

# SIMON ROBERTS

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## Settlement

by Martin Caiger-Smith, 2014

In July 2004 Simon Roberts embarked on a twelve-month journey across Russia. His aim was to compile a photographic portrait of a country he had imagined, since childhood, through fiction, film and geography lesson, and to find in its realities a corrective ‘footnote’ (as he put it) to the clichéd images of political crisis, excess and deprivation toted by the media. The majority of the images he made, from Murmansk to Vladivostok, brought together in the publication *Motherland*, are of people in their places. Some could be called portraits, of people – often couples – identified by name, accompanied by the sort of details of their lives that betray a conversation, an empathetic encounter. Yet despite the thoroughness of his exploration, the length of his journey, Roberts remained, and felt himself to remain, an ‘outside observer.’

A single image from *Motherland* – almost ten years on now – seems a portent of the approach that has characterized all his work since then. It’s a reflective image of trees and water, at a cursory glance reminiscent of the landscape paintings of the Russian painter Ivan Shishkin from the 1890s – finely detailed, delicately toned and understated studies of the forest edge. Yet unlike most of those, Roberts’s landscape is – we soon note – peopled. Small figures, in groups, standing or crouched, stud the riverbank and its wooded backdrop in the pale Sunday sunlight. They are observed, significantly, by the photographer at a certain distance, from across the water. *Victory Day Picnic, Yekaterinburg, May 2005.*

Since his return from Russia to England later that year, Roberts has retained this carefully-constructed, broad view of people engaged with each other and with their environment. And has turned his lens on his own country – and his compatriots – in a series of projects, realised in exhibitions, books and broadsheet print. This exhibition brings these projects together for the first time in one body: *Landscape Studies of a Small Island.*

What sort of landscapes has Roberts sought and found? We speak of the economic, political, social or cultural landscape: rarely, now, do we think of landscape as unpeopled. The American tradition of landscape photography – from the mountainscapes of Carleton Watkins and Ansel Adams to Edward Weston’s desert dunes – advanced a ‘pure’ vision of that vast land as wilderness, untouched nature; it tended naturally towards the transcendental, an emotional commitment to sublime grandeur – and this led in turn, by way of reaction, to more recent dystopian views by a generation of photographers, of nature despoiled, describing the way in which man established himself within the environment, acted on or against raw nature: a passage from *America the Beautiful* to *God’s Own Junkyard*<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The former is the title of the famous patriotic song extolling the virtues of the majestic country; the latter the title of a photographic book by Peter Blake, published in 1963, bemoaning the ‘planned deterioration of America’s landscape’

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The English landscape, by contrast, has evolved over a longer time in a slower, deeper, more nuanced exchange, a sort of accommodation. Every track and contour of the land bears the marks of human presence, of settlement. It can never be truly empty, its scale is essentially a human scale. And so its landscape tradition, in painting and then in photography, is (like the Dutch or Flemish) one of a land used, settled, picturesque more than sublime - a busy landscape marked and shaped by constant change and event. English landscape has never been far from the social.

This is the terrain that Roberts entered, and he positions himself within a long tradition, of those who have sought to portray the land through its people, rooted within their location. In the Victorian era the emphasis was most often on the regional and the traditional: Peter Henry Emerson photographed East Anglia, adopting a tight focus on the rural rhythms of the locality, often with a wistful, elegiac tone. Over the last fifty years, photographers have again attempted to depict the reality of English life in terms of the particularities of regional and class identity and difference. Chris Killip found his community in the north, among the dispossessed inhabitants of the post-industrial Yorkshire mining districts; Paul Graham traced the track of the A1, the Great North Road that runs like an artery up the body of Britain from London to Edinburgh; John Davies has looked out over the distinctive townscapes of the Welsh valleys, Jem Southam has followed the course of the 'red rivers' of Cornwall, fast-flowing records of man's workings on nature.

Others - before Simon Roberts - have sought to take on the whole nation, and in so doing to explore not just England but the notion of Englishness itself. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the politician and amateur photographer Benjamin Stone set an important marker, embarking on an exhaustive study of British customs and manners. In more recent times, Tony Ray Jones, in the 1960s, returning (like Roberts) from a period abroad, set out determinedly to make an 'important statement' about English society - 'to communicate something of the spirit and mentality of the English, their habits and their way of life...the ironies that exist in the way they do things, partly through tradition and partly through the nature of their environment and mentality.'

Such ambitious ventures are best taken on in a spirit of humility, and this, it seems, is Roberts's way: imposing on himself this challenge, he grants that is impossible to define such a thing as Englishness but not - clearly - impossible or uninteresting to seek it. In Roberts's English odyssey, each body of work arises from a defined project, and each project entails a journey, a passage from place to place, through time and the seasons. On his return from Russia, Roberts set off - as Ray Jones had before him - on the road, in a motorhome; like Ray Jones, too, he headed for the seaside, the edge of the island that gives it its form, the place where people most readily come together and reveal themselves. The motorhome became part of Roberts's means, a public declaration of sorts, and a platform from which to engage with his subject and to 'act' as a photographer, not least in a literal sense: the vehicle's roof provided Roberts with a secure place on which to erect his tripod and operate his unwieldy camera and an elevated position from which to survey the landscape - a sort of ritual procedure in itself, to emulate the ritual activities he looked down on. His first stop: Skegness Beach, Lincolnshire, a landscape of scrubby sandhills,

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waves and scudding cloud, a horizon at mid-point, a swathe of scattered small figures, braced against the wind, below.

