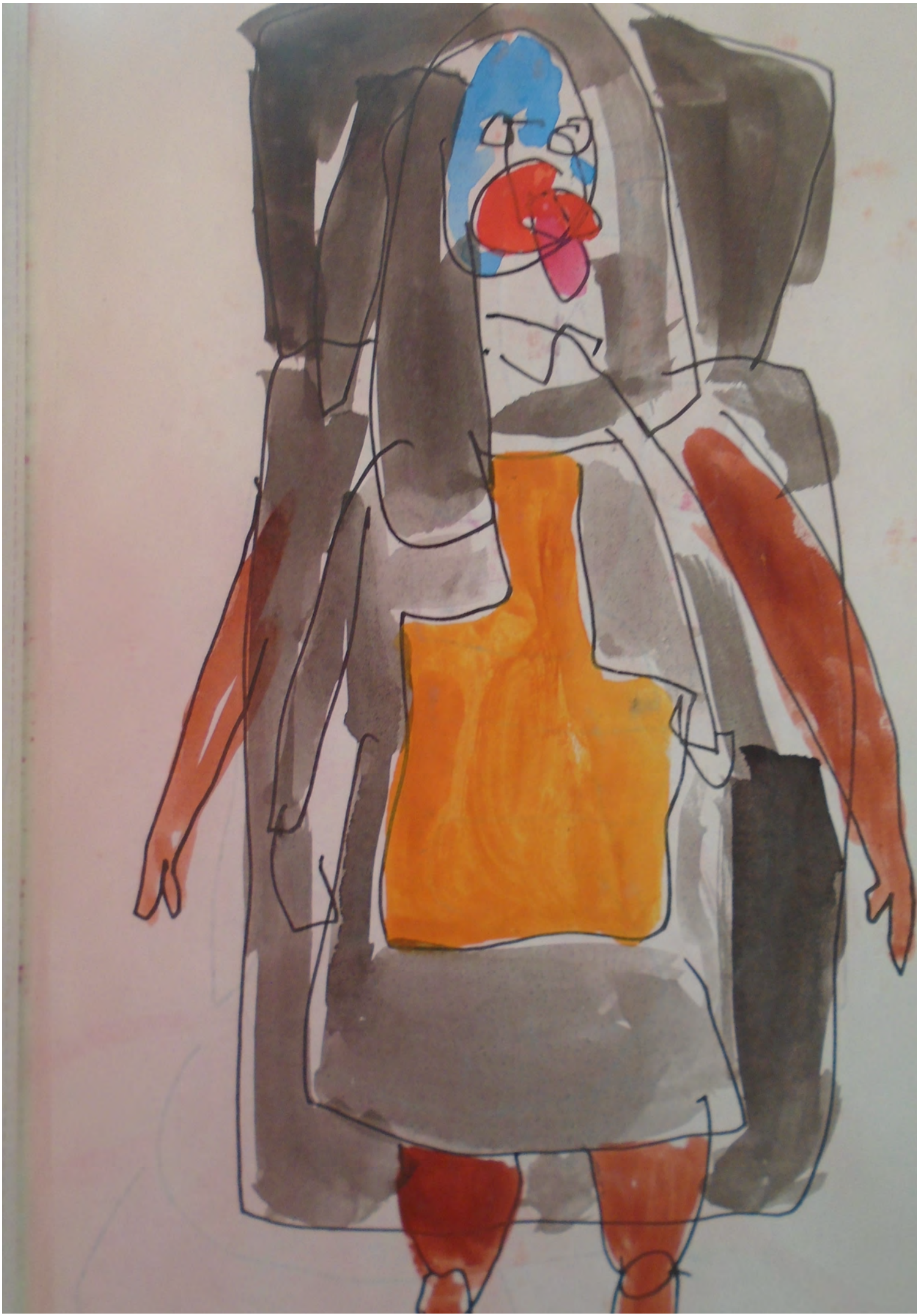
The painted church now stands in the middle of the peninsula, serenely surrounded by water. The place 'where rivers meet' is deeply felt in early West Asian culture as the source of 'eternal life'. Sumerian hero Gilgamesh goes in search the immortal man Utnapishti ('he who found the secret of life') and the 'plant of heartbeat' called 'Old-Man-Becomes-Young'. He finds them at the end of the world, at a place described in Akkadian as *ina pi nārāti*, 'at the mouth of rivers', though Gilgamesh soon learns that he cannot take the immortality found at this mystical location home with him. Ancient Egyptians looked to Osiris in expectation of life after death as, like the later Saint George, he was killed and dismembered by his enemy, but made whole, to rise again from the dead. Sites associated with the regeneration of Osiris were often surrounded by water, like the subterranean Osireion of Abydos, thought to represent the primeval water of Nun from which emerged creation. In the Islamic tradition, Moses eventually found the place of the mystical Koranic figure of al-Khidr (Surah 18), realising he had arrived when the fish, brought to eat on his journey, came to life and dropped back into the water *majma'ul bahrain*, 'at the meeting of rivers'. Although far from home, the Syro-Egyptian metal workers brought to England by the Romans might have been filled with hopes of being brought back from the dead by the unusual peninsular topography of Hardham, practically an island 'at the meeting of rivers'.

