

Nothing Here Before

Beneath the floor of the South London Gallery in Camberwell is a marquetry panel designed by the 19th century artist, designer and socialist Walter Crane (1845-1915). Commissioned as a centrepiece for the gallery, which opened in 1891, it's believed to be the only piece of its kind that Crane made. The huge wooden panel contains fish scale and diamond patterns, representations of shells and bulrushes.

At its centre is the inscription: The Source of Art is in the Life of a People.

Crane's injunction to art makers came to me again when I first saw Mark Aitken's photographs of the residents of Cressingham Gardens in south London, installed as large prints on the estate's exterior walls. Like Mark, I've been a resister and a witness to the colonisation of Brixton and surrounding neighbourhoods by an entitled middle class that seeks to universalise its own experience. Though they are attracted to the distinct qualities of what are most often working class neighbourhoods with large immigrant populations, it is these qualities that are erased first, because they are the living cultural expressions of the people who are displaced. What this has meant is that community values have been displaced by commodity values. Take a walk along Atlantic Road or Brixton Station Road and you'll see physical evidence of this - the empty arches that once housed independent businesses serving the community, before landlords Network Rail increased the rents by around 300%, forcing traders out of business.

Businesses that do not serve the community now predominate. The centre of Brixton has become a site of mass consumption. A woman who opened a Brazilian-themed restaurant a few hundred yards from a sports centre where I took my son to play football every Saturday morning for years told me: You know, the thing is there was nothing here before.

Brixton's new desirability has meant that long term residents living in housing owned by Lambeth council are threatened. Many have already been displaced. What's happening is simply a property grab, one replicated across London, as councils, working with private developers, destroy estates they have refused to invest in for decades, in order to make developments from which existing residents are priced out.

People are being removed from their homes and communities so that others can move in. What is the measure by which they are entitled? They have more money. The idea that poverty is always deserved and money the only viable measure of worth is of course one of the more lasting and destructive legacies of Thatcherism.

Designed in the 1960s by Ted Hollamby, and built on the southern edge of Brockwell Park at the beginning of the 1970s, Cressingham Gardens is a central battleground where the fight against 'regeneration' is being played out.

In 2012 Lambeth council determined to demolish the estate, and replace it with apartment blocks. Residents and supporters have fought a fierce campaign of resistance ever since.

What should the response of the artist be when people are being threatened with eviction and losing their homes? For Aitken, a long term resident of the estate, the response has been to make visible people who are kept invisible and told they are worthless. As he writes: 'Despite the siege imposed by property 'developers', the photographs commemorate our complex and variable histories. They modestly state that we exist.'

It's right that these pictures insist on the primacy of the subject. They are photographs that resist the process of erasure, of a people and its multiple but linked cultures and histories, the removal of which is always necessary for any colonisation process to succeed. It's an erasure that allowed European colonisers to 'discover' places where people had lived for thousands of years. *There was nothing here before* is the slogan of the property developer, the gentrifier, the invader. It's always a con.

Mark Aitken's pictures of Phylis, Danny, John Sergeant and all the others, undeniable in their beauty, size and strategic placement, prove the lie. When I first saw them on the walls of the estate, on a fine summer's evening, I thought that these proud pictures looked like banners. Ones to march behind.

Howard Cunnell