

A&P

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MILLENNIUM IMAGES

A refreshing approach to stock

EDWARD STEICHEN

The Legacies, pt2, by AD Coleman

SIMON ROBERTS

The *We English* project

THE EYE OF THE MIND

Paul Gallagher on b&w landscape

UNWRITTEN HISTORY

Lamented by the late Bill Jay

LARRY FINK

Spends a Night at the Met

VU MAGAZINE

David Lee on a pioneer publication

PORTFOLIO: TOM SULLAM

How I escaped from the City

SCENE AROUND

Four new portfolios

PLUS ...

New work, new books,
& lots of new ideas



**THE BRILLIANT
BOOK AWARDS**
Almost £3000 in prizes!



Rushey Hill Caravan Park, Peacehaven, East Sussex, 21 December 2007. © Simon Roberts from *We English*, see pp 56–63.

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Number 58 | Winter 2010

04 | FOREWORD

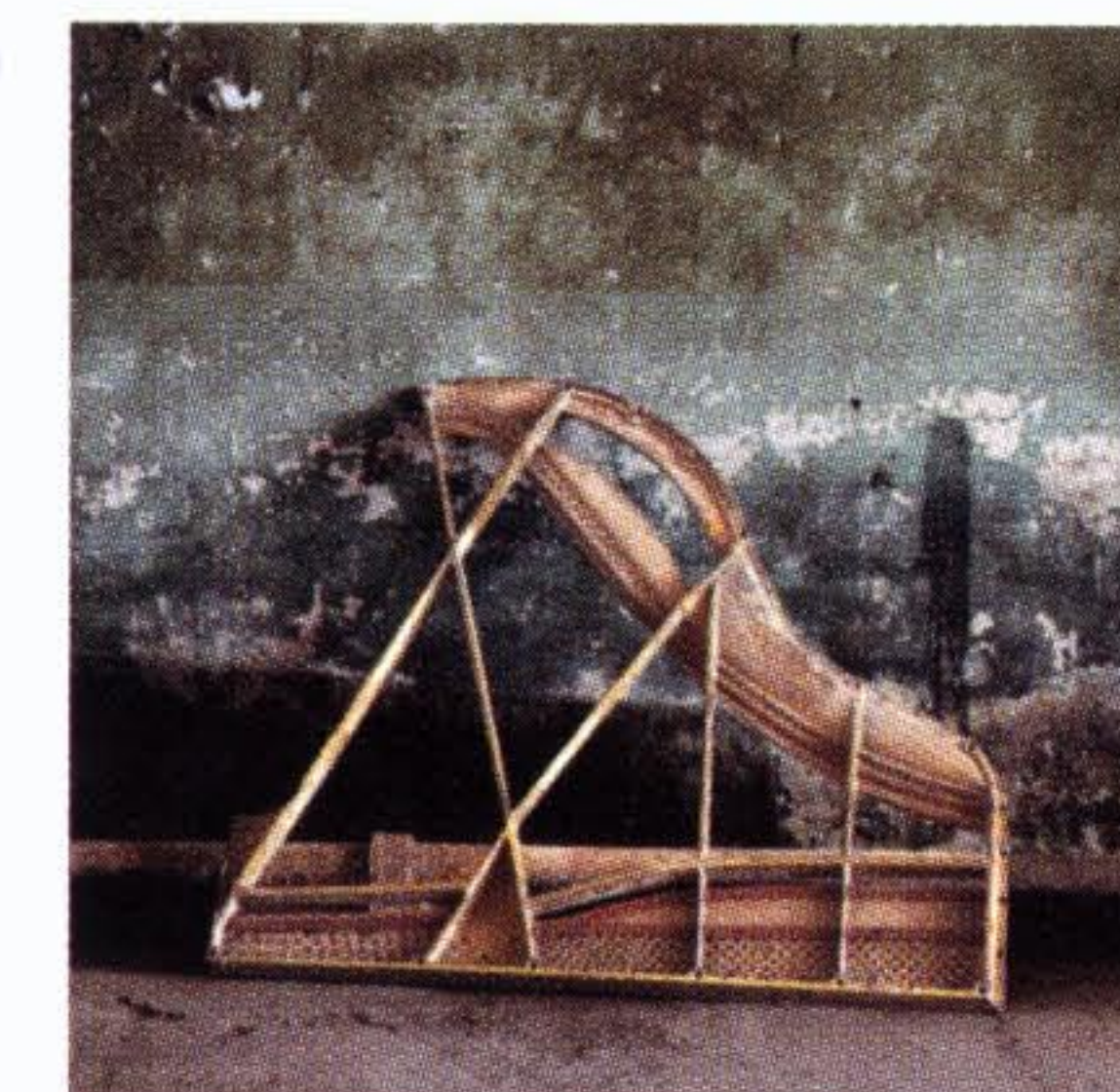
Chris Dickie on this issue & the Brilliant Book Awards.

