

WE ENGLISH

To mark their acquisition by the Gallery, artist Simon Roberts introduces his series of prints depicting the South Downs

Although I was born in Croydon (in 1974) my formative years were spent in a provincial town in Surrey's commuter belt, while holidays took place in the Lake District (usually in the rain) or visiting my grandparents in a Sussex retirement town on the South Coast. Childhood memories, and the range of associations and images they suggest, became the starting point for 'We English'. It seemed to me that these landscapes formed an important part of my consciousness of who I am and how I remember, interpret and understand England.

Over the course of a year, I produced a series of colour landscape photographs, which record places where groups of people congregate for a common purpose and shared experience. Looking at leisure activities struck me as a thought-provoking way of exploring England's shifting cultural and national identity. Leisure activities might seem to say much more about who we are than, for instance, what we do in the workplace. They can be aspirational, revealing not just how we see ourselves but how we wish others to see us. And landscape is an intrinsic part of these leisure experiences. It is a commodity: we consume it, utilise it, adapt it and make it ours, even though we rarely own it.

The four images acquired by Pallant House Gallery were all taken in Sussex. Some of the landscapes, for example, the South Downs, have changed very little over time. While the airy lightness of the large skies and the verdant

beauty of the fertile hills evoke an atmospheric timelessness, the paragliders present a very contemporary slice of British life. The dialogue between old and new, past and present in this image appeals to me, as does the tension between the somewhat triumphant flying of the flag of St George and the old-fashioned backdrop of the quiet static caravans positioned outside Peacehaven, in another of the images. Like Edward Burra's images of people at leisure, my photographs are of everyday activities and everyday people. Unlike Burra, the people in my images are seen from afar, moving in landscapes that appear larger and more potent than they are, so that they are dwarfed by beauty, by nature, by their environment's drama and dimensions.

There is a long and rich history of surveys by British artists that have captured the social, political and cultural landscape of England and Britain; many of whose work can be found in the collection of Pallant House Gallery. So I am delighted that these four photographs from 'We English' will now constitute part of the collection and will play a humble part in the on-going evolution of this rich selection of modern British art.

The photographs will be on display at Pallant House Gallery from 22 October to 22 February. For more information about Simon Roberts see www.simonroberts.com. The monograph 'We English' is published by Chris Boot, 2009