

SIMON ROBERTS



Published: Chris Boot, 2009

Simon Roberts travelled throughout England in a motorhome between 2007 and 2008 for this portfolio of large-format tableaux photographs of the English at leisure. *We English* builds on his first major body of work, *Motherland* (2005), with the same themes of identity, memory and belonging resonating throughout. Photographing ordinary people engaged in diverse pastimes, Roberts aims to show a populace with a profound attachment to its local environment and homeland. He explores the notion that nationhood - that what it means to be English - is to be found on the surface of contemporary life, encapsulated by banal pastimes and everyday leisure activities. The resulting images are an intentionally lyrical rendering of a pastoral England, where Roberts finds beauty in the mundane and in the exploration of the relationship between people and place, and of our connections to the landscapes around us.

SELECTED REVIEWS

"We English, the title of Roberts's engrossing exhibition of large-scale color photographs (and the related book) might lead you to expect gently satiric social studies in the style of Martin Parr. But the focus of the work is primarily landscape, and several of the images are broad, handsome vistas with only a few people scattered about the terrain. Even the photographs that include larger groups were taken from a distance—a perspective that echoes classical painting, although the subjects (golfers before a line of cooling towers, race contestants sloughing through the mud of a river at low tide) are decidedly contemporary."

Vince Aletti, The New Yorker, October 2009

"These elegant pictures invite multiple readings, but they do it with confidence and zest. With flashes of wit, humanity, and abundant respect for his photographic predecessors, Simon Roberts has added a good one to the canon of surveys of the English."

Francis Hodgson, Photography Critic, 2011

"Best new book on England for many years."

Martin Parr, The Telegraph, December 2010

"Roberts' book is a kind of gentle celebration, its images captured on a large-format 5x4-inch camera and owing as much to the English landscape painting tradition as any photographic precedent.....The results are epic vistas captured from a distance that are both timeless and contemporary."

Sean O'Hagan, Observer, 2011

"We English is a complex body of work – photographically simple in one sense, but imagistically complicated, with many different inferences, not all of them immediately appearance, so one can be grateful for the book's size, which enables one to see much of the detail in the pictures. Whether it can be considered as art or documentary, I don't care – the so-called painterly aspects of the work interest me the least. What does interest me is that Simon Roberts has produce an intelligent and persuasive vision of our contemporary English mores."

Gerry Badger, Ag Magazine, 2010

"Quite simply, the images are beautiful, though perhaps not immediately revealing - their beauty can encourage the clumsy habit of overlooking what they contain. The best of these photographs are remarkable in the layers that Roberts has managed to capture - environment, group and individual. And truly the three inform and shape the others."

Sarah Bradley, Photo-Eye Magazine, 2010

“While many of Roberts’ images adhere to our traditional notions of beauty spots, others are of noisy, packed events like Derby Day. In each, however, the framing is such that the subjects are fixed firmly within their environment. Individuals are rendered small but, significantly, we can still read them by their expressions, their clothes and what they’re doing. It’s a technique that links back to landscape painting and the layered canvases of the 16th century. As a contemporary record, however, Roberts has captured a nation beautifully and brilliantly.”

Creative Review, 2009

“They are first and foremost pictures of the English at leisure, but they would be little without their topographical backcloth. His depiction of the English landscape is sublime in the true, Romantic sense of the word, wide and deep in their prospect, a blurring in the distance, rugged hills under shifting skies that flit between now and everlasting. They work best when the pleasure-seekers are reduced to constellations of tiny figures in the foreground. Roberts replaces the shepherds and rustic folk of yore, though, with trekkers, golfers, paragliders, picnickers and revellers.”

Lucy Davies, The Daily Telegraph, 2010

“The movement that [Tony] Ray-Jones began and [Martin] Parr continues is also one in which Simon Roberts is at home. His monumental study *We English* manages to combine a fascination with social rituals such as St George’s day pageants and visits to the seaside with the type of huge-scale and distant large format ‘grand views’ that appear to come straight out of the American tradition....For Roberts, landscape is a site of leisure pursuits, and this viewpoint fits well with both contemporary social thought and the consumption-obsessed imagery of much current documentary. But he manages somehow to allow the sublime beauty of many of these settings through, and to make pictures of lasting quality.”

Peter Hamilton, British Journal of Photography, 2009

“Roberts’ photographs [in *We English*] are indeed beautiful. The light is often luminous, the colour rich and intense.....The pictures are sumptuous.”

