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THE ARTIST'S ISSUE

Constructed photography is back as a new generation returns to montage and staged imagery

9 AGENDA IRVING PENN 19 PROJECTS SIMON ROBERTS
35 ON SHOW MARTIN PARR 44 PORTFOLIO LIEKO SHIGA
54 INTERVIEW TOM HUNTER 60 IN PRINT SELF-PUBLISHING
68 TECHNOLOGY CANON 70-200MM 81 INTELLIGENCE

HOW TO EDITION PRINTS 98 ENDFRAME CINDY SHERMAN

Open Shutter: Enter the UK's first contest for HD-DSLR film makers >> New cameras from Canon, Nikon & Sony >> Rangefinder primes >> Epson scanner test >> Fotospeed fine art papers tested
British elections are often portrayed as two-horse races between Labour and the Conservatives, but this year’s incarnation, held on 6 May, was one of the most hotly contested in decades, and 57 percent of the vote went to other parties.

Simon Roberts was mindful of the increasing influence of these other parties when he set out on his latest project as the official Election Artist this year. Only the third person—and the first photographer—to get the job, he travelled the length and breadth of Britain, showing as many facets as possible of the 24-day run-up to the vote.

“I think it was tougher because I’m a photographer,” he laughs. “The previous Election Artists were able to work in the studio [Jonathan Yeo painted three portraits of the party leaders in 2011, while David Godbold created 18 drawings for the 2005 election]. But with photography, if you’re not there, you don’t get anything.”

Roberts planned his schedule carefully over the three months before the election was called, and sometimes even worked out key images in his head, finding out about local landmarks such as decommissioned factories and working out how to include them in the shots. Once the election was called, he set up home in a camper van, driving to each location and wherever possible, contacting the relevant campaign officers along the way. Sheer good luck also played a part in some of the images, such as his photograph of Nick Clegg, Roberts just happened to be lined up to shoot Clegg the day after the first leaders’ debate on TV, where he was attracting a huge amount of media interest. Roberts was able to capture the future Deputy Prime Minister at the centre of a media circus.

In fact, differentiating his images from daily news shots was a key challenge—as Roberts points out, there are lots of photographs of any election campaign, he needed to shoot something of historic interest, destined for the Parliamentary Art Collection at the House of Commons. His solution was to use a 5×4 plate camera and stand on the van to shoot, ensuring his work is as much about the British landscape as the contemporary political bandwagon. “We often experience elections through the media,” he explains. “I was much more interested in what was happening on people’s doorsteps, village greens or high streets.”

The election, as we all know, proved inconclusive, but Roberts largely resisted the urge to photograph the tense days of negotiation before the coalition government was announced—it wasn’t really part of his remit, and most of it happened behind closed doors. The final exhibition included just one image from this period, the press pack outside the Liberal Democrat headquarters, in a tough edit of just 15 110×140cm photographs. But the display, which went on show in Portcullis House on 18 September, also includes another, extremely eclectic set of images—shots taken by the general public and uploaded to Roberts’ website for the project. “That was a key part of my proposal,” says Roberts. “I knew it would be the most photographed elections ever.”

He received 1,066 images in total, shot on a variety of cameras and depicting a broad scope of subjects. One showed a binman-sitting couple sitting on a sofa watching the results come in on TV, for example, another shot had no sign of the election at all. “The guy who took it was living in a very safe seat and hadn’t seen a politician [in his area] or any leaflets [from the candidates],” says Roberts. “His image was a kind of protest about how his area had been removed from the political process.”

The Election Project is on show at The Old Leinster Bar (in the basement of The Brigadoon Hotel, 10–20 July, 2010) and also at Portcullis House during pre-elected weeks (http://tholeinsterbar.org.uk).