

YOU BLIGHTED KINGDOM



THE MODERN TRIBES OF A FRACTURED NATION

A new exhibition of photographs by Simon Roberts shows a fractured, uneasy country, says **ADRIAN BURNHAM**



Do try and get along to the Flowers gallery, London E2, to see a selection of large-format prints featured in a new monograph of Simon Roberts' photography. From dizzyingly vast social panoramas to achingly intense studies born, it would seem, of a discreet and privileged access to families and small local gatherings,

Roberts' work celebrates the ebb and flow of group activity by which our society seems to breathe.

Except, for me, there's a choking feeling too. Be it air show, music festival, countryside event, protest or civic assembly. At one level these denotations of culture afford ideas of positive collectivity in the face of the supposed social disintegration commonly associated with our ever more digital age.

But there's desperation also. An unsettling murmur of dismay attends almost every scene. Turning the pages of Roberts' recently published monograph *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island* the over-arching narrative that emerges is one of a dislocated, compartmentalised society: a very much dis-United Kingdom. We might blinkeredly co-exist in this realm but we

Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet, 19 June 2008

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struggle in any real sense to equitably share in it.

Merrie Albion presents imagery of a decade from the tragic events of Shoreham Air Show 2007, when a pilot was killed when his Second World War fighter crashed, to the signing of Article 50 in 2017. It is also, of course, the ten-year period of societal woes born of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity politics.

Social anthropologist Tim Ingold observed that a "place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage". Roberts' photography memorialises people's engagement with the world and the

unique significance they lend places.

In *Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet* women in their bathing caps and pantaloons seem at ease paddling in the spume, reaching out to hold hands with one another. The men appear less comfortable, regimented, looking somewhat convict-like in their striped onesies.

Apart from the bloke in the broader blue striped get-up and the one at the back in the Panama hat – which wasn't a Victorian tifter as far as I know – this work at first conjures if not the repose of a Eugène Boudin beach scene then certainly an innocent glee. Until you notice him. Crouching behind the only female bather hesitating at the shoreline, there's a man taking a picture with his cameraphone. An intense 21st century focus folded inside this faux 19th century



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tableau. So it would appear that even when inhabitants of this isle are dwelling in the exact same geographical spot it's the differing agendas and intentions, ideologies and inclinations that, at best, see people not registering one another or else taking up a position of seemingly steadfast and unbridgeable difference.

Another image, from 2011 this time, *Watching the Royal Wedding, Hyde Park, London* is – at least, for anyone less than sympathetic to the monarchy – a sight for sore eyes. The thousands of people, or rather subjects, arrayed in front of giant screens showing the royal, somewhat grainy, Buckingham Palace balcony snog. Many are holding camera phones aloft, making their own record of this episode of bread and circuses. The Union Jack flags with hearts at their centre and a portrait of Wills and his new missus

dotted throughout the crowd. For me this is an image of a malign and deeply depressing con.

But that sort of intemperate talk isn't going to resolve anything, is it? Not when the country is so polarised about so many urgent issues that will determine the UK's future for generations to come. I should take a step back, get some perspective. This is often what Roberts' photographs both evoke and enact for the viewer. I need to take up a position that admits not everyone shares my views. Mind you, the wedding thing's about to happen all over again so come May I'll probably be seething.

In the photograph titled *Griffin Youth Club event, Blackburn* six women are ranged laterally across the frame. Standing and sitting in front of a fence behind which is a strip of green and a

1) Annual Eton College Procession of Boats, River Thames, Windsor, Berkshire, 17 June 2016

2) Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, Shoreham Air Show, West Sussex, 15 September 2007

3) Download Festival, Donington Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire, 13 June 2008

grey, empty car park or schoolyard. Beyond that temporary Heras fencing surrounds a half-built structure. Estate housing recedes into the distance.

Kerb stone, double yellow lines and school zone road markings 'adorn' the foreground. Is it rapt attention on some of the women's faces or a frowning disbelief at the entertainment on offer? That two of them appear to be cradling or massaging their necks contributes to a tenseness in the image. It's a tableau that suggests if this is an event then it's not much of one. The main action is out of shot.

What we're left with is a paucity that speaks volumes. Plastic chairs have been dragged out and 'arranged' beside the bus stop, a limp refuse sack tucked in the fence for litter. Postures are strained and clothes – jeans and tees mostly –

elemental. The only male sits on the kerb: signature bright white trainers, baggy trousers, a hoodie that partly obscures his face and on his shirt the legend: 'I'm Big in Japan'.

Everything in this photograph seems to point elsewhere. There is an air of abject half interest. As yet unaware of phrases like 'household income' or 'declining living standards' it's only the toddlers who are engrossed in their play, paying no attention to the diversion on offer.

Even before reading the notes that conclude successive sections throughout *Merrie Albion*, it barely comes as a surprise to learn that 34.9% of Blackburn children live in poverty, one of the worst

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levels of child poverty in the country. But this photograph is far removed from poverty porn. Rather it's an elegiac image of lives foreclosed by power that resides elsewhere, out of sight like the putative entertainment. A place where even the bread and circuses are a bit s**t really.

As David Chandler writes in his introductory text *Gatherings*, while Roberts' imagery affords a sense of detachment, at the same time a connection to the 'commonness of places' is achieved and often thereby an empathy with the subjects of the photographs.

