

Between the acts

In his new book, *Merrie Albion*, photographer **Simon Roberts** surveys a country looking towards an uncertain future. He talks to **Oliver Atwell**

Perhaps the best artworks are those that are able to encapsulate a sense of time, place and identity. Back in 1922, James Joyce published his masterwork *Ulysses*. The writer's intention was that if Dublin were wiped off the map by war, the city could be constructed piece by piece using his book as a guide. In his new book, *Merrie Albion*, which charts the 10-year period between the collapse of New Labour and the Brexit vote, Simon Roberts has curated a series of images that perfectly capture contemporary Britain. Each image details our attempts to carve out

some sense of identity for ourselves, whether it's by taking part in war re-enactments, gathering in parks or lining the streets to honour dead soldiers. But as we all know, Britain is a fractured nation – one actually uncertain of its collective identity and, most importantly, what the future holds. If we're being honest the nation is currently gazing into the turbid fog of an unknown future. The Brexit vote, no matter what you think of it, is the most significant event in the country's recent history, and it's this spectre that haunts the pages of *Merrie Albion*. The seeds of the book began to flourish during one of Simon's

Right: Diamond Jubilee Celebration, Craven Vale estate, Brighton, East Sussex, 2 June 2012

Below: Goodman Park Polling Station, Slough, Berkshire, 6 May, 2010



previous projects called *We English*, which found Simon travelling across the country in a motorhome between 2007 and 2008 and creating a series of tableaux that captured people engaged in a series of diverse leisure pursuits. It was during this time that Simon noticed that he was building a number of images that presented an interesting perspective of a particular political period.

'I could see that it was politics that was having the most influence over what was happening economically and socially, so I decided I need to continue making work and think about the way I was making pictures,' says Simon. 'I needed to keep a consistency of style over the next few years so that at some point

I could bring the work together.

'That meant I began responding to certain things that were happening around Britain that I felt would have some historical significance. My previous projects, such as *We English* and *Pierdom* were about making work around a general theme; they weren't built around the idea of reporting, whereas here I began trying to respond to specific events, sort of in the way a journalist would. I wanted to look at something like Margaret Thatcher's funeral but take a step back and present a kind of distant panoramic view of the event.'

While the social and political climate of Britain has been subject to critique by many photographers before him, Simon was keen to

provide a unique aesthetic perspective that would stand out from what he sees as the 'British tradition'. Rather than adopting the close-up, street-based approach of photographers such as Martin Parr, Dougie Wallace or Chris Killip, Simon instead creates images that appear almost as if they were theatre sets. They perfectly blur the line between landscapes and social documentary and in that sense have much more in common with the grand tableaux of Gregory Crewdson and, most importantly, the 19th-century English painter William Powell Frith, who created expansive and panoramic views of Victorian life.

'In another sense, my work is more informed by the

'These images blur the line between landscapes and social documentary'



Prime Minister Theresa May, Downing St, London, 13 July, 2016

‘Dusseldorf German school of photography,’ says Simon. ‘You can see that in the sense of distance that’s present – the fact that they are taken from an elevated view and from some feet away from the scene. Part of this decision comes from me feeling distant to ideas of England and Britishness. With that in mind, I wanted the viewer to always be on the edge, seeing the scene from a slightly critical perspective. I also just wanted to do something different from everyone else. The closest British photographer would perhaps be John Davies in the use of the landscape, but few of his images feature people, whereas that’s the central concern of my work.’

That concern with people is crucial. While Simon’s work does indeed give you a sense of distance from the scene, each of his images is deeply humanistic. The images, rather than simply using people as faceless compositional elements, revel in the interaction between groups of people and the ways our interactions can help to build a sense of identity. ‘I like the photograph to be a record of several narratives taking place within the frame,’ says Simon. ‘The landscape is a set piece within which people can then enact various notions of identity or collective attitudes. Part of it was inspired by me thinking

about how we all think of ourselves as being very removed as a society. We have a tendency to see ourselves as very individualistic and forming friendships online rather than within physical spaces. I wanted to look at what brings us together. Where do we gather? How do we gather? What does it look like? Religion, protest, sport – these are activities that still unite us.’