Even in the early twelfth century, when the church at Hardham was built utilising building material salvaged from Roman Hardham, the worshippers were still coming to this location in the hope of rebirth, constructing a Chrisitan faith from familiar and trusted tropes. The Saint George frescos at Hardham celebrate a figure who, like Osiris, was shut in a casque and broken limb from limb, yet his body was made whole, and he lived again. The hope of rebirth was reinforced for the lepers of twelfth-century Hardham in a frieze which extends along the wall opposite the St George legend. Based on the parable in St Luke's gospel, these frescos retell the story of Dives and Lazarus. The poor man Lazarus suffers not only from the predations of leprosy, but also bears the uncharitable shrug of wealthy Dives, yet in death it is the beggar who is taken up by angels to 'sit in the bosom of Abraham'. An orchestra of medieval fiddlers surrounds the chancel, holding the typical spoon-shaped rebec inspired by the Arabic *rabab*: it is not hard to imagine the stories so vividly depicted on the walls of the church being brought to life by such gypsy musicians, gifted in the art of storytelling in song, helping the community to face the many consequences of endemic leprosy.

Like the anticipation around Hardham of the Christmas visit of the Sussex tipteers, the people of Egyptian Abydos looked forward to the annual celebration of Osiris's grisly death and his regeneration in processions and ritual drama during the flood season of Khoiak. During the festival, 'mummy' figures of Osiris made from clay, sand and barley seed would be watered in the temples, to watch the god's body push forth new shoots. The masked actors of the annual Osiris play recreated the familiar events of the defeat of evil Seth at the hands of Osiris's son Horus, giving the audience ample opportunity to voice their appreciation as Horus was shown 'restraining the foes of Osiris' in mock combat. Osiris's triumph over death took place before the very eyes of the faithful.

The story of Osiris and Horus had such broad appeal that it was adopted first by the Greeks, and then the Romans. Horus was celebrated by the New Kingdom Egyptians as *Heru-pa-hered*, or 'Horus the Rejuvenator', a phrase which the Greeks reinvented as a child deity they called 'Harpocrátes', one of a number of Eastern mystical devotions which travelled as far as Roman Sussex. In the Coptic tradition, the image of the Horus restraining Seth, shown as a falcon-headed horseman pinning down a crocodile, is considered to be the inspiration for the Christian Saint George's dragon combat. When the compiler of the Domesday Book recorded the name of 'Heriedeham', was this because the community still recalled *Heru-pa-hered*, a devotion to the Eastern story and drama of rebirth, where in the place of Horus, Christian Saint George now offered the hope of conquering death?

