



BRIT CRIT

Simon Roberts explains how he's encouraging the British to look at themselves more honestly

Simon Roberts is, in many ways, a very British photographer. His work over the past 10 years has recorded and surveyed British culture, and his latest monograph, *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island*, holds up a mirror to British life immediately pre-Brexit. But will most British people see themselves in his work? It's often the case that while we think we're looking at descriptions of 'the other', we are in fact looking at ourselves... ➡➡

[Left] Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet, 2008

SIMON ROBERTS grew up in the confines of a Surrey commuter-belt town in south-east England, at a time when a particular kind of Englishness was defined by “tupperware parties and social chit chat” – “think 1980s Martin Parr photographs of middle-England”, he says – and where his parents navigated the waters of polite society from different ends of the cultural boat; his father an upper-middle-class Londoner and his mother a working-class socialist from Cumbria.

The clash of formative influences can be seen in his work; a desire to understand and show the British people and where they fit, both literally and metaphorically, in the cultural landscape. “Politics were talked about at home and I’ve always been interested in the documentary tradition,” he says. “It was the social British photography of the 1960s and 1970s that I first connected with.”

Like many photographers of his generation, he didn’t study photography initially but geography – which in turn shows considerable influence on his later work. “When I was studying it was interesting to see how human geography was beginning to look at the visual image in relation to the way we decode ideas of landscape and interpret place,” he says. “I am interested not only in what the landscape looks like but how we inhabit the landscape. My pictures are as much about the idea of how groups of people congregate in a landscape, and exploring what that might tell us about the way we experience landscape.

“For instance, are we creating private colonies on public beaches behind our little wind-proof enclaves, or are we coming together en masse, walking in the streets and waving the English flag? It is really asking questions in some way from an ethnographic perspective.”

Roberts’ approach is deliberately objective in its raised perspective and its all-inclusive ‘democratic’ sharpness, with obvious influence from the New Topographics and students

of the Dusseldorf school. Large-format detailed presentation of people and places is nothing new, and yet applying that approach to our ‘small island’ had not been done before.

After a year travelling around Russia in 2004–2005, which resulted in *Motherland*, Roberts’ first monograph, he came back to a place markedly different than the one he had left.

“I’d returned to a country seemingly pre-occupied with discussion about devolution and the possible break-up of the United Kingdom. It seemed an interesting time in contemporary British life, to look at what it is to be English.” The resulting monograph *We English* was published in 2009 and was swiftly followed by a commission from the UK Government to be the 2010 ‘election artist’.

After the formation of the coalition government, Roberts felt compelled to make work about the period of economic downtown and the austerity that had been unleashed on the British public. In 2011, he realised there was a long-term study about Britain in the making and he continued recording events and gatherings with a similar photographic aesthetic; from the London Olympics to the state funeral of Margaret Thatcher.

“I see the landscape as a theatre within which I am looking for people acting out various traditions or ideas that can be either social or political. For me, the Gordon Brown picture from my ‘Election Project’ series is a political story; it is looking at the rather banal theatre that takes place around electioneering, but it also talks about media manipulation, attempts to control the press and the role of the citizen



[Right] Funeral procession of Margaret Thatcher, Fleet Street, City of London, 2013



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[Top] Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, Shoreham Air Show, 2007
[Above] Penshaw Monument, Houghton-le-Spring, Tyne and Wear, 2013
[Right] The Holker family, Ashley Vale Allotments, Bristol



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journalist. Particular events can seem quite anodyne but also be quite politically charged. When you look at my photograph of a Battle of Bannockburn re-enactment, here is a tradition that to some extent was hijacked during the Scottish referendum; Alex Salmond visited the re-enactment of this battle where Scotland defeated England at the height of his campaign for Scottish independence.”

From a collection of Dickens fans on the beach at Broadstairs to a street scene in west London with the blackened Grenfell Tower lowering above young green chestnut trees, *Merrie Albion* invites us to excavate our own place in the landscape of Britain. There are tea parties, music festivals, country fairs, politicians and protesters; there are Vote Leave posters and ‘I’m IN’ tote bags on opposing pages. There is Stonehenge and Flatford Mill, Eton and Birmingham, Glasgow and London. There are spectacles and sights, there is a royal wedding, there is a Jubilee party, there is Theresa May speaking outside Downing Street, and there is a family on an allotment in Bristol.

Roberts’ work sits alongside contemporaries such as Parr and Dench, to show us perhaps not in an alternative light, but specifically in the context of where we are, and where we have been in the past 10 years. His interest in history and politics brings a nuance and an enquiry to his depiction of the British; reading the detailed captions gives the viewer a greater understanding of what is going on, transforming a photograph of say, the reenactment of the Battle of Bannockburn from a nostalgic pantomime to a critique of contemporary politics.

“Englishness, or Britishness: it is interesting how they can be intertwined; one year we were all celebrating England in the World Cup and the next year we were celebrating Britain in the Olympic Games. To some extent we are still at a loss as how to define our ongoing national story, in an increasingly globalised society. The irony is that the

English, while coming from the biggest country in the Union, have the least sense of who they are. One of the things that I have witnessed on my extended travels is the idea of localism; people are becoming much more connected to traditions or local gatherings, or aligning themselves with particular groups or ideals; perhaps these define us more than any idea of nationhood or of the nation state.”

The book is a weighty beast, and justifiably so; it covers a lot of ground and bears a concentrated read with a considered look around each image. Although the latest photograph dates from as recently as June last year, *Merrie Albion* feels as if it is depicting a time that’s already become ‘the past’.

“The project started when we had the collapse of New Labour, when a whole ideology was changing; we had the credit crunch; we had this big political U-turn in the form of austerity and finally, a decade after I’d started photographing Britain, we had one of the most significant political changes in post-war British life. The referendum result seemed to mark a perfect time to bring this work together, and to look back and ask questions like, ‘How did we get to this place? What has changed over the last decade? How have we got to this time where we’ve been able to make this drastic decision?’

“I want these pictures to offer as many questions as answers, so really it is about the viewer entering into them and exploring all the narratives they provide. Every picture is loaded with meaning and offers a glimpse into the complicated cultural terrain where contrasting and sometimes conflicting versions of national identity are played out.”

Lottie Davies



Merrie Albion – Landscape Studies of a Small Island by Simon Roberts is available from **Dewi Lewis Publishing** for £45 + P&P www.dewilewis.com/products/merrie-albion and is on view at *Flowers Gallery*, London E2 until **10 March 2018**. www.flowersgallery.com

[Right] Red Road Flats, Balornock, Glasgow, 2014



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