

# Figures in a landscape

For centuries, we have trekked and clambered across 'our' national landscape, from Stonehenge to Scafell Pike. New work by the acclaimed British photographer **Simon Roberts** explores this experience

Introduction by **Stephen Daniels**

Simon Roberts' photographs explore how our collective and national identities are shaped, interpreted, defined and transformed by our relationship to the landscape. Made with a large-format camera, they have a visual command that comes from their expansive nature and scale. "Where possible, I'm looking for a high vantage point from which to frame my photographs," he says, "and more often than not this is from the roof of my motorhome (or using a free-standing stepladder when I'm not permitted to park near the scene). As a result," Roberts says, "the viewer is often placed at a slight distance and elevation from the subject so they are not part of the action but detached, critical viewers. In essence, I attempt to map contemporary life governed by forces that ► 23





River Stour at Flatford, East Bergholt, Suffolk, July 20 2014



Kielder Forest Park, Kielder, Northumberland, April 11 2014



Nymans Estate, Handcross, West Sussex, November 6 2014



Mullion Cove, Lizard Peninsula, Cornwall, May 9 2014



Willy Lott's House at Flatford,  
East Bergholt, Suffolk, July 20 2014

◀ are not possible to see from a position within the crowd. The perspective echoes that of history painting.”

Roberts' work explores senses of belonging in landscapes. Since land invariably belongs to somebody, landscape is closely linked to notions of ownership, whether by individuals or by institutions, as well as to larger worlds of nature and nation, beauty and history. The contemporary engagement with landscapes, particularly beauty spots, is connected to older worlds of journeying, to pilgrimage. Just as medieval pilgrimages were sociable as well as spiritual, so visiting landscapes is itself a collective experience: people interact with each other, whether they like it or not, as well as with the places they go to.

His photographs reveal the degree to which landscapes are peopled in groups – hikers here, picnickers there – and to which the landscape is managed and shaped for visiting as well as for other commercial activities such as farming and forestry. They explore how people perform in such places – striking out into the landscape, taking in the view, observing other visitors. This is the nation as a people as well as a place, its landscape a social theatre as well as picturesque scenery.

“In most of these photographs,” says Roberts, “we see the mundane ways in which we interact with the landscape – diving into a river, cycling along a towpath – perhaps with no sense of the historic significance of the place we’re using or passing through. I’m also looking for subliminal signals in the landscape and often there is a sense of tension just under the surface of my photographs – the police car in Kielder Water, the jockeying for position to take a picture at Flatford Mill, the managed pathways at Stonehenge.”

In one of his photographs (overleaf) – a canonical Lake District view along Wastwater (the deepest lake in England) and towards Scafell Pike (the highest mountain) – we see a group of teenage girls in the foreground. The girls have turned away from the sublime view to gather around the screen of a mobile phone. Similarly, our attention is focused as much on them as the view. What, we might ask, are they up to? Are they looking at a photograph they have taken of the scene behind them? Are they, like more geographically-minded visitors, consulting a digital map of the area? Or are they texting a friend, perhaps sending a view of the scene or, more likely, a selfie? Could they be chatting to a person in another place, wishing themselves away from the landscape they have been brought to in the family car? Since the Lake District was first regarded over two centuries ago as “a sort of national property”, to use Wordsworth’s phrase, its fells have silently witnessed many such figures. This is a portrait as well as a landscape, a social as well as natural scene, a people in their place, as well as a view of the landscape itself. ▶

*This is an edited extract from “Landscapes of the National Trust” by Stephen Daniels, Ben Cowell and Lucy Veale (published October 15, £30); nationaltrustbooks.co.uk. Simon Roberts’ “National Property: the Picturesque Imperfect” previews at Photo London and opens at Flowers Gallery, Cork Street, London W1, July 8-August 8, flowersgallery.com. Stephen Daniels is professor of cultural geography at the University of Nottingham*



Kielder Water Caravan Park, Kielder, Northumberland, April 11 2014



Wastwater, Wasdale, Cumbria, July 31 2014