Delaine tells me she still has the gold sovereign with the image of Saint George given to her by her family. This gift brings to mind the old protection that Hardham parents would summon for their children, calling on the Holy Rider to pin down Abyzou, keeping their children safe from the malign attentions of this demon 'from the abyss'. The stories of Saint George, whose very name comes from the 'earth' (Greek *geo-ergon*, 'earth-worker') draw on the West Asian faith which manifests itself in Osiris, the green-faced god of regeneration who, with the help of son Horus, will pin down scaly Seth and ensure regrowth. During the 1800's, villagers of the Arun valley could still look forward to arrival of the gypsy tipteers in their tatter coats cleared a space with the sweep of a broom to begin their Christmas play of Saint George. Each year the hero would lock swords with Bold Slasher and the Turkish Knight, and cheers would turn to groans as the actors took it in turns to sink to the ground, limbs twitching, expiring from their wounds. Each year they would rise again.



ON WINGS OF RAGE
***St Sara Kali George by* Delaine Le Bas**

Alex Michon

In St Sara Kali George, artist Delaine Le Bas reimagines a new figure that embodies a character of non-defined sexuality fighting against a world that even in 2020 still has not come to terms with difference and continues to create a climate of fear and xenophobia.

Refusing to lockdown her anger, utilising film, music, performance and costumes she presents an evocative and timely wake-up call against the silver tongued prophets of profit.

"*Our quiet rage gives us wings, the possibility to negotiate the gears winding backwards uniting all time."*
Patti Smith, Year of the Monkey

The enforced lockdown in March, which plunged us into a vortex of uncertainty and trepidation also ushered in an unforeseen focus on an existential pool of possibilities. However, unlike Hindu philosophers, Taoist poets, Jewish mystics or Catholic hermits, this turning away from our external reality towards a more contemplative inner world was not made out of choice, nor did it necessarily involve a search for the divine.

Goethe wrote that '*One can be instructed in society, but one is inspired only in solitude.'* Artists and writers, of course, are generically hard wired to cope with alone time, they understand the importance of what psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has termed 'fertile solitude' and how it is essential for unlocking creativity

For the artist Delaine Le Bas, although lockdown brought a precious space of time to concentrate on her latest project *St Sara Kali George,* for her, it actually brought our pandemic-panicked society more sharply into focus. '*A world that even in 2020'* she says '*still has not come to terms with difference and continues to create a climate of fear and xenophobia'.* As a British artist of Romani heritage, it is a climate of which Delaine is personally aware.

We are Continuing our Education in the Teenage Bedroom

Speaking to the artist Majed Aslam early on in lockdown, asking how he was coping he confessed that he was actually enjoying the experience, saying that he felt like a teenager in his bedroom again '*reading books, listening to music and painting*'. When I asked Delaine the same question, she related to the *teenager in the bedroom* analogy, telling me how she had been listening to a lot of music she had not listened to in years and recalling how back in the day she would tape stuff from John Peel's radio show.

Making extensive notes in a Corona 2020 diary entitled '*We are continuing our education*' she reeled off a ton of books she had been reading which were feeding the ideas behind her work. Included in her extensive lockdown bibliography were: *The Year o*f the *Monkey by Patti Smith, Kali The Feminine Force by Ajit Mookerjee, Sun Ra and Aye Aton Space Interiors and Exteriors 1972,* and *Who Owns England by Guy Shrubsole,* a book which she urges that '*everyone should read'.*

Debunking the little Angerlander scenario of a green and pleasant land and questioning exactly whose borders it is *we* are taking back, Shrubsole estimates that '*the aristocracy and gentry still own around 30% of England.'* This may even be an underestimate he argues as the owners of 17% of England and Wales remain undeclared at the Land Registry. The most likely owners of this undeclared land are aristocrats, as many of their estates have remained in their families for centuries.

