

SIMON ROBERTS

New Vedute

by Miranda Gavin, 2016

In his most recent body of work, *New Vedute* (2015-16), Simon Roberts takes traditional Italian tourist postcards found in junk shops and flea markets, all of which have been written on, stamped and sent back to the UK, and reanimates them for a contemporary viewer. Framing one image within another, Roberts uses these postcards depicting idealised views of Italy— grand historical monuments, ancient ruins, picturesque natural landscapes and holiday destinations—as backdrops upon which he then superimposes more contemporary photographs from Italy. Roberts is in effect deconstructing the conventional tourist gaze by using vernacular images including his father’s holiday snapshots taken during family vacations to Italy, his own photographs taken with a compact camera and freely-available images found online.

The use of opaque layers recalls Roberts’ series, *The Last Moment*, and its translucency is a filter through which our understanding of the country and culture of Italy is constructed and revealed. The combination of contemporary and picture postcard photographs also highlights some of the political, social and economic challenges facing Italy today, especially in light of mass tourism, financial instability, unemployment, the refugee crisis and immigration. This creates an inherent tension that can be disconcerting and in merging two photographs, taken at different times for different purposes, Roberts is also playing with the way we, literally, see Italy.

It is in the space existing between competing versions of Italy that Roberts probes materially and metaphorically. Sometimes Roberts shows us the same scene, sometimes it is geographically unrelated; at times the effect is disorientating, even humorous, particularly in the way scale and size create comic visual moments. The postcard is thus a means by which the viewer perceives Italy, a country that is currently the second most visited tourist destination after France. Roberts further taps into the relationship between British tourism and Italy, as well as that between photography and the ontology of the postcard, especially its cultural and iconographic significance.

Historically and conceptually Roberts’ Italian postcard series sits within a trajectory of work by diverse Italian artists including the Venetian painter Canaletto, artist Franko Vaccari and photographer Luigi Ghirri. In the 1600s a new landscape genre emerged, known as ‘veduta’ from the Italian for ‘view’, and artists such as Canaletto became known for creating topographical paintings, drawings and prints of cityscapes and other vistas that were sold to travellers as souvenirs of their time abroad. These early travellers included the British elite who embarked on Grand Tours of Italy in the late 1600-1700s to further their classical education.

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Concurrently the development of photography allowed for the accurate mechanical reproduction of a diminutive vista that could be printed onto a postcard to create what Roberts refers to as a modern-day 'vedute'. Furthermore, industrialisation and globalisation helped to create and shape modern tourism as a cultural and political experience and Italy became a primary destination for the British Victorian middle classes, who were now able to travel to Italy using rail transport. Thomas Cook established an inclusive form of tourism in the mid 1800s, known as the Cook's Tour—this in turn allowed for independent travel, whilst being catered for and accommodated, and led to the replacement of the notion of the traveller with that of the tourist. A century later as mass tourism reached new heights after WWII, tourists from all income groups visited Italy as a holiday destination.

Roberts' approach is also inspired by Franko Vaccari's *Omaggio all'Ariosto* (1974), for which the artist combined travel and photography, as he retraced Ariosto's walk from Carpi to Ferrara in Italy, taking Polaroid snaps from the towns he passed through en route. Further associations include photographer Luigi Ghirri, who redefined the Italian landscape in the book project *Viaggio in Italia* (1984), in which he collaborated with twenty authors to provide a different view of daily life in Italy, articulating the local and the everyday rather than the grand, the traditional and the stereotypical.

In nodding to these works Roberts is also reflecting on and questioning the importance of cultural emblems, the notion of typical Italian landscapes and the nature of the postcard. As well as exploring the pictorial side of the original postcard, Roberts also creates titles for his repurposed postcards using the exchanges written on the back alongside the date they were sent. *New Vedute* (2015-16) is thus a multidimensional body of work in which Roberts has reconceptualised the postcard for the digital age through fragmenting and disrupting (singular and) romanticised views of Italy.