

JEMIMA BROWN

**PEACE
CAMP**



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**MARKING THE
40TH ANNIVERSARY
OF GREENHAM COMMON
WOMEN'S PEACE CAMP**



Janice McNab

ARMS ARE FOR LINKING: JEMIMA BROWN'S PEACE CAMP

Over the summer of 2021, thickly clad dolls with thermos flask bodies began to appear in the shop windows of Newbury. They popped up in The Empire Cafe and the library, the old air base control tower and the Corn Exchange. They were the ghostly advance guard of *Peace Camp*, Jemima Brown's artistic tribute to the women who had chained themselves to the fences of Greenham Common US Air Force base forty years before. These dolls proliferated around town in a way that must have reminded locals of the actual protestors, and the camp that became one of the longest running peaceful political protests in history.

In 1981, a group of young mothers called *Women for Life on Earth* marched from Wales to the gates of the base and chained themselves to it, demanding dialogue with its leaders, but by extension, with everyone whose lives might be impacted by the presence of US cruise missiles on British soil. Their re-enactment of a Suffragette strategy quickly multiplied and a small camp grew to support them. Within a year, this had become a women-only camp, a decision taken by the female majority in order to ensure a safe, non-violent space free from domestic obligation. Brown's 'dolls' pay tribute to this experimental community, and are dressed like these women dressed, in woollies and sou'westers. Their lower bodies are made out of essential camp items: a torch; a flask; a tin for tea. The sleeping dolls merge into sleeping bags. Each is defined by a tool of their temporary trade—to protest.

The artist extended this representational principle into the diorama of the camp that she created for West Berkshire Museum. Protestor dolls stand in front of a painted backdrop of the perimeter fence, gazing out at us over a barrier of pallets and corrugated iron that took its design from archival photographs. The land they

Peace Camp, installation, detail,
West Berkshire Museum



Julia (Red Lamp),
West Berkshire Museum

¹ While often linked to colonialising narratives, their influence has also been positive. Early twentieth century dioramas in the U.S. played an important role in the creation of nature reserves. When the Pelican Island diorama was displayed in the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1902, it directly influenced the creation of the first U.S. Federal bird reserve in 1903. See R. Hutterer and C. Kampke, *Natural History Dioramas, History, Construction and Educational Role*, pub. Springer Science and Media, Dordrecht, pp. 7-21.

stand on is sculpted from candlewick bedspreads and plastic tarpaulins. Printed polyester cushions stand in as bushes, and the green is woven through with the artist's own 1980's school uniform.

Brown grew up near the common and camp stories bled into her growing teenage awareness of what it was to be a young woman in Thatcher's Britain. She has now sewn this young self into her landscape, a suggestion of the way the story of the Greenham women bled out into the lives of all those who read about it.

This story went on for two decades and upwards of 70,000 women demonstrated, sang, joined hands or danced around the camp's perimeter. They stormed the watch towers, cut fences with bolt cutters, and spoke at the U.N. The cruise missiles did finally go, propelled by *Glasnost* and the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the most important legacy of the protest is now often seen as the radicalisation of a whole female generation. The camp became a place to meet and share experiences from across the divides of class, race, education and sexual orientation. Greenham women from all walks of life were often arrested, and this wider experience of the sexist brutality of the British criminal justice system taught them how to use the law, and how to get it changed. They educated and empowered themselves.

Brown's choice to build a diorama of the protest embeds this self-educating mind-set within the formal terms of *Peace Camp*. Museum dioramas are educational tools that contextualise a museum's objects within a painted and sculpted scenography. These sets allow us, the viewers, to imaginatively embrace a lifeworld that is perhaps long ago or far away. It is an aesthetic order that belongs to the 19th century but is still beloved of natural history museums around the world today. It is defined by miniaturisation, the vastness of life perfected and contained within a manageable stage set, the world as a doll's house with which we might play.¹ The diorama of *Peace Camp*, and the dolls that stand on its folded tarpaulin ground, play with this pedagogic history. They do so with a lightness that revisits the way the women of Greenham Common played with the forces of control that continually tried to shut them down and silence their views.