Saints Alive

'Become a saint of your own province and your own consciousness'
Allen Ginsberg

Taking as her inspiration the patron saint of the Romani people St Sara Kali, Delaine re-imagines her as a hybrid with St George, to create a new figure of non-defined sexuality fighting against the intolerances of a unrelentingly unjust and racist world. It is with a sweet irony that Delaine conjures up St George, the saint most adopted by the British far right, since many Romani people in Eastern Europe consider him to be *their* patron saint. The Gypsies of Serbia commemorate St George's Day (Djurdjev Dan) the day of all 'Slavas' on 6th May a holiday which is also celebrated as a harbinger of spring and new life when Gypsies take their bedding outside and sit, eat and sleep in the open air.

Dark skinned and beautiful, Sara is portrayed as a Black Madonna. The Gypsies, whose origins were in India, call her *Sara la Kali*, connecting her with the Hindu Goddess. In her book *Kali the Feminine Force*, Ajit Mookerjee states that, although she is often presented in her warrior aspect as cruel and horrific with her lolling red tongue and necklace of severed heads, Kali is also creator and nurturer, the goddess of mother love and feminine energy.

In Delaine's work St Sara Kali George is represented in her embroideries and films as a warrior saint-signifier protecting those '*giving birth to a pure intent that greed and horror wish to destroy.'*

'*This is England'* states Delaine '*where St Sara Kali George has been for centuries, she belongs to no part of England that you think you know. She stalks the land because you do not know who she is. She brings solidarity to those that you wish not to see*.'

Saintes-de-La-Mer in the Camargue in Southern France is a famous Roma site of pilgrimage. Legend has it that St Sara Kali was a servant girl from Egypt who first arrived on the southern shores of France in 42 AD. She accompanied Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacobe and Mary Salome, Lazarus and St. Martha, all followers and disciples of Christ. Whether they were cast out or choose to leave, they were eventually set adrift in a boat with no oars from Alexandria in Egypt.

The story has a remarkable resonance with the present day journeys made by refugees and Delaine echoes this in a poignant re-enactment in her film depicting herself washed up on a seashore, garbed in exotic embroidered finery, akin to the type of clothing the saint is often represented wearing, next

to a black bin-liner like clad Kali in a visual metaphor representing a sacred and profane dichotomy.

Even as I write this the body of a young 16 year old Sudanese boy has been discovered on a French beach after drowning attempting to cross the Channel whilst Priti Patel talks of '*sending in the Navy'* to as she euphemistically states '*stem the flow of migrants*'.

Delaine states that '*The Roma body*' along with the image of the refugee fleeing across the channel is '*a contested site/sight within the public space and imagination*.' It is St Sara Kali George's intention to '*move through the world, against the tide, against the racism, against the knowledge production that has imprisoned it.'* Words like asylum seeker, and illegal and economic migrant are linguistically weaponising the idea of the refugee in an intentional act of forgetting that these are human beings. Contrast this to the jovial 'expat' used to describe British people who move abroad.

In a recent YouGov survey taken in August this year it was found that nearly half of the British public have little or no sympathy for refugees making the desperate journey across the Channel from France.

Costume as Activator

'*Nothing of what we wear is politically innocent'.*
Mimi Thi Nugyen

Costuming has always played a significant role in Delaine's work. Playing on and disrupting notions of the exotic Gypsy stereotype, costume here functions as an important transformative signifier. As the Afro-futurist space sculptor and performance artist D.Denenge Akpem states '*the garment or costume is an active part of the creative/transformative process, the costume becomes an activator*'.'

As a seasoned *Oh Bondage Up Your's* She punk, Delaine is well aware not only of the activist potential of clothing but also of its demeaned status within some echelons of the fine art fraternity. To this end she continues to reinforce its relevance within her work. Her contention that the performative quality of the costumes act as living sculptures also resonates with the present day disdain surrounding outdated imperialist edifices cast in slavery's sorrowful stone which have recently been rightly toppled in righteous anger.

