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The We English project

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Paul Gallagher on b&w landscape

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Lamented by the late Bill Jay

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Spends a Night at the Met

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Green and pleasant land

Gerry Badger considers Simon Roberts’ recently-published We English project

SIMON ROBERTS makes an interesting observation in his new book, We English. He notes that, in making a year-long trip around England and photographing the English interacting with their landscape, he was filling something of an unexplored field. To be sure, we had a whole plethora of photographers in the 1970s and 1980s photographing the English social landscape – you know who they are – but where are the others in Roberts’ generation seriously photographing modern English life? I hope they’re out there, but I’m not so sure. I keep meeting recent graduates who tell me they can’t make any sort of a living from photography, so I think it’s partly an economic thing – a lack of an all-embracing support system like the Arts Council in the 70s, a lack of commercial markets for documentary photography.

But it’s also, I think, a cultural thing. The world of photography is broader today than it was in the 70s or 80s, much more international, and it just seems easier to make use of these wider contacts and work abroad. Indeed, Roberts himself did this. His first book, Motherland, was the result of an extensive trip around the former Soviet Union. Now, to borrow a football analogy, his photography is ‘coming home’.

Indeed, his own personal sense of home, feeding into our collective sense of our culture, is very much the subject of We English, and we can see from the very title of that first book, Motherland, that the inelaborable connection we have with our home soil is the key leitmotif running through Roberts’ work at this juncture in his career – perhaps unsurprisingly so since he originally studied to be a geographer.

Of course, an Englishman’s connection to our ‘green and pleasant’ land is both complex and mystical, and culturally important, so Roberts has a big subject on his hands. Actually, I don’t believe our relationship with the nix en scene, is more unique than any other natives’ connection with their motherland earth, but the English were certainly among the first to create an industry – both a cultural and a material industry – out of it, beginning in the 18th century. The material industry began with the development of two linchpins in what we might term the landscape heritage industry – the seaside resort and visits to hilly places such as the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. The cultural industry began with the romantic poets, novelists such as Jane Austen and a whole raft of landscape painters, culminating in Constable and Turner.

But before we look at how Roberts suggests this complex history, a word about his photographic approach. He decided to use a 4x5 view camera, in order to record detailed, all-encompassing views. One influence was not so much English landscape painting, but the work of those earlier Dutch painters such as Peter Breughel and those popular images of frozen-over canals swelling with people skating, playing football and variously enjoying themselves. He says the first pictures he made, of the beach at Skegness, dictated this approach, whereby he would stand back, and photograph landscapes where people congregate. It was the act of congregation that interested him, not so much the individuals who had been the target of previous photographers.

The other influence was the road trip, as made by favourite photographers of his, including Stephen Shore and Joel Sternfeld. I guess the single photographic antecedent is Shore’s wonderful image of campers by the River Merced in Yosemite. The work was made while touring the country in a camper van with his...

wife and family, in several trips between August 2007 and 2008. And the usual, traditional English pursuits were recorded – the seaside, Derby Day, rambling, and visiting country houses. But Roberts was very careful to steer clear of too many quaint, archaic local customs – like the Bacup coconut dancers – that were the staple of such photographers as Sir Benjamin stone and Tony Ray-Jones. His aim was to show England in the 21st century, how our cultural history has affected us, but how it has also been adopted, adapted and changed by the pressures of modern life.

So the car is a baleful presence throughout the book, both visible and invisible. A number of the pictures were taken in the car-parks that are such necessary adjuncts to 'countryside' attractions, and one of my favourite images is of a couple sitting looking at a much-loved Yorkshire Dales view, in foldaway chairs, their car parked next to them at the side of the road. They claimed that they have enjoyed that particular view for 50 years, and that it has hardly changed.

That, however, cannot be said of other views in the book. The countryside is under constant pressure, constant threat. Conservation rather than preservation – I trust I have that the right way round – is the name of the game. If a particular kind of pursuit falls out of favour, we can invent a new one – like the ubiquitous car-boot sale. If we lose a piece of land to a housing development, we can adapt a new one – like making country-parks and man-made lakes out of former industrial sites.

The clash between modernity and tradition therefore is continually explored in We English. As are the contexts that occur frequently between different groups of people over the ongoing usage of areas or parcels of land. Roberts points out in an amusing aside that because Holkham, near Sandringham in Norfolk, became popular with the Queen Mother and her entourage, it has now become established as a gay bench, to the chagrin, no doubt, of bird watching and rambler groups.

Roberts also goes some way to sketching the myth that the English countryside is the exclusive preserve of the white middle classes. On Strange Edge, in Derbyshire, a couple in traditional Muslim dress walk towards the camera, and while there are still pursuits that are class specific, in many of the activities Roberts depicts class barriers seem to have broken down, and people of all classes and races are glimpsed in the same spaces – though they are not exactly mingling. But that is the English way.

The distant view implies an objectivity and the sense of being non-judgemental – the New Topographical approach. It also tends to produce understated imagery, and it is these qualities that I like in We English.

Featuring work from an earlier project, Polar Nights, by Simon Roberts, 6 at Cane Calman, Brighton, until 7 February.

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Gerry Badger
Chelford Car Boot, Moat Hall Farm, Marthall, Cheshire, 13th July 2008.

Caerl Estuary, Padstow, Cornwall, 27th September 2007. All images © Simon Roberts, courtesy Chris Boot.

We English will be on show at the National Media Museum, Bradford, between 12 March and 5 September. www.nationalmediamuseum.org.uk.