Photographing from an elevated viewpoint was a tactic much favoured by the so-called New Topographic landscape photographers in America from the 1970s on – Robert Adams, Joe Deal and Lewis Baltz among them. Their stance as they surveyed man’s footprint on the landscape was a reaction against the emotional appeal to the sublime prevalent in much landscape photography: ‘I want my work to be neutral and free from aesthetic or ideological posturing’ said Baltz. As an English critic wrote of them in 1981, their refusal to moralise was ‘not an avoidance of the moral issue, but rather it allows the viewer to gain an understanding of the subject through the evidence provided within the photographs. It establishes distance, both emotional and intellectual...’<sup>2</sup>

Much the same could be said of Roberts’s work. Non-judgmental, free of the irony that inflects the observations of Ray Jones or his follower Martin Parr’s droll visions of strange doings by the sea, it is above all intent on providing evidence, ‘information’. How people come together in planned events or idle play, how they disport themselves across a scene, share space or find their own in a crowd; their apparatus and apparel in fair weather or foul, the environments they gravitate towards or create. His pictures appear to carry no overt political message or agenda. And yet, people – unlike landscape? – cannot be viewed with utter neutrality, nor can their presence itself be regarded as neutral. Evidence is gathered, here, of social relations, human conditions, into which much can be read. The title of Roberts’s earlier Russian project, *Motherland*, is a politically loaded term, a relation of people and place freighted with compromised notions of national pride and love of country, and Roberts’s first project in his own country, *We English*, focusing on the ‘unforced’ activities that mark the communal pursuit of leisure in the English landscape, balances a dispassionate view with a pervasive sense of recognition, even affection.

A balance is struck between reserve and engagement in these works. The ‘We’ of Roberts’s title declares some measure of personal attachment, an identification with his subjects, the race goers, picnickers, golfers and pigeon fanciers, and with the locations, whether the well-worn, even clichéd, landscapes of the Lake District or Gordale Scar (much sung, much painted, in English Romantic tradition), or the more anonymous delights of Bank End Fishery or the Chelford Car Boot Sale. Throughout, Roberts maintains a measured distance: the figures in his compositions typically occupy the middle ground, marking their territory like a sort of acupuncture of the landscape. And yet there is nothing covert in the photographer’s approach: he encouraged collaboration, ‘outside’ the work itself: at the outset of his journey Roberts set up a blog, and on his website announced his project, soliciting suggestions for places he might visit, happenings to attend<sup>3</sup>. Responses poured in: so involvement was sought, contact was made, an ongoing dialogue established.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Highnam, *New Topographics*, Arnolfini, Bristol, 1981

<sup>3</sup> [www.we-english.co.uk](http://www.we-english.co.uk)

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Immediately after the publication of *We English*, Roberts was commissioned to follow the campaign trail for the May 2010 General Election, and again criss-crossed the country, at accelerated speed, as the 2010 British Election Artist. The images he made for *The Election Project* retain the elevated viewpoint afforded by his Talbot motorhome; from its roof he surveyed candidates of every political colour, meeting and greeting the electorate on doorstep, pavement and village green, against a backdrop of tower block or church tower, sometimes submerged in a melee of locals and press, sometimes bereft and alone, beached on a kerb or street corner. Even here, in these local pictures of a national event, there is a sort of democracy of interest: a composition can pivot on the stray gesture of an unwitting passer-by as readily as on a major politician pressing flesh at the centre of a knot of attenders.

It is the unforced yet rigorous structure of the image, the discipline of the photographer's eye, that allows us to wander at will in among the crowd, to catch the seemingly casual detail, that random sign. *This Is a Sign*, the project that followed in 2012, is a poignant counterpoint to the electoral jamboree - an A-Z compendium, a silent visual litany of communal protest, resignation, resilience and despair expressed everyday by everyman, in the face of the economic downturn across the country: a national fabric of verbal protest, singed at the edges, woven on Union banners, printed on demonstration placards, scrolling across traders' TV screens and daubed on the boarded-up shopfronts of every high street.

And to conclude, a return to the seafront, the edge of England, and the pleasure pier. Roberts's most recent series, *Pierdom*, is a circumnavigation of the sites on which these distinctive, precarious structures reach out to sea, architectural expressions of the working class leisure, quintessentially English and now, long after their Victorian heyday, fading into disrepair, for the most part deserted. Skeletons in waiting, they are threatened like the very coastline itself by the irresistible forces of change - erosion and silting, shifting sands and rising waters, exposure and settlement - that are as much social as they are natural.

What does all this amount to, this fascinating store of visual information? And where does Simon Roberts stand in all this? Roberts's English (as opposed to British) focus suggests a personal identification, a determination to explore further that which matters most closely to him, that to which he belongs - and the long journey, the blog, the appeals to the public, all appear like some sort of pact. The project as a whole points to another form of *settlement* that may, ultimately, be a personal one for Roberts - settlement in the sense of an agreement, or resolution, following an exchange or transaction - and a sense of closure? Closure seems unlikely: the testing of reality against preconceptions, received truths or cliché, the search for understanding through observation, seems set to continue.

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