In *Download Festival, Donington Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire* young faces, almost all wearing trademark Kiss-inspired make up, staring up at the photographer's lens – many of Roberts' photographs were taken from the top his camper van – is a celebratory gathering

redolent with tribal warmth and belonging. But, again, we later learn that it was here at Donington Park in 2015 that Leicestershire Police force defended the act of scanning 90,000 festival goers' faces so as to check them against a list of wanted criminals. Black stars, black bats, black ops.

Ashley Vale Allotment, Bristol is a fabulously verdant scene of interactivity. Not just the gleeful face of the mother beaming at her child or the more pensive smile of the man off to the right who has paused mid-dig to observe his kid's antics. The carrier bags on sticks to ward off birds, the laughter on the mother's mouth, the path to the houses above the man's head from where traffic can probably be heard... this is the sight and sound and lush texture of folk working the earth as, in turn, that task contributes to making them the people they are.

It might be objected that I'm unnecessarily shoe-horning factual

4) Griffin Youth Club event, Blackburn, Lancashire, 23 July 2008

information back into Roberts' work while the photographer chose to keep them separate. That the pictures can speak for themselves. They can't. Not definitively. Or not in the many registers that Roberts' work operates. As visual ethnographer Sarah Pink reminds us, it's more productive to acknowledge that photographic "images can be thought of as visual spaces in which a number of different meanings may be invested. As such they are used to represent or refer to diverse persons, activities and emotions that may not obviously or directly form part of the visible content of the image".

But, as I've said, while Roberts, in terms of initial presentation, lets pictures stand alone, with only a prosaic title indicating place and occasion, the fact that *Merrie Albion* is punctuated with perceptive, insightful texts by a number of excellent writers suggests the range and depth of engagement these complex images can provoke.

Roberts' notes to the apparently Edenic *Ashley Vale Allotment, Bristol* remind us that "a 2017 study by food policy experts from three universities has learned that departure from the EU raises such urgent complications for food and agriculture that without focus on the issue 'the risk is that food security in the UK will be seriously undermined', leading to dwindling supplies and erratic prices".

This isn't socio-economic concern tacked onto a creative visual practice. Roberts studied human geography prior to becoming a photographer and a more and less obvious but always deep concern with the state and fate of people appearing in his work endures. Not many in the UK currently cultivate their allotments out of stark need. The idyllic image of the Holker family arguably shows what's at stake more effectively than academic reports or government statistics, if allotments were ever required to be turned over to a regimen of food production because of scarcity.



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Do we stand to lose these locally managed, informally productive, convivial and nurturing places in years to come?

The *Peckham Peace Wall, Southwark* is an atypical Roberts set up, closer to its subject rather than the more elevated aspect often adopted by the photographer. It's on a level with the people and despite being set in a teeming urban thoroughfare there's barely sense of a crowd. That said the presence of an entire if fragmented community is evident. This work suggests thoughts of communication: the woman on the phone; the boy watching an animated exchange; the still, central figure of a man with a walking stick intently scanning the flurry of messages and behind him someone else using his phone to photograph and presumably send on a close-up of a particular note.

Although we can't read the individual Post Its that have been pressed to the boarded-up post-riot Poundland shop we sense that its hundreds of messages are

causing a stir, holding attention.

Messages left here expressing opinions regarding the violence, vandalism, arson and looting that occurred in the riots of 2011 apparently totalled 4,000. I'm not, however, convinced that this is a portrait of "the community's resilience and steadfastness". Even if a facsimile wall was produced in Peckham Square to commemorate the original, spontaneous, makeshift repository of local comment and concern. Roberts' photograph speaks much more about the fragility, impermanence – the hanging about, just-hanging-on quality – of many 'communities' couched as they are in sites of shoddy, cheaply built but crippling expensive to occupy, households in thrall to exploitative, gaudy chain shop commerce.

We've seen ten years of toxic and myopic attacks on health, education and social welfare. There are those – I'm thinking of pictures ranging from the *Annual Eton College Procession of Boats*

5) Ashley Vale Allotments, Bristol, Avon, 30 May 2008

6) Watching the Royal Wedding, Hyde Park, London, 29 April 2011

7) The Peckham Peace Wall, Southwark, London, 10 August 2011

8) Ferrybridge Power Station, Knottingley, West Yorkshire, 5 July 2016

All images © Simon Roberts, Courtesy of Flowers Gallery London and New York

to the *Equestrian Jumping Individual, Greenwich Park, London* – who are pictured taking part in or witnessing some grand distraction. And the photographs of political and trades union events similarly show various of the UK's publics thronging together in preservation of what is precious, what is dear to them. These grand occasions, however, through Roberts' lens sizzle with palpable social tension.

And it's not just in the more obvious photographic representations of conflict such as *After the Riots, London Road, Croydon* or *National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, Parliament Square, London* that we're made aware of social discord. With *The Peckham Peace Wall* this apparently mundane scene talks just as effectively about social standing, wealth, privilege and exclusion. A post-riot report bemoaned the "lack of opportunities for young people, poor parenting, a lack of shared values and sense of responsibility among some, an

inability of the justice system to prevent re-offending, issues relating to confidence in the police, and materialism".

Here and throughout Roberts' fascinating, sometimes gently ironic, always thoughtful and considered visual survey, we see not so much a Merrie Albion but rather a fractured UK riddled with complex concerns. This is the land on which we live, the air that we breathe.

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■ The *Merrie Albion* exhibition runs until March 10 at Flowers, 82 Kingsland Rd, London E2 8DP

■ *New Photography Monograph: Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island*, by Simon Roberts, is published by Dewi Lewis