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ALTERED IMAGES

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SIMON ROBERTS
www.simonroberts.com

The nation votes

Simon Roberts takes a wide-eyed view of this year's general election, taking on an historic commission for Parliament.

British elections are often portrayed as two-horse races between Labour and the Conservatives, but this year's incarnation, held 06 May, was one of the most hotly contested in decades, and 35 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 2001, 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 sketched 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 its 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, when 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 5x4 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 25 120x90cm 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 election ever."

He received 1696 images in total, shot on a variety of cameras and depicting a broad scope of subjects. One showed a bleary-eyed 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." BJR

The Election Project is on show at The Old Co-op Building in Brighton as part of the Brighton Photo Fringe (www.photofringe.org) from 02 October until 14 November. It can also be seen at Portcullis House during pre-booked tours (<http://bit.ly/electionproject>) until December.

www.theelectionproject.co.uk

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