Peace Camp, installation,
West Berkshire Museum

The barricade that separates us from Brown's figures is constructed out of real pallets, a deck chair, and an oil drum. These are camp items at a one-to-one scale, and a heightened perspective then zooms us in to the one-third life size of the dolls. This is managed by an ironing board sentinel; whose metal frame guards the scene at life size but whose wire structure seamlessly conjoins the painted background fence and the scaled-down intensity of a tilley lamp protestor looking out from her spot on the candlewick grass. A painted background supports this slide into representation by re-working the classical perspective of a beloved English country scene. We might have thought of Constable's *Cornfield* as we follow the mud path to its vanishing point, except that in place of English oaks we now have the concrete posts of an endless security fence. This is also our bucolic hinterland but protesting women have replaced the peasants of yore.

An essential aspect of the diorama is the idea of a God's eye view. But, this is broken when the actors on the stage of life look back, and if these figures are not catching up on sleep, this is all they do. They stare back. None are engaged in open-ended activities that might suggest we make this scene our next playset. We are still looking at an historic diorama but these resisting stares test the viewer relationship proposed by most museum displays. It is uncannily broken down, a feeling that returns whenever we see Alice, Julia or Mel looking back at us from the windows of Newbury's shops and public spaces.

Brown has worked on these beautifully crafted figures for ten years, and has said that the idea for them came to her on a 2010 trip to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, where she found herself looking at puppets in a display case. Her child was only three years old at the time, and the complex gravitational pulls of being an artist, teacher, lover and mother all at once drew up her teenage memories of the camp women and their experiments in new ways of living, organising their lives and effecting change. The artist says she decided in a moment that her next work would be *Peace Camp*.

Sewing the costumes became a joint project with her mother, and many of the discarded clothes they used had previously belonged to her child—an infant sock, for example, making a nice hat. Their clever and

tender production of these costumes does not obscure the simple peg doll design however. Wherever there is a child, there will be some sort of doll, as they are a fundamental part of the socialization process, and the peg doll is its simplest form, found across cultures and millennia. The dolls of *Peace Camp* are not holding Barbie hairbrushes though, and none of them are babies. They have adult faces, wear non-gendered outdoor clothing and the action they are ready for uses bails of twine, wire cutters and torches.² Their incongruity within the greater world of dolls, even in our theoretically post-gendered times, is a representational rupture that, in itself, takes us directly back to the battle the women of Greenham fought for the right to define their own lives.

The making of "woman" as a gendered and normative image was a key issue that camp life challenged. The domesticity that some women were escaping, or of which some were denying themselves the comfort, was recreated on different terms there, and their experimental constructions find reflection in Brown's experimental figures.

² Post gender dolls are big business these days, but a 2017 analysis of themed Lego® sets revealed that they emphasized building professions and skills in their toys for boys, and caring for others, socialising and being pretty in their toys for girls. According to the report's authors, this suggests a continued system in which 'girls spend their childhoods practicing how to be pretty and care for another person, while boys practice getting what they want. See S. Reich, R. Black, T. Foliaki, Constructing Difference: Lego® Set Narratives Promote Stereotypic Gender Roles and Play, in *Sex Roles, A Journal of research*, issue Sept, 2018.

³ Maggie's Centres are a network of carefully designed drop-in centres offering care, information and support to anyone affected by cancer. They are built adjacent to large hospitals in the UK and Hong Kong and carefully designed to offer a gentle environment to those processing difficult medical information. The first centre opened in Edinburgh in 1996, and was named after writer Maggie Keswick Jencks, who died of cancer the year before. With her husband Charles Jencks, she designed the blueprint that has become her legacy.

The dissonance inherent to imagining something anew is revisited when a GAZ® camping stove or a Thermos® flask that our fingers might remember touching and using in the past is *at the same time* also representing a grown woman. Neither definition entirely takes over from the other, and this reiterates a key drama of the camp itself. It was the camp, as a daily lived experience, but it was also a representation of another possible option, an image of resistance that moved around the world.

