

SIMON ROBERTS

The Last Moment

by Miranda Gavin, 2014

Much has been written about how 'disruptive' technologies and new means of communication are transforming our relationship to the media and overturning traditional business practices. It is within these technological, social, and psychological contexts that Simon Roberts explores the ways in which we now create and consume photography, not only the deluge of images being produced and shared daily but also the obsessive need to document our lives. *The Last Moment* (2011-2013) signals a departure in approach for Roberts as he uses techniques of scanning, layering, marking and masking to create stripped back, abstract photographic works in which circles of various sizes float free in a semi-translucent sky.

In *The Last Moment* Roberts engages with ideas of re-appropriation by scanning published press photographs of key world events collected from British broadsheet newspapers, and investigating our radically shifting visual culture and contemporary attitudes to image making. The act of scanning the surface of newspapers is a physical engagement that reveals the nature of the printing process—tiny round dots, rather than squared-off pixels—while prominence is given to the materiality of the photographic object and the crossovers between analogue and digital media. The idea of translucence, especially as it relates to optics and lenses, is central to the work. Roberts masks off the background, but not entirely, using a white layer to create a ghostly veneer – a semi-negative space - patterned by different constellations of artificial disembodied 'eyes', each one a self-contained world.

Roberts' artistic gesture is not an act of erasure (this would imply total removal). Instead, the artist accentuates the focal points in each image

by preserving original densities, allowing the backdrop to recede through the act of its being rendered translucent. Translucidity is not only a visual aesthetic running through *The Last Moment* but is a metaphor for the various ways cameras function and are used in today's global societies. The masking of the background context is an artistic gesture but it is suggestive of the ways many people experience the world: often in chunks, sectioned off, and devoid of context.

Traces of previous bodies of work, such as *The Election Project* (2010), resurface in *The Last Moment*, providing a framework within which Roberts foregrounds the spectacle as that of onlookers rather than the event itself. Flocks of amateur and professional photographers follow the UK election trail, congregating around newsworthy events, and therein become points of interests themselves. Occasions such as royal weddings and celebrity appearances sit alongside photographs of political events like the Arab Spring uprisings and the death of Colonel Gaddafi, where disruptive technologies and the emerging role of citizen journalists have transformed traditional media reporting and distribution.

The title *The Last Moment* makes reference to the capturing of treasured memories once referred to as '*The Kodak Moment*', and the recent demise of the American camera manufacturer which became synonymous with the development of amateur photography. Roberts explicitly notes the influence of John Baldasseri and Paul Graham's *American Nights* while the work sits alongside that of contemporary visual artist and photographers who are using mark-making and masking, but often in terms of erasure.

The role of photography today is multifarious and in a constant state of flux. As photography has become ever more available and mobile, the perceived function and value of photographs has changed. In the world of social media where life is played out online, the act of taking a photograph is not confined to the production of a final image, a physical object, but is more about the intangible nature of photography, the ritual of sharing photographs, and of asserting the photographer's presence. It is against this backdrop that Roberts' contemplates *The Last Moment*.

Miranda Gavin writes about contemporary photography and lens-based media.