

Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island



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Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island

By Simon Roberts
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Reviewed by **Stephen Clarke**

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Jonathan Swift wrote about the travels of Lemuel Gulliver, whose first voyage has become the most well known. As the sole survivor of a shipwreck, Gulliver awakes to find himself captured by the population of miniature people who inhabit the island of Lilliput. From his high vantage point as a giant he is able to observe the customs and practices of the Lilliputians. Like Gulliver, Simon Roberts is an inveterate traveller; his books *Motherland* (2007), *We English* (2009), *Pierdom* (2013), and *Merrie Albion* (2017), testify to this. In *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island*, Roberts views his subjects—similar to Swift’s fictional character—at a height and from a distance that broadens the frame yet contains many details.

In his opening essay, David Chandler comments on this expansive view. Linking Roberts’ work to that by Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth and Jeff Wall, the photographer of the British scene is positioned alongside his international counterparts. More importantly, Chandler relates Roberts’ large gallery prints to the concerns of the American art historian Michael Fried: the ‘anti-theatricality’ of his photography in its distance and scale establishes his photographs as artworks. The largest *Merrie Albion* prints on display at London’s Flowers Gallery were 72 x 60 inches; even in their condensed size in publication, Roberts’ images provide the viewer with a complex narrative that requires continued inspection. The other discourse that Chandler firmly ties to Roberts’ work is the picturing of the British landscape. Beginning in 1856 with the painter William Powell Frith and the photographer Robert Howlett who presented their audience with the panoramic spectacle of *The Derby Day*, Chandler plots the connections to Benjamin Stone, Tony Ray-Jones, and John Davies. Roberts’ wider landscapes share with their Victorian predecessor the intricacy of small scenes within a larger composition.

In *Merrie Albion* our fascination with detail is acknowledged by the insertion of cropped close-ups; these accompany the ten written contributions. Art historian Ian Jeffrey focuses his attention on one image of the Royal Bath and West agricultural show; V&A director Tristram Hunt, who worked on the 1997 General Election campaign, analyses Roberts’ pictures of the 2010 General Election, in particular the scene of Gordon Brown’s campaign calamity in Rochdale; Frank Cottrell-Boyce is literal in his approach to detail, referencing the ‘i-Spy’ children’s books of the 1950s and 1960s as he muses on his own engagement with Britain’s industrial landscape celebrated at the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics; Irenosen Okojie, Nikesh Shukla and Carol Ann Duffy reflect on the experience of immigrant communities within Britain; A. L. Kennedy constructs a monologue in the voice of the Scot disenfranchised in his own land. Pulling back from the close-up, the Human Geographers Alex Vasudevan and David Matless map out the overall context of Roberts’ book. Vasudevan explains that the card relief on the book’s cover that disrupts the title *Merrie Albion* is the downward economic graph of the banking crisis. This period determines the trajectory of Roberts’ journey from 2008 through the recent times and landscapes of this country. Matless brings that journey to its endpoint with reference to Roberts’ photograph of Theresa May standing outside Downing Street in July 2016, pledging to build a better Britain. In the image immediately following May’s address to the nation, and one year on, a charred Grenfell Tower peers over green foliage and North Kensington’s youth.

Like the diminutive rulers of Lilliput, the political figures in Roberts’ contemporary Britain are reduced in size in relation to the events surrounding them. While *Merrie Albion* is not a satire in the same vein as Swift’s novel, the book contains commentary on the state of the nation at the beginning of a new century through photographs and text. Following each section of images, Roberts provides his own explanatory notes which, in detail and clarity, reveal him as conscientious geographer presenting a factual survey of his island. The book opens and closes with people at the boundary between land and sea. The opening picture shows bathers in Victorian costume on the beach at Broadstairs entering the water as part of celebrations for the annual Dickens Festival. By the end of the book, tiny figures look down warily from the cliff’s edge at Beachy Head, less merry and unsure of their position.



– Reviewed by [Stephen Clarke](#)

Simon Roberts: Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island was exhibited at Flowers Gallery, London 19 January – 10 March 2018

Below, images from *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island* by Simon Roberts, courtesy of Dewi Lewis.



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