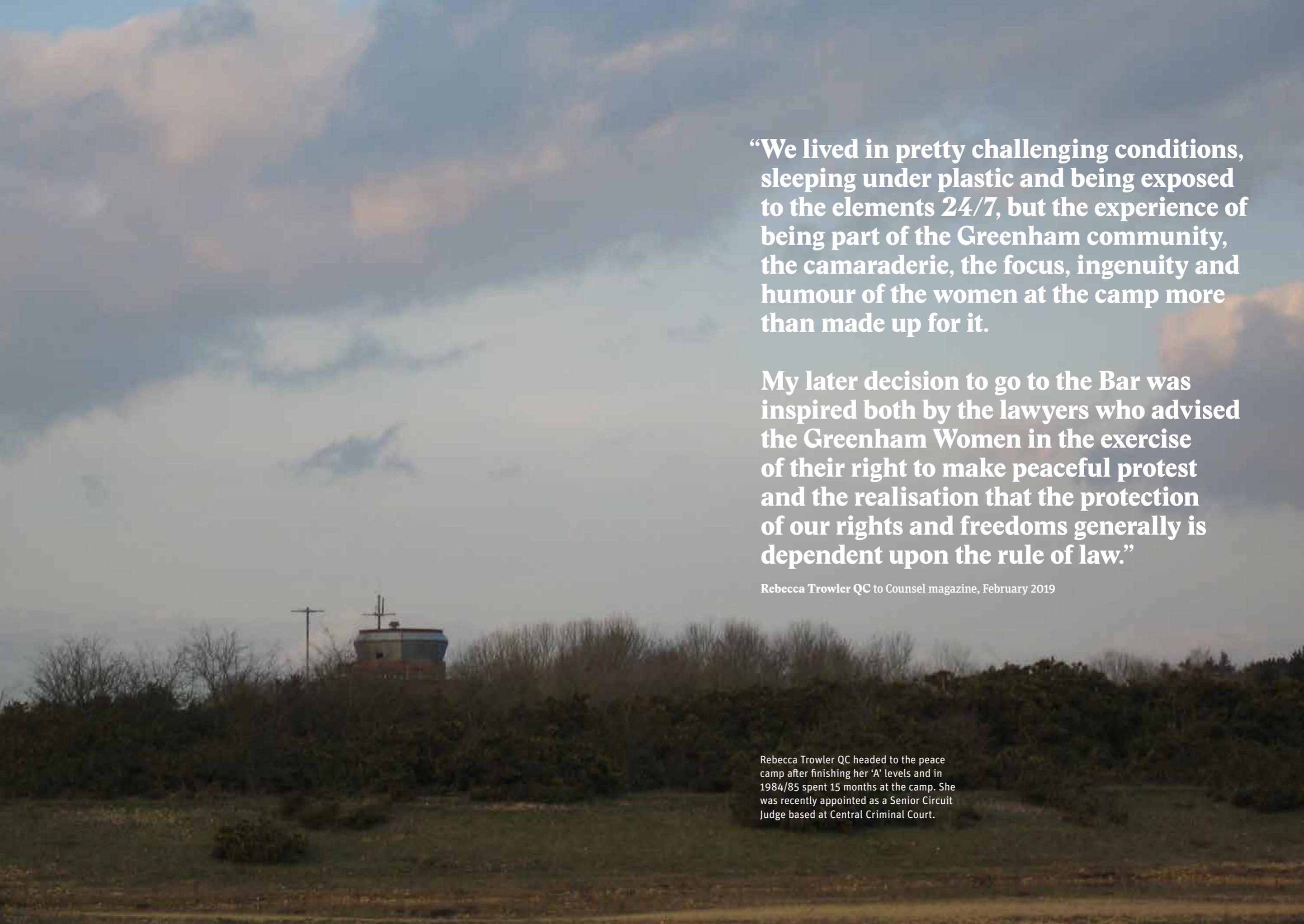
This image also moved into the teenage artist growing up nearby, and Brown has woven her early connection into the material of the diorama, while weaving her adult self into each woman protestor doll. Their faces are all uncannily different-but-similar, and that similarity is the artist.

Every face in *Peace Camp* comes originally from casts taken from a group of students with whom the artist had worked. She digitally blended their features with her own and these merged faces were then re-cast at one third of life size. In making each figure also partly her, she seems to be asking each of us to do likewise; to imagine ourselves in these women's shoes, in another possible life, another possible moment. What would we have done? What can we do now?