Delaine explains that her costumes '*reconfigured in another space to form three dimensional sculptural paintings, embody a new history, a new body, a new site/sight. They are to be worn by whoever wishes to perform in actions swimming against the tide of mediocrity having an intimate dialogue with the costume/armour in movement are accompanying vocal sounds and words that will change for each performance with an underlying soundtrack that has been created for the performances and installations.'*

When Delaine speaks of '*the contested sight/ site of the Roma body'* it is no mere academic conceit as she often places herself centre stage within her work. Here in '*Portrait of the Artist wearing "Don't worry Fuck Brexit T.Shirt by Jeremy Deller and Pink and White Checked Knickers by Top Shop' Home Lockdown Costume* photograph by Lincoln Cato 15.06.20' the artist is again playing with pre-conceived notions. Stripped of all her usual exoticism, the artist defiantly faces the camera, letting the T.Shirt speak for itself in both a

humorous take on her political affiliations and a rare glimpse into how we were all being a little less sartorially interested during our imposed home time.

The link with Jeremy Deller is an interesting inclusion, Deller like Delaine is often cited as a 'political artist'. Interviewed in 2014 for *Art Review,* Deller stated "*I'm not an activist, but ..I quite like art that is provocative and can say things in a slightly different way*.' A statement which just as equally relate to Delaine.

Musing on whether we call Delaine an artist or an activist I would say that unequivocally she is both. Just as Wilfred Owen wrote '*my subject is war, and the pity of war. The Poetry is in the pity*' so I would claim that with Delaine her subject is her response to the world around her, expressing both anger and pity and being both personal and political, the activism is in the art.

Come outta' the cupboard, ya' boys and girls
The Clash, London Calling

So as we tentatively come out of hiding, blinking in the daylight of an as yet unknown new dawn, it becomes increasing obvious that it's the same old capitalist one. For a brief moment back then when this virus first hit, a new spirit of altruism could be detected which included: a renewed respect for our NHS, serious discussions surrounding universal income taking place, neighbours stepping up and checking on shielders and nature breathing a sigh of relief with the shutdown in gas emissions.

Recent events however prove that the fight goes on. As the psychiatrist, and political philosopher Franz Fanon wrote in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1963, "*When we revolt it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because for many reasons we can no longer breathe*'.

This prescient quote resonates not only with the brutal murder of George Floyd in July when viciously restrained by the police he called out that he could not breathe, but also relates to the increasing inability of breathing which Covid patients experienced.

