SIMON ROBERTS

National Property and a Pilgrimage to the Picturesque

By Stephen Daniels, 2015

Simon Roberts' photographs explore how our collective and national identities are shaped, interpreted, defined and transformed by our relationship to the landscape. Often creating expansive, tableaux photographs, he creates visual narratives which chart the ambiguities and complexities of post-industrial Britain. The photographs require scrutiny and contemplation. They have a visual command that comes from their expansive nature and scale, where all are made with a large format camera.

Where possible he's looking for a high vantage point from which to frame his photographs, and more often than not this is from the roof of his motorhome. As a result, the viewer is often placed at a slight distance and elevation from the subject so they are not part of the action but detached, critical viewers; in essence he attempts to map contemporary life governed by forces that are not possible to see from a position within the crowd. The perspective echoes that of history painting.

Roberts' work explores senses of belonging in landscapes. Since land invariably belongs to somebody, landscape is closely linked to notions of ownership, by individuals or institutions. Landscapes are also linked, beyond legal ownership, to larger worlds of nature and nation, beauty and history, as the term belonging extends to more shared senses of attachment, citizenship and entitlement. The contemporary engagement with landscapes, particularly beauty spots, is also linked to older worlds of journeying, to pilgrimage. Pleasure seekers follow well-trodden ways to places we call, in a semi spiritual sense, iconic scenes or national shrines. As medieval pilgrimages, were sociable as well as spiritual, so visiting landscapes is itself a collective experience: people interact with each other as well as with the places they go to.

The National Trust along with English Heritage, Ministry of Defence, Utility companies, the Forestry Commission and RSPB are among the largest UK landowners. The photographs in this series are an exploration of public interaction and usage of spaces held in private hands, and how that frames shared experiences of place, a sense of cultural belonging, and the various ways this is claimed in the ways people conduct themselves, and in the company they keep. Roberts' photographs reveal the degree to which natural looking landscapes are peopled, in various groups, hikers here, picnickers there, and the degree to which the landscape is managed, shaped for visiting as well as well as for other commercial activities like farming and forestry. The photographs explore how people perform in such places, striking out into the landscape or keeping close to the car park and its conveniences. They do many things, some view the landscape, taking photographs, others look away, or at other visitors. This is the nation as a people as well as a place, its landscape a social theatre as well as picturesque scenery.

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Roberts comments “in most of my photographs in this series we witness the somewhat mundane ways in which we interact with the landscape – walking the dogs, diving into a river, cycling along a tow-path – interacting with the landscape perhaps with no sense of the historic significance of the place we’re passing through or using. I’m also looking for subliminal signals in the landscape, capturing a sense of tension just under the surface of the photograph – the police car in Kielder Water, the jockeying for position to take a picture at Flatford Mill, the managed pathways at Stonehenge, the gas delivery van ‘spoiling’ the view of Sheringham Park.”

In one of his photographs – a canonical Lake District view along Wastwater (the deepest lake in England) and towards Scafell Pike (the highest mountain) – we see a group of teenage girls in the foreground. The girls have turned away from the sublime view to gather around the screen of a mobile phone. Similarly, our attention is focused as much on them as the view. What, we might ask, are they up to? Are they looking at a photograph they have taken of the scene behind them? Are they, like more geographically minded visitors, consulting a digital map of the area? Or are they texting a friend, perhaps sending a view of the scene or, more likely, a selfie? Or are they chatting to a person in another place, wishing themselves away from the landscape they have been brought to in the family car?

Since the Lake District was first regarded over two centuries ago as “a sort of national property”, to use Wordsworth’s phrase, its fells have silently witnessed many such figures. This is a portrait as well as a landscape, a social as well as natural scene, a people in their place, as well as a view of the landscape itself.

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