08 | SNAP SHOTS

Reports culled from the photographic home front.

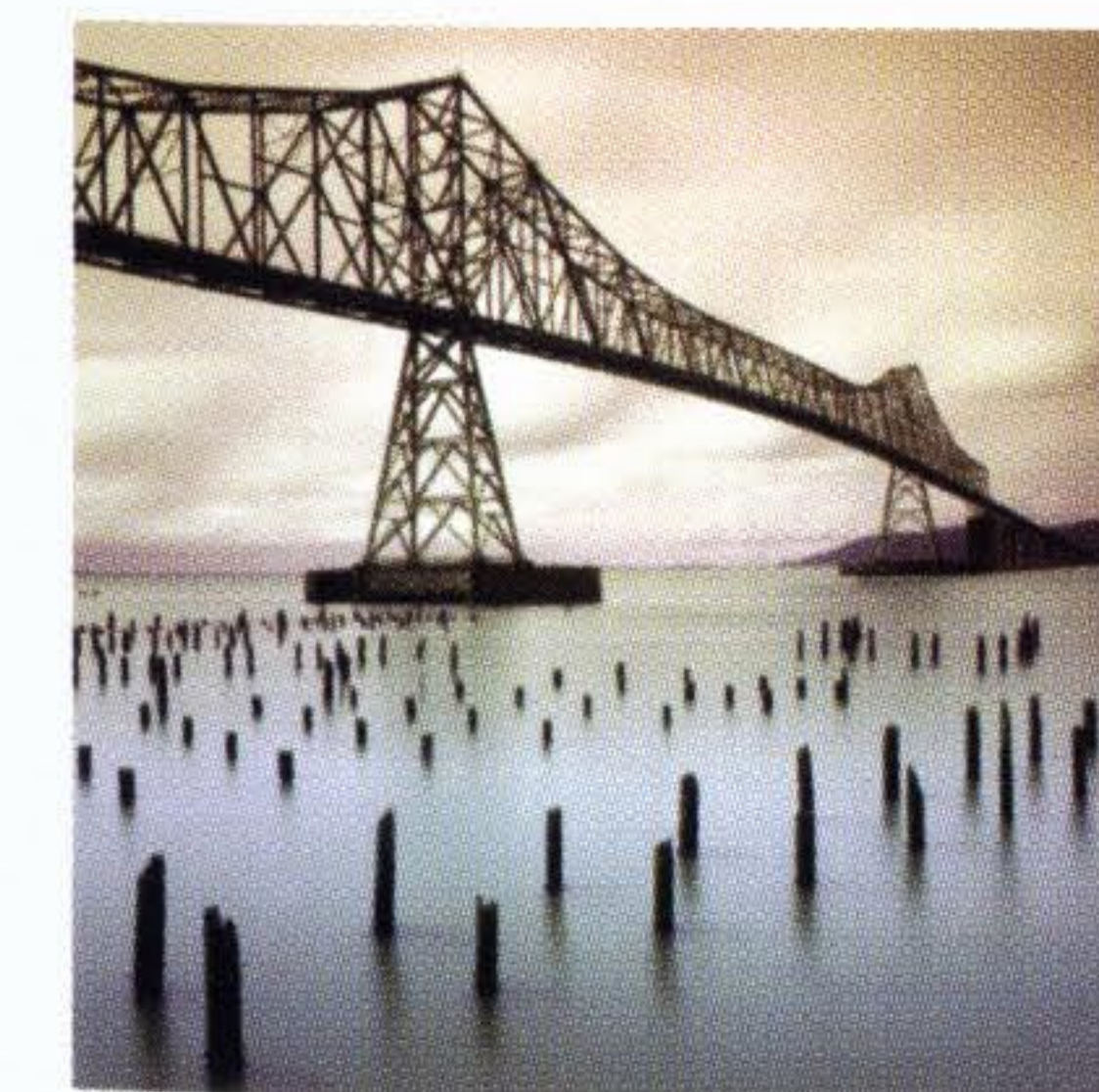
12 | SCENE AROUND

A selection of new work from Nicholas Hughes, Richard Littlewood, David Creedon (right) and Peter McKenzie.