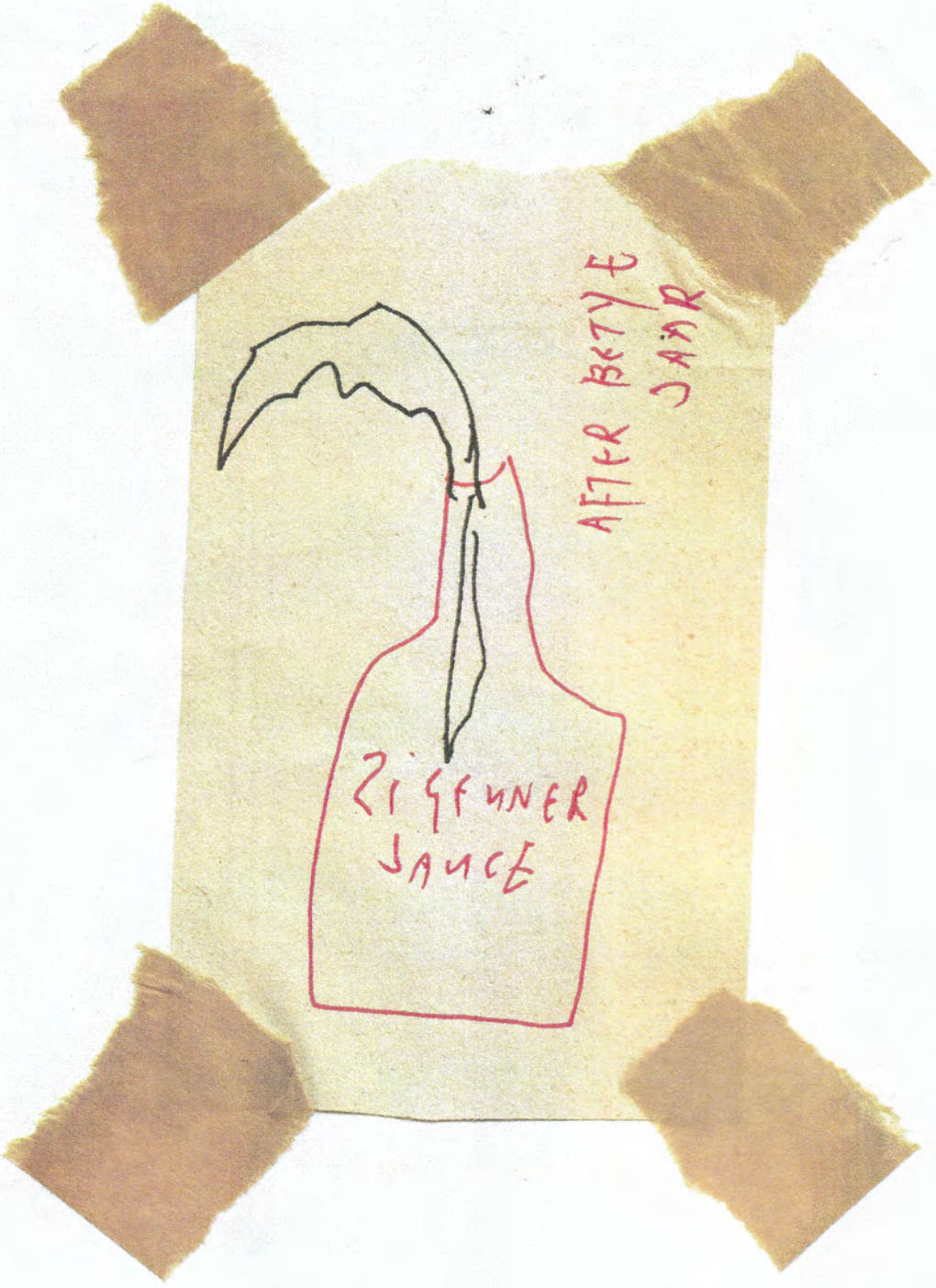
' I am collapsing decades and saying these ecstatic moments connect, that each instance is a glimpse of another reality very close to this one'
Artist Laura Oldfield Ford: The Savage Messiah

Delaine's *St Sara Kali George,* not only reminds us that as we were secreted in our shielded shelters, plugged into our computers and smart phones like never before, outside injustices continued apace, nurses and care workers, for all the clapping, were not given their much expected pay rise, whilst A level downgrades hit students from disadvantaged areas the worst. St Sara Kali George flies on wings of rage against all these monstrosities
the gears which she *"winds backwards uniting all time'* are the movements of all the saints and righteous rebels who don't hold back from telling truth to power.