Jane Fletcher, Source, 2010

“With a Simon Roberts it is a case of the more you look, the more you see. *We English* has tremendous historical and anthropological interest; it takes us on an amazing journey through ideas of belonging and memory, identity and place. It is one of the those rare books than you can and will come back to time and time again.”

Tim Clark, 1000 Words Magazine, 2009

"The pictures are in themselves undeniably beautiful, but their real power comes from the collection as a whole. To remove from the stream of time a series of moments that are instantly recognisable as being part of life in England is a real achievement, and one that will ensure this collection will become the defining study of life in England at the end of this decade."

Phil Coomes, BBC News Online, 2009

"The first place he photographed was the beach at Skegness in Lincolnshire, where people have holidayed since the nineteenth century. It's a bit grim. The sky is overcast and the water brown, there is litter and everyone is bundled up, wearing coats. The scene is mundane and familiar to many, but Roberts has managed to bring a lyrical quality to it. The sea and sky are huge, the view is elevated and looking down we get a vast sense of space....There are two stories in his photographs: one is everyday, the other is eternal."

Hannah Duguid, The Independent, 2009

"We English has all the hallmarks of a great body of work by a photographer of considerable depth. It shuns the flashy "in-yer-face" tactics so commonplace in favour of quiet thought and subtle observation. It is work that repays the reader through frequent re-examination: full of humour, but more subtle than Erwitte; full of commentary, but less judgemental than Parr; full of beauty, but without cliché."

Michael Cockerham, Blue Filter, 2009

"In 2007 award-winning photographer Simon Roberts embarked upon a 13-month journey around England...The resulting photographs are lush in their painterly composition but defiantly mundane in subject matter, conceived as an unflinching and unbiased exploration of what it means to be English today."

Stephen Ledger, Eluxury, 2009

"The influence of past masters is evident, but Roberts's wide-open images allow in as much landscapes as possibly. This shows we leisure-practitioners in context, organic elements within a larger canvas. We look as dull as the topography and weather, occasionally lit up by a Turner-esque ray of sunshine. While Roberts is not the first to find beauty in bleakness, or in the mundane, even moronic, weekend habits of the English, he brings to the treatment an irony-free and lovingly meditative gaze."

Chris Morris, Timeout London, 2009

"His large format colour prints of epic scenes resonate with blurry memories of classical landscape paintings."

Sue Steward, The Arts Desk, 2009

"We English takes the much photographed people and landscapes of England, and re-imagines them on a monumental scale; creating a classic, elegant, dignified, quiet body of work: social observation without presumption. Roberts isn't just ticking boxes: he's seeing what's there, in all its subtlety and complexity, producing work which is completely at variance with all the imagery of England to which we have become so accustomed over the years."

David Land, RPS Journal, 2009

"True to his word, Roberts' pictures are unmistakably his own. Photographed in colour with a tripod-mounted 5x4 plate camera, they exhibit a disciplined compositional restraint, a richness of palette, and often a wealth of narrative incident.....His intent to mine the country's overlooked moments - the trivial and the quotidian - is made good."

Guy Lane, The Art Book, 2010

"Simon Roberts' We English series particularly benefits from the large format and clean, elegant design chosen for this beautiful book. Leafing leisurely through the pages, it's easy to become drawn in and absorbed by the detail in each image."

Jim Casper, Lens Culture, 2009

"We English adopts the slightly elevated vantage point known from painting, using a large-format camera. The photographs indeed look like paintings, with their often vast vistas, in which people often are mere specks...Given the universality that I find in We English, the book has an appeal that extends beyond the borders of England. Whatever the people in those photographs are doing might define them as "the English", but it can also relate to other people. And what better portrait of your own country could you create than one that does talk about our human condition?"

Joerg Colberg, Conscientious, 2009

"We English is a wonderful mixing pot; an autobiographical and cultural narration placed in generous landscape settings about those who call themselves 'English'.... While utilizing a large format camera and what appears is a small aperture, Roberts creates beautiful color photographs that are rich in content, color saturation, sharp in focus and loaded with details."

Douglas Stockdale, The Photobook, 2010

"The work of Roberts', reverberate with the echoes of traditional English landscape painting, whilst remaining stoically contemporary in nature."

Wayne Ford, 2011