With The Social: Landscapes of Leisure, Simon Roberts worked on a major commission on behalf of the Northern East Photography Network for their month of Photography, extending his exploration of the English social landscape.

The photographs are echoingly familiar, yet also distanced. As in the traditions of large-scale history painting that inform them, we encounter highly socialized and deliberately lyrical environments. Yet these are thoroughly contemporary landscapes, where ordinary people get on with their various activities and pursuits. Some of these are solitary – taking the dog for a walk, or lost in reverie on a park bench.

But most of all these are sociable and socialized environments, full of activity. To some viewers the locations will be immediately recognizable, while for many others the ways in which people use and inhabit the spaces – having a picnic, flying a kite, playing football or cycling – provide the more immediate points of connection.

Roberts’ post-industrial landscapes were taken on sites of former heavy industry, such as Silksworth Ski Slope, sited on a former slagheap of the Silksworth Colliery or St. Peter’s Riverside, once the centre of Sunderland’s shipbuilding industry.

As in many of Simon’s projects, themes of memory and identity attach to the otherwise ordinary past-times and vistas. The relationships between people and places create a rich tapestry of social observation, where the high and often distant vantage points give a sense of the contemporary existence of each different landscape, as well as the accretions of historical use, social transformation and reinvention.