August 2020

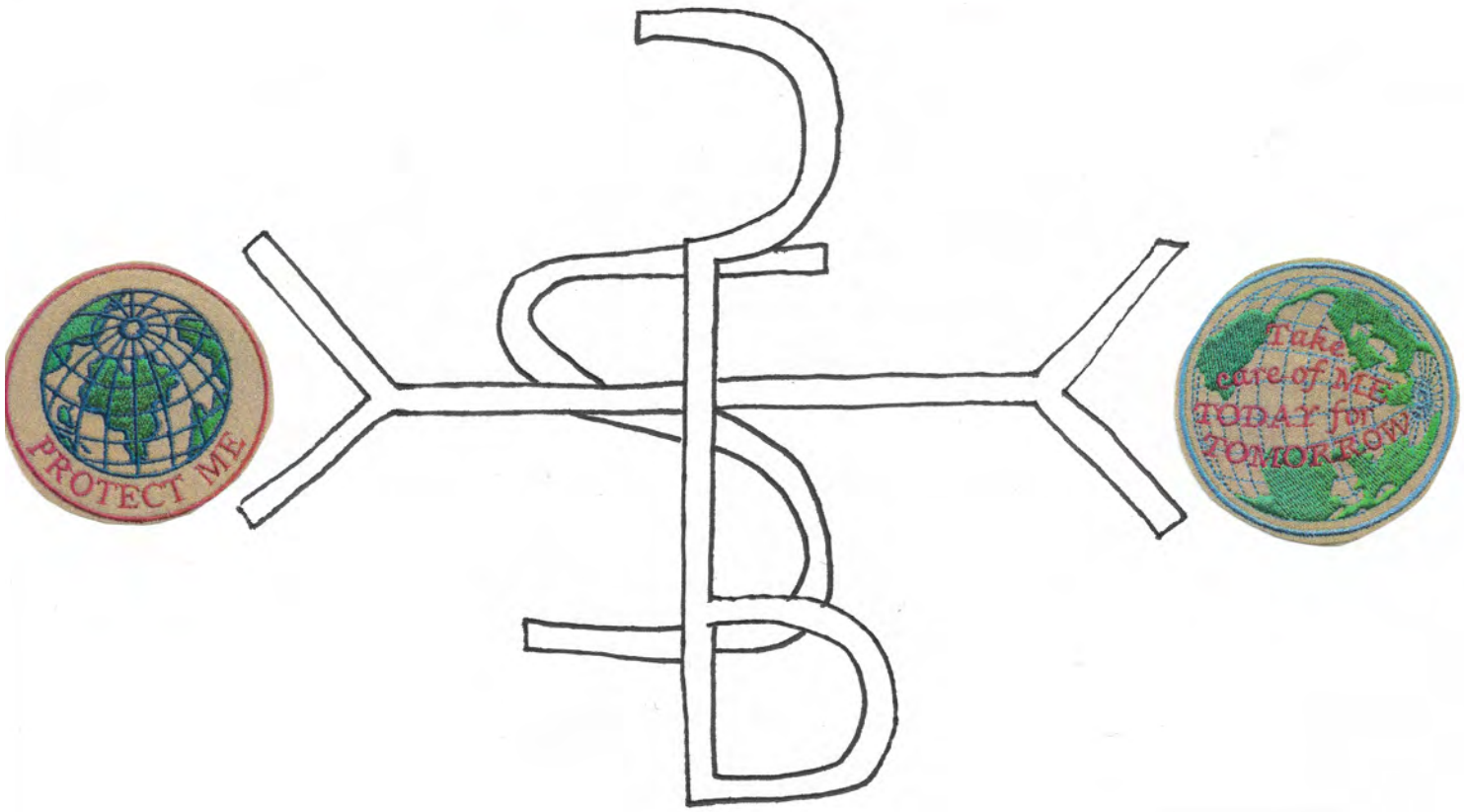
Portrait of the artist wearing “Don’t Worry Fuck Brexit” T-shirt by Jeremy Deller & pink & white check knickers by Top Shop “Home Lockdown Costume”
Photograph by Lincoln Cato 15.06.20
Courtesy The Artist Delaine Le Bas, Lincoln Cato & Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix London
yamamotokeiko.com

COMING SOON.....



With reference to the artist Betye Saar "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail" 1973 and the "Puputov's" used in the 2017 Venezuelan Protests "Marcha De La Mierda" or "March Of Shit". Drawing & collage by Delaine Le Bas from Di/esinter-gration sketchbook/diary Worthing- Berlin Start 04.11.17 (Collage/Drawing size: 14.5cm x 21cm)

ST
SARA KALI
GEORGE



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