

SIMON ROBERTS

Simon Roberts' work – *The Election Project* in context

by Greg Hobson, 2010

In Spring of this year, Simon Roberts was selected as the 2010 British Election Artist. The third commission of its kind, it is the first time that a photographer has been chosen. Previous artists were Jonathan Yeo, who in 2001 painted three portraits of the party leaders and in 2005, David Godbold, who made a series of eighteen illustrations. Roberts was selected through a process of nomination and interview and, his track record of powerful and consistent photography works, together with his more recent active involvement of the public in his projects, secured the commission for him.

Roberts came to prominence with his expansive and empathetic book *Motherland*. The result of a year-long journey through over 200 locations in Russia between 2004 and 2005, the photographs eschew the then clichéd view of a broken Russia and instead present a confident and optimistic country, populated by a nation proud of its heritage and shared identity. The book was enhanced by extended, informative captions that have become a hallmark of Roberts' works.

On returning from Russia, Roberts began to muse on what it meant for him to be English and what defined his attachment to his home country, its landscape and people. An enduring fascination with the Russian peoples' sense of belonging led to a reconsideration of his own sense of connection to England, a fascination that became the seed of his next major project, *We English*.

Roberts again proposed an intensive period of travel, this time across the length and breadth of England travelling in a 1993 Talbot Swift Capri motorhome with his then pregnant wife and their two-year-old daughter. Significantly, however, Roberts' photographic point of view shifted from his more intimate, involved position in *Motherland* to a dramatic, wide view of the English at play, of people relaxing and reveling in quintessential and instantly recognizable landscapes. Roberts was inspired by the long and rich tradition of British landscape and social photography, as well as distinctive 16th century Dutch landscape painting, where the images of people and the landscapes have equal weight and interest. The resulting large-format photographs are a fascinating and beautiful exploration of ordinary people, inextricably bound to the places in which they choose to engage in leisure pursuits.

At the outset of *We English* Roberts set up a blog and invited the public to suggest photo-locations and events to him, thus involving them in his journey and potentially, as his subjects. Hundreds of suggestions poured in, from attending established English folk customs, and visiting village horticultural society shows to photographing Ramadan celebrations held on the 'Curry Mile' in Manchester. As his journey unfolded, so did his fantastically detailed and accessible blog, providing a real-time diary of his trip, his

SIMON ROBERTS

thoughts, his observations about photography and his ongoing dialogue with his followers. In fact, the blog is so detailed and consistent, that it has become a noteworthy work in itself.

We English was published as a handsome monograph in September 2009, and the exhibition launched at the National Media Museum in Bradford on 12 March 2010. Just seven days later, on 20 March, Roberts was announced as the official Election Artist by the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art. On 6 April, Gordon Brown, then Prime Minister, asked the Queen to dissolve Parliament on 12 April and announced the General Election for 6 May, thus beginning tightly media managed, yet curiously dull, major party election campaigns. These virtually indistinguishable campaigns were designed to engage a disillusioned electorate, disappointed with political process and angry with politicians that were benefiting from perks during a time of recession and austerity. In this context, Roberts – during just twenty-four days of campaigning – faced the challenge of making an artistic record of what was to become one of the most contested and politically significant elections of recent decades.

It was Roberts' intention to cover as much of the country as possible, and to include campaigning by as many of the political parties as possible. In his words, he was attempting to “capture the unprecedented diversity of political parties canvassing in this country, taking a cross section of those fighting the General Election, moving away from focusing on the choreographed campaign activity of the three main parties, and exploring the more mundane reality of electioneering and also the experiences of the smaller parties and independent candidates standing in marginal constituencies around the country.”

Roberts adopted the logistical and theoretical approach of *We English*, travelling in a motorhome and adopting long, wide views afforded by elevated positions – usually from the roof of his motorhome – and the peculiarities of his 5x4” plate camera. Furthermore, he conceived a novel way to encourage public participation by inviting people to comment on the campaign by uploading photographs from their digital cameras, or transmitted from their mobile phones to create what Roberts described as “an alternative photographic vision alongside my own, adding a collaborative and democratic dimension to the overall work. The public's images will also help provide an antidote to the more stage managed photographs from the campaign trail.”

Rooted in his successful approaches adopted for *We English*, Roberts' photographs – and those of his public participants – provide us with the most revealing portrait of Britain during an election, to date. The combination of the high-tech and instantaneous media of mobile phones, and the low tech, slow process of using a 5x4” plate camera and traditional film processing leads to new meanings and insights that are created by this juxtaposition of divergent views of the same subject. (Interestingly, Roberts received several images taken by members of the public at events he had attended, subjective snapshots within his more objective panoramas of the same scene.)

SIMON ROBERTS

The public submissions are typically British, combining a healthy cynicism with wry humour, and an eye for the absurd and surreal. Roberts' photographs, on the other hand, are a captivating investigation of the British landscape in 2010, as well as the political campaign that was unfolding in it. In the exhibition, he presents us with twenty-five large format photographs - multi-layered and detailed tableaux - one for each day he spent on the campaign trail and includes a final photograph capturing an unexpected additional day, the coalition talks. His elevated position affords a view that is unfamiliar to the person on the ground, in particular the eye-level, close up view of the press photographer and television camera in the media scrum. Roberts' photographs encompass entire scenes and, what might normally appear to be banal vistas, peopled by weary campaign-trailers, are transformed into elaborate theatres, the landscapes providing the sets for the detail of the many nuanced interactions and expressions being played out in them.

These elements - ones that make Roberts' photographs unique in their astute political and social commentary - are appositely brought together in the photographs of the incoming and outgoing leaders. David Cameron is seen strolling to his local polling station in Witney in Oxfordshire, holding hands with his wife. Here, a mannered media circus lines the streets while comically extended microphone booms attempt to capture Cameron's comments. Rather fortuitously perhaps, given the election outcome, a 'Liberal Democrats Winning Here' poster can be seen in the garden next to the polling station. Not immediately evident is the person dressed as a chicken in the centre of the frame. Surrounded by yellow-jacketed policemen the only observers are Cameron's own press and security. This chicken followed Cameron on his election trail. Sent as the *Daily Mirror's* election mascot to add, "much needed silliness to an otherwise po-faced campaign." Everyone else - including a woman's Jack Russell terrier being held up by its owner - studiously ignores the chicken, instead focusing on the Camerons with an air of respectful interest, rather than celebration. Cameron appears jovial, at ease and confident, a demeanour that remained publicly unshaken, though not entirely well judged, in the days that followed.

Nine days earlier and 185 miles north, Roberts serendipitously captured Gordon Brown encountering Gillian Duffy in Rochdale. All the elements of a theatrical play are here in one photograph: the grinning man in the red tie at the bottom of the photograph clearly finds the confrontation amusing; the security service officials are alert and aware; Brown's personal press aides are looking out for a potentially damaging intervention; bored ex-offenders go about their business of cleaning the bridleway, a media opportunity arranged for the Labour leader's visit to the town. Meanwhile, centre stage, Gordon Brown is harangued by Duffy, whom, moments later, he would describe as a "bigoted woman."

While Roberts' photographs are a timely record of the rise and fall of a Prime Minister and a government, they are far more than that. Like all his photographs from *The Election Project*, they are microcosms of Britain itself.