Feedback loop

While the images are the central concern of *Merrie Albion*, what’s particularly notable about the book is the inclusion of text. As well as each image being accompanied by a short explanatory passage about the location, the book is split into four chapters, all of which contain essays by writers such as A L Kennedy, Tristram Hunt and Carol Ann Duffy. Four themes become the framework of our journey through 10 years of the British social climate, and in this way, the images are renewed every time you look at them. You look at the image, build your own interpretation, read the words and then look back at the image, possibly with a fresh understanding of that picture.

‘I always make lots of notes and carry out lots of research, so I’d already built up an archive of material,’ says Simon. ‘Then it was a case of how I could bring that into



Above: Annual Eton College Procession of Boats, River Thames, Windsor, Berkshire, 17 June, 2016

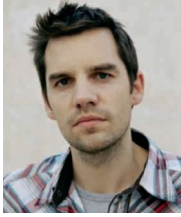
Far right: Beachy Head, Seven Sisters Country Park, East Sussex, 24 March, 2017

Left: Download Festival, Donington Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire, 13 June, 2008

the book. I wanted the words to be helpful but not overwhelming, so I decided to split the book up into chapters, and each one has an area of contact sheets with 150 words for each image. It’s not a lot but it’s enough to give you a different way of understanding the images. On top of that, I realised that the book needed other voices to tease out certain perspectives on social, political and cultural elements. The idea was then to invite certain writers whose work and ideas I admire and offer them an opportunity to create essays and respond to certain pictures from their own perspective. Those essays offer another way of us looking at the last decade. That gives the viewer more of a sense of a survey.’

Uncertain times

At the time of writing, Britain’s place in the world is still one of uncertainty. Simon ends *Merrie Albion* with an image taken at Beachy Head in East Sussex. Several tourists stand close to the cliff’s edge, daring themselves to

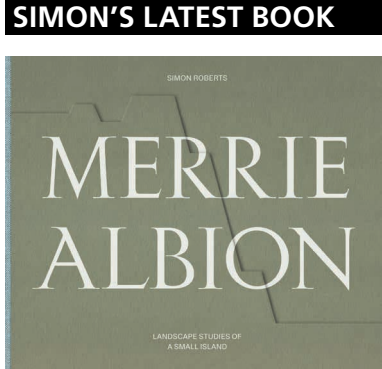


Simon Roberts is a British photographer whose work deals with our relationship to landscape and notions of identity and belonging. His publications include *Motherland*, *Pierdom*, *We English* and now *Merrie Albion*. Photographs from *Merrie Albion* are included in the group exhibition ‘The Great British Seaside’ at the National Maritime Museum, which runs until 30 September 2018.



look over. The image is accompanied by a quote from Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* written in 1941: ‘When they were alone, they said nothing. They looked at the view; they looked at what they knew, to see if what they knew might perhaps be different

today. Most days it was the same.’ The marriage of image and quote is a perfect metaphor, one that will be instantly recognisable for anyone living in Britain no matter which side of the Brexit fence they sit. Only time will tell if we can survive the fall off the cliff edge.



‘VERY astute readers will notice that around halfway through the book the size of the photograph changes on the page,’ says Simon. ‘The first half of the book was shot on a 4x5 Ebony field camera with film; then at the Olympics I started shooting with a digital back because the International Olympic Committee wouldn’t let me use a tripod at the stadium. That meant I had to shoot handheld or use a monopod. That then dictated that I had to shoot digital. But what I found was that the quality of digital was easily as good as shooting on film. Those later images in the second half of the book were shot on a Phase One Back attached to a Cambo ACTUS Field Camera, so it’s similar to the Ebony field camera in that it has tilt-and-shift-like ability.’

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