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SIMON ROBERTS: THE ELECTION PROJECT

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Captain Beany, New Millennium Bean Party, Port Talbot, 23rd April 2010, © Simon Roberts



My photographic interpretation of the of the election fever in sleepy Christchurch Dorset, © Stan Laurenson-Batten

In spring of this year, Simon Roberts was selected as the official 2010 British Election Artist. The third commission of its kind, it is the first time that a photographer has been chosen. The appointment is made by the House of Commons, via the Speakers Advisory Committee on Works of Art. Previous holders include Jonathan Yeo, who in 2001 painted three portraits of the party leaders and in 2005, David Goldbold, who made a series of eighteen illustrations. Roberts was selected through a process of nomination and interview; his track record of making powerful and consistent photography works, together with his more recent active involvement of the public in his projects, secured the commission for him.

Roberts employed a similar approach to the one he used in the *We English* project. Traversing the length and breadth of the country in a mobile home, accompanied by an assistant, Roberts aimed to capture as many political parties, in as wide a variety of constituencies as possible. In the spirit of *We English* he continued to use a tripod-mounted, large format 5x4" camera, often shooting from the top of his motorhome. This allowed him a wide field of view, far removed from the up close and personal shots that are familiar from news media.

As an antithetic yet complementary accompaniment to his work, Roberts also encouraged public participation in the project. He invited people to visually express their opinions on the campaign by uploading their own photographs from digital cameras and mobile phones to a special website created for the purpose. This created what Roberts described as 'an alternative photographic vision alongside my own,' adding a collaborative and democratic dimension to the overall work.'



Guerrilla art election poster on Dalston high street in Hackney, London, 22nd March 2010, © Elizabeth Dunningham

The combination of the two approaches provides a fascinating insight into both the political and physical landscape of Britain, as well as the possibilities of photography to tell different stories about the same subjects. The considered, wide views taken by Roberts are like theatre sets, with myriad small dramas being played out in them. Whether they show Captain Beany, leader and sole member of the New Millennium Bean Party, or a newly popular Nick Clegg surrounded by a media scrum, they repay scrutiny; as gestures, expressions, and involvement – or lack of – in the campaign process, are revealed.

The public submissions, on the other hand, show a very British combination of cynicism, humour and the absurd, wonderfully encapsulated in Stan Laurenson-Batten's elaborately montaged photograph of himself as a UKIP candidate.

Taken as a whole, Roberts' Election Project is far more than simply a record of what transpired to be an historic year in British politics. It is also an important overview of the British people and landscape in 2010.

In 2007, Simon Roberts was one of the first recipients of the National Media Museum's Photography Bursaries. The Bursary contributed to the completion of *We English*, his major work investigating the English at leisure. It was published in 2009 and exhibited at the National Media Museum in 2010.

The Election Project 2010 can be viewed on tours of Portcullis House, Westminster. It is open on Mondays and Fridays until 13 December 2010.



Nick Clegg, Liberal Democrat, Warrington, 16th April 2010, © Simon Roberts