



## Claire A. Baker

### Hearing from Artists

*Through embroidery, artist Claire A. Baker examines themes of abandonment, memory, place and home. She lives and works in the Tees Valley and is in conversation with Olivia Heron, Assistant Curator, in August 2020.*

**OH: Since 2015 your research has centred on the self-settlers of the Chernobyl exclusion zone in Ukraine. What draws you to this place and its people?**

CB: I first visited Chernobyl whilst researching 'dark tourism' for my MA. I went to a number of sites of death and destruction – it was a sobering and emotional body of research. However, the trip to the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone with its mesmeric atmosphere showed this place to have tragic but also, almost inconceivably optimistic attributes revealing many extraordinary human stories. This instilled in me an intense desire to know more and I returned as soon as I could.

The exclusion zone (the 30km area around Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster in 1986) is captivatingly beautiful and a place like no other. The incredible stories it tells are of bravery, heroism, survival, resilience and struggle. In addition, there are important issues arising from the nuclear disaster that are still relevant today with many lessons to be learned.

It evokes such strange emotions being there, standing on land deemed uninhabitable for



Claire A. Baker portrait. Photography by Lucy Baker

tens of thousands of years, infected by an invisible enemy. The emotions are disparate and contradictory: melancholy, excitement, deep sadness, solitude, community and pure wonder at the sheer beauty and the aesthetics of decay, destruction and disintegration. It makes me feel alive.

The exclusion zone quickly became addictive. Understanding Chernobyl as 'Place' is intrinsic to my research, and has emerged through examination of the setting and location and its inhabitation by 'self-settlers' (those who returned in 1987 by various ways and means after being evacuated in the months following the accident).<sup>1</sup> Their relationship with the area plays a crucial role in the development and continuation of my work there: their 'rootedness' is an intangible link between the people and this place. Startlingly most of the villages have recently disappeared from Google Maps and the exclusion zone has been 'rebranded' as a 'Radiation Ecological Biosphere Reserve'.

Chernobyl and the surrounding areas have become dominated by its catastrophe and



Self Settler House, January 2020. Photography by Claire. A. Baker

subsumed by it – the name speaks of a nuclear disaster and not of a place. But the tragic event of 1986 doesn't define its remaining population. To them it is merely 'home', the place where they were born and raised. The sense of belonging, of memory – collective and individual, family complexities and rich history – all determine that the cultural importance of this place is limitless and not only because its isolated inhabitants will soon have completely disappeared.

Over the last five years the number of self-settlers has dramatically decreased from around 200 in 2015 to 85 last summer (2019). Their average age is 80 and 80% of them are women, hence their collective name of 'Babushkas' ('grandmothers' in Russian). The more I visited the zone and its spread out villages, the more self-settlers I met and the more I became interested in their lives, their history and their now – their everyday. My relationship with them is very special to me and they have become dear friends. I feel a strange affinity between us and it is the ontology of this intangible bond which is now becoming the central focus of my practice-based PhD.

### **OH: Tell us about the significance of embroidery within the project.**

CB: Embroidery was my way in. It was a tool with which I began to get to know the Babushkas. It is a shared and common interest between us. As a textile artist this activity gives me a valid and accepted reason to be close to them and to nurture and consolidate relationships. The Babushkas' history of embroidery is long and steeped in tradition and as a cultural indicator is of great importance.

Through my project *Embroidery as Language* (2018-19) I determined to use their past textile experiences as a conduit to new relationships. In the absence of a mutual language, facial expressions and body language become heightened and easy to read. Stitching together brings about humorous and haptic acts that are basal, spontaneous and immediately connective. The introduction of a shared collaborative activity immediately ensures a more physical, engaging and mutual experience.

My embroidery practice was understood. My request to stitch with the Babushkas is what





Home 3. Chernobyl Zone, September 2019. Photography by Claire. A. Baker

provoked attention and acceptance from them and together I feel that we are doing something really worthwhile. Here stitch is the communicator and skills are shared and stories told. There is a sense of belonging together. It is somewhat irrelevant that we do not speak the same language; a minor act of physical affection goes such a long way. The Babushkas' reintroduction to embroidery (some have not stitched for more than 60 years) evokes feelings of deep nostalgia, of sharing and community, loss of a younger self and reminds them not only of a caring tradition but also their femininity and the domesticity of home making and family, which has been lost.

Some do have physical limitations such as poor eyesight (often from the effects of radiation) and/or rheumatism, arthritis, gnarled fingers and poor dexterity that is decidedly the result of years of hard manual labour. This means they struggle at times but the wish to 'help' me overcomes their difficulties if only for a few minutes and I am so touched – honoured – that they do so. The practice gives them confidence and joy. They are proud and dignified, understanding (and surprised) that their work is so highly valued.

Embroideries are still hung in abandoned houses all over the zone in the absence of much else – it was prohibited to remove textile items during the evacuation of 1986 as it was said they were prone to absorbing dust and radiation particles. Evacuees were led to believe they would return in a matter of days so took little with them. The remaining embroideries are amongst the very few leavings still in these houses and ignored by looters, illustrating their lack of value to anyone other than their owners and makers, partly due to their commonness. The impermanence and vulnerability of the embroidery found within the villages of the exclusion zone is critical and the preservation of them has gained new importance. I feel it is my life's work to save at least some of their legacy that I find so emotionally captivating.

**OH: How do you relate to the idea of 'thinking through making'?**

CB: I found it extremely difficult during lockdown to write, so (eventually) I made. Through making I gave myself time to think, to explore ideas, materials, commonalities (with the self-settlers) and an escape. It is through the making process that creativity



Babushka, March 2019. Photography by Claire. A. Baker



Stitching, Parishev, February 2019. Photography by Claire. A. Baker

occurs and where the innovation that we seek sometimes comes. By making work I generate new ideas for future or further work and enjoy the excitement of that process. I try to make my ideas visual and visible by making them physical. I am constantly asking myself: Why am I doing this? What has drawn me to do this? What does that mean? How can I make it better? What is it for? What does it say?

Currently I am working on interpreting the self-settlers' religious and folkloric beliefs and making objects that portray their impending loss, signifying a deep emotional connection. This idea originated with work exhibited in 2019.

#### **OH: What are your future ambitions for the project?**

CB: The time available to me with these women is finite and short. It is cut even shorter by this year's horrific forest fires in the zone and COVID-19 travel restrictions. My sense of urgency is absolute, underpinned by anxiety, a sense of fallibility and of time running out: the Babushkas are getting older and realistically, very soon everyone and everything could be gone.

My ultimate desire is to reclaim and treasure the abandoned and the lost by building an embroidery and historical narrative archive, physically housed in Ukraine, that would give importance and value to regional textile cultures,

craft and most of all to those extraordinary people who have been forgotten.

Recently I have changed the central and pivotal focus of my research due to circumstance. The heart of my current research is and must be based on the now (and immediate future). Stripped bare my research and artworks are ultimately about the relationships I have built up and have with these extraordinary women. So, I need to go back and just be with them.

I also intend to further explore how embroidery and the sharing of skills can be used as a connective device, bringing more of the community of isolated individuals (as yet unknown) together through the process of stitch, making collective and individual work onsite.

I still wish to bring the Babushkas' examples of domestic embroidery to a wider audience by touring my last exhibition 'Place, Home, Loss, Legacy' (Hartlepool Art Gallery, 2019) worldwide, introducing new, evocative personal artworks to convey their poignant, almost unbelievable human story.

<sup>1</sup> In academic theory the concept of 'place' explores how lived experience and social interactions shape the meaning and significance of sites and spaces, transforming them into 'places'.