

STUDIES OF A SMALL ISLAND

Over the last decade, Simon Roberts has taken his motorhome across the length and breadth of Britain, capturing the nation's shifting notion of identity in large format photographs. Michael Grieve pays him a home visit ahead of the publication of his latest book, Merrie Albion













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British Journal of Photography.
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- Images from *Merrie Albion*
© Simon Roberts.

Arriving in London on an early morning flight from Berlin, I jump straight onto the train to Hove railway station. Starved of sea, I walk diligently, sniffing my way through the town centre towards the beach as if returning to my primordial ancestors. Confronted by an array of frayed Union Jacks flapping in the wind, I stand before a magical sunlit view of the English Channel stretching out towards a Europe hidden beyond the horizon. To the left, the burnt-out skeletal silhouette of the once-magnificent West Pier etches out into the glistening water.

Struck by how beautifully melancholic this vista is, it dawns on me that Hove is the perfect home for Simon Roberts. The British documentary photographer is renowned for his large format photography of socio-political landscapes and he has recently recorded the tremors of Britain's self-expulsion from Europe. Not unlike a Roberts photograph, the beach provides a wide panorama from land to sea; a reminder of our identity as an island nation.

At his Hove studio, Roberts's assistant, Joe, is busy adjusting proofs for a new book, *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island*, to be published by Dewi Lewis and launched at Paris Photo, where Flowers Gallery will present the work ahead of a show in London next spring. The precision in adjusting the hues of the final prints demands fine concentration, as the deadline for delivery looms. It is impressive that Roberts makes a living and supports his family from his documentary work. His galleries, Flowers in London and Robert Morath in Berlin, ensure healthy sales and he is often able to secure backing for long-term projects, such as the recent *Sight Sacralization: (Re)framing Switzerland*, commissioned by Musée de l'Élysée and Fotostiftung Schweiz. That particular project explored the phenomena of viewing platforms from which tourists are able to experience vistas of natural beauty, often taking selfies like performers in some grand theatre.

We move from the studio towards the industrialised seafront to talk over a full English. I'm interested in what makes him tick as much as the work itself. Although Roberts has travelled and made projects around the world, the thematic foundation of his practice is rooted in questioning national identity – in particular, British identity. With his acclaimed book *We English*, published by Chris Boot in 2009, and now *Merrie Albion*, he holds up a mirror to the nation's psyche – and, importantly, he includes himself in that reflection, revealing why he's drawn to the subject matter to which he dedicates so much of his time.

Roberts was born and brought up in “an ordinary and very uninteresting upper-middle-class part of Surrey, in the commuter belt,” he says. “My father was from a well-to-do family and my mother came from a working-class background, and it was her influence of politics and social awareness that swung the entire family, including my Conservative dad, more towards the left way of thinking.” His father was a keen amateur photographer who in his youth during the 1960s embarked on a road trip around the United States, photographing his journey all the way. “My dad worked in the corporate world but I have very fond memories of him showing his Kodachrome slides that, now when I think about them, were unknowing Eggleston-style images.

“I was fairly average at school and preferred to be outdoors on my bike. It wasn't until I discovered photography that I found a passion, when my dad took the family on a business trip to San Francisco and we visited the Yosemite National Park. It was here that I was amazed by an exhibition of Ansel Adams, who photographed the spectacular natural landscape of Yosemite, and how these photographs – these two-dimensional objects – suddenly gave incredible details and theatricality to the clouds, which seemed very different to my actual experience.

“The important thing is to not regret your background, as it becomes part of who you are. The important thing with anything you do, but particularly when it comes to a visual art form of self expression, is that you have to question where you come from and ask how it has created the person you are, and how you use that as an extension of what it is you want to express. That takes a long time to understand and it's been a long journey for me to see that all my background, growing up, has made me the photographer and communicator I am now.”

Towards the end of his studies in geography at the University of Sheffield, Roberts began meeting his good friend the photographer Greg Williams, “usually down the pub”. Roberts was seduced by Williams' enigmatic character and his stories of adventures as a photojournalist, travelling around the world on assignments. Roberts jokes as he distinctly remembers, “Here was me, spending my time looking at rock formations for the past three months, while in front of me was someone who was really living life to the full.” In that moment, Roberts decided to take photography seriously, move to London and study at the London College of Printing – before realising that it would be too expensive, and moving back to Sheffield to study at the National Council for

the Training of Journalists. “The course was taught by Paul Delmar, who was a big figure in the newspaper industry at the time,” he says. “Essentially, it taught me how to be an efficient photojournalist. In many respects I hated it but I really valued how it taught me to be self-disciplined and professional, how to research stories, to know my copyright. It also showed me that I was not interested in news photography, which was obvious to Delmar, who would tell me that I needed to work on long-term stories.”

Roberts won the Ian Parry Scholarship in 1998 for a project he did about a young lightweight boxer who was also a dancer. It conveyed a sensitive young man being pushed for greatness as a fighter, and it was this nuance of vulnerability that Roberts was interested in capturing – the human story. Shot on 35mm black-and-white in a boxing gym, it followed the aesthetic of the ultimate stereotypical reportage story. And yet Roberts learned a great deal from this one-year experience. “Every story has been told but every story is different and can be told a different way,” he says. “I realised that I enjoyed being a storyteller and this first real project was important for this realisation.”