The camp is a marker in British women's emancipation. It presented a model of leaderless organization while leading many of those involved into political lives, and provided an idea of community support that would eventually lead to the Maggie's Centres.³ While we celebrate the Greenham women's achievements, however, and place them within the legacy of the Suffragettes, we also need to remember, and perhaps recapture, the anger that drove their determination for change. Sensitizing ourselves to life conditions other than our own is one of the tasks that art can perform, and *Peace Camp* asks us to viscerally re-visit a moment when women in Britain learned how to see themselves in a new way.



Peace Camp, installation, Runway Gallery, The Base

A landscape photograph showing a field in the foreground, a line of trees and bushes in the middle ground, and a building with utility poles in the background under a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“We lived in pretty challenging conditions, sleeping under plastic and being exposed to the elements 24/7, but the experience of being part of the Greenham community, the camaraderie, the focus, ingenuity and humour of the women at the camp more than made up for it.

My later decision to go to the Bar was inspired both by the lawyers who advised the Greenham Women in the exercise of their right to make peaceful protest and the realisation that the protection of our rights and freedoms generally is dependent upon the rule of law.”

Rebecca Trowler QC to Counsel magazine, February 2019

Rebecca Trowler QC headed to the peace camp after finishing her 'A' levels and in 1984/85 spent 15 months at the camp. She was recently appointed as a Senior Circuit Judge based at Central Criminal Court.





Jemima Brown

Jemima Brown was born in Oxford in 1971. She grew up in Oxfordshire and was aged 10 when the Greenham Women's Peace Camp was established. Her experience of the camp was peripheral but has resurfaced to have a significant impact on her work in recent years.

She graduated with an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Art in 1995. In 2011, she won the Mark Tanner Sculpture Award, resulting in the related exhibition at Standpoint in London.

Past achievements include a Fulbright Scholarship as a guest of the Graduate Program at University of California, Los Angeles and the Cocheme Fellowship at University of the Arts, London. Her work is included in collections such as Arts Council England; The West Collection, Philadelphia; Janet De Botton Collection, London and Jack Helgeson Collection, Norway, among others.

Recent exhibitions include *Familie/Family* at Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam (2018) and a solo exhibition, *The Great Indoors*, at Canterbury Christ Church University's Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury (2019). She currently lives and works in Broadstairs, UK

Ken Pratt

Ken Pratt is a writer and curator based in London and Antwerp. He has curated exhibitions in museums in the UK, Norway, Slovenia and the Netherlands, among other countries, as well as in commercial galleries and non-profit spaces. He has written extensively on art and contributed to catalogues for renowned artists including Luc Tuymans, Jane Alexander and Jasmina Cibic. He has contributed to books and publications for institutions and galleries including Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; M HKA and MAS, Antwerp; Tate Modern, London; Wako Works of Art, Tokyo, Vestfossen Kunstlaboratorium, Vestfossen and Fondazione Prada, Milan, among others.

Matilda Strang

Matilda Strang was born in Newbury in 1985 and is an independent curator based in Glasgow. Over the past fifteen years she has programmed and produced various projects and events within the realms of contemporary visual arts, moving image, sound, music and performance. From 2011–19 she was the co-director of Supernormal, an experimental art and music festival based in Oxfordshire, England.

Alexandra Kokoli

Dr. Alexandra Kokoli is Senior Lecturer in Visual Culture at Middlesex University London and Research Associate at VIAD, University of Johannesburg. An art historian and theorist originally trained in comparative literature, Kokoli researches aesthetic mobilisations of discomfort to political ends, focusing on art practices informed by and committed to feminism. She has published widely, including the monograph *The Feminist Uncanny in Theory and Art Practice* (2016). Her research into Greenham Common has been supported by the Paul Mellon Centre and the Leverhulme Trust.

Janice McNab

Janice McNab is a Scottish artist and academic who now lives in the Netherlands. She was born in Aberfeldy, studied at Glasgow School of Art, and in 2000, moved to Amsterdam on a Scottish Arts Council residency programme. Her PhD is from the University of Amsterdam, and she is Head of the MA Artistic Research at The Royal Academy of Art, The Hague. From 2020-2022 she is also a post-doctoral scholar with The University of the Arts, The Hague / Leiden University.