Another result of winning the award was that he met Aidan Sullivan, then the picture editor of *The Sunday Times Magazine*. “When I look back, there are significant people who you meet who are real turning points in your life, and Sullivan was one of those hugely significant characters whose influence and support I still value,” he says. “Now I see part of my role as someone who can help others – such as my assistant Joe, in whom I see tremendous potential – and I hope I can do something to be one of those moments in his life and career, that helps take him on his personal journey.”

Greg Williams had given up working as a war photographer, and when he started an his London-based agency Growbag, he asked Roberts to be part of it. The venture, which also included Simon Norfolk, Tom Craig, Britta Jaschinski and Poppy Berry, quickly blossomed by dealing directly with magazines and cutting out foreign agents. For a time, while the publishing industry was still buoyant, it propelled Roberts in a productive direction, working on interesting stories and getting them sold. Shooting a story called *Snowbirds*, about the migration of thousands of elderly people from the north to the south of the US during the winter months, he began to see the virtue of using larger format photography. He predominantly used 35mm cameras with lots of different lenses, capturing a ton of transparencies, but for the first time he also took a Bronica

and shot five rolls. “When I arrived back in London, Aidan Sullivan went through all the transparencies on the light box, shoved them to one side and said there was nothing particularly interesting,” he says. “But when he looked at the five contact sheets of medium format he said that was the beginning of the story, and to go back and re-shoot it this way: with one camera and one lens, and not be burdened by equipment and the choices of which lens to use. This liberation has pretty much been my mantra for shooting ever since. To photograph with a 5×4 field camera [to which Roberts later progressed] is to simplify the process, and the consequence of utilising this equipment is the act of slowing down, being much more in the moment and actually thinking about the picture and framing. It demands a lot of anticipation and I have learned to be very patient.”

Roberts cites a 19th-century painter, William Powell Frith, to describe how he works these days. The artist’s *The Derby Day*, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1858, is a large tableaux depicting mini narratives featuring a variety of colourful characters at this famous horse-racing fixture. Frith commissioned a photographer, who would have been using an 8×10 camera, to record various scenes at the racecourse and then selected and painted details from each photograph to add to his overall composition. With *Sight Sacralization*, Roberts was given what he would consider a short period of time to complete the project. Partly as a result of this constraint, and with the camera in a fixed position, he approached the work like a modern Frith, making composites of the same scene and adding people to the setting.

“I shoot in a similar way to Frith by adding moments of theatricality and creating scenes,” he explains. “I am more interested in making composites and I feel, in a sense, that I am directing the situation. In front of me people are still doing their thing and I shoot on the tripod in the same way, except that I make perhaps four or five exposures of the same scene over a few minutes, as different elements enter into the frame. And so in Photoshop I select these elements and add them into the overall composition. It is partly about time and partly about control, and I have no problem composing the image this way, as I do not consider myself to be a journalist but rather someone who wants to communicate an idea.”

Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island is a concise compendium of Britain over the past few years and is an excellent visual survey of the run-up to Brexit. The book includes six essays from notable writers such as David Chandler, Carol Ann

Duffy and Ian Jeffery. The photographs examine rich and complex variations of Britain that are now even more poignant after last year’s vote. Images of election campaigning in clean and tidy suburbia, protests, the aftermath of riots in London, diamond jubilee celebrations, rock concerts, a family enjoying Brighton beach, computer screens of the trading floor of Lloyds – the list goes on. Roberts has managed to capture all the major events in juxtaposition with minor situations that are large with meaning, from the dead of the Iraq war being saluted by Army veterans through Wootton Bassett to an depiction of impoverished mothers and children at a youth club in Blackburn. Contained within each photograph are mini dramas, cheap-looking high streets with pound shops set against Victorian architecture. Roberts shows a Britain at odds with itself. Rather than a harmonious society, we sense fragmentation and awkwardness and a yearning for a glorious past that never existed.

Before I leave Hove, Roberts wants to pick up his son, Elijah, after his first day at primary school. As we wait outside, mothers and fathers converge in a hive of activity as children begin to emerge dressed in uniform, scuffed new shoes, carrying homework and emptied lunch boxes. To the left of the school is a playing field and to our right are suburban homes. In the midst of this quintessential English situation, I imagine stepping back to view the entire scene, standing on top of a motor home with a large format camera fixed firmly on a tripod, as Roberts has done so many times in places such as this. The value of his photography is to remind us that in order to understand and connect with who we are, we sometimes need to step outside of ourselves and see the bigger picture. **BJP**

simoncroberts.com

Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island

Robert’s book, published by Dewi Lewis, will be launched at Paris Photo later this month, alongside a presentation of prints at the Flowers gallery booth in the Grand Palais. Flowers will stage a show in London next spring.

dewilewis.com

flowersgallery.com