22 | INSIGHT

Chris Dickie talks with Niall O'Leary of Millennium Images about what makes this stock agency creatively different (see cover).



38 | HISTORICAL

AD Coleman concludes his two-part essay on one of photography's most influential figures, Edward Steichen (see title page).

48 | APPROACHES

Paul Gallagher continues his series on black and white landscape, this time considering 'vision'.

56 | VIEWED

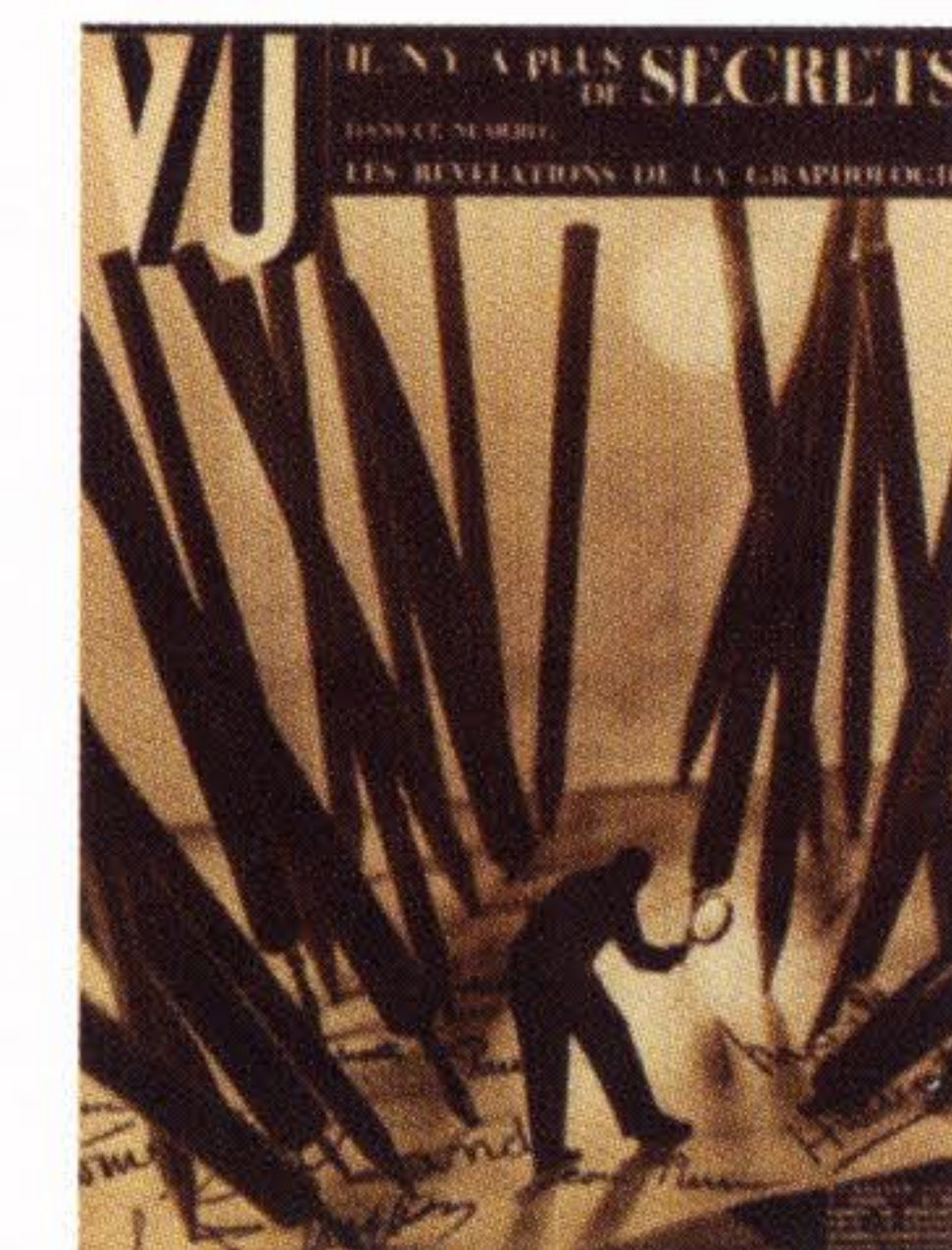
Gerry Badger enjoys the newly published book project, *We English*, by Simon Roberts (facing).

64 | TAKING ISSUE

We continue our series of columns by the late Bill Jay with a lament about the lack of photo historians.

68 | DOCUMENTARY

Bill Lowenburg follows Larry Fink as he records a *Night at the Met* (right).



78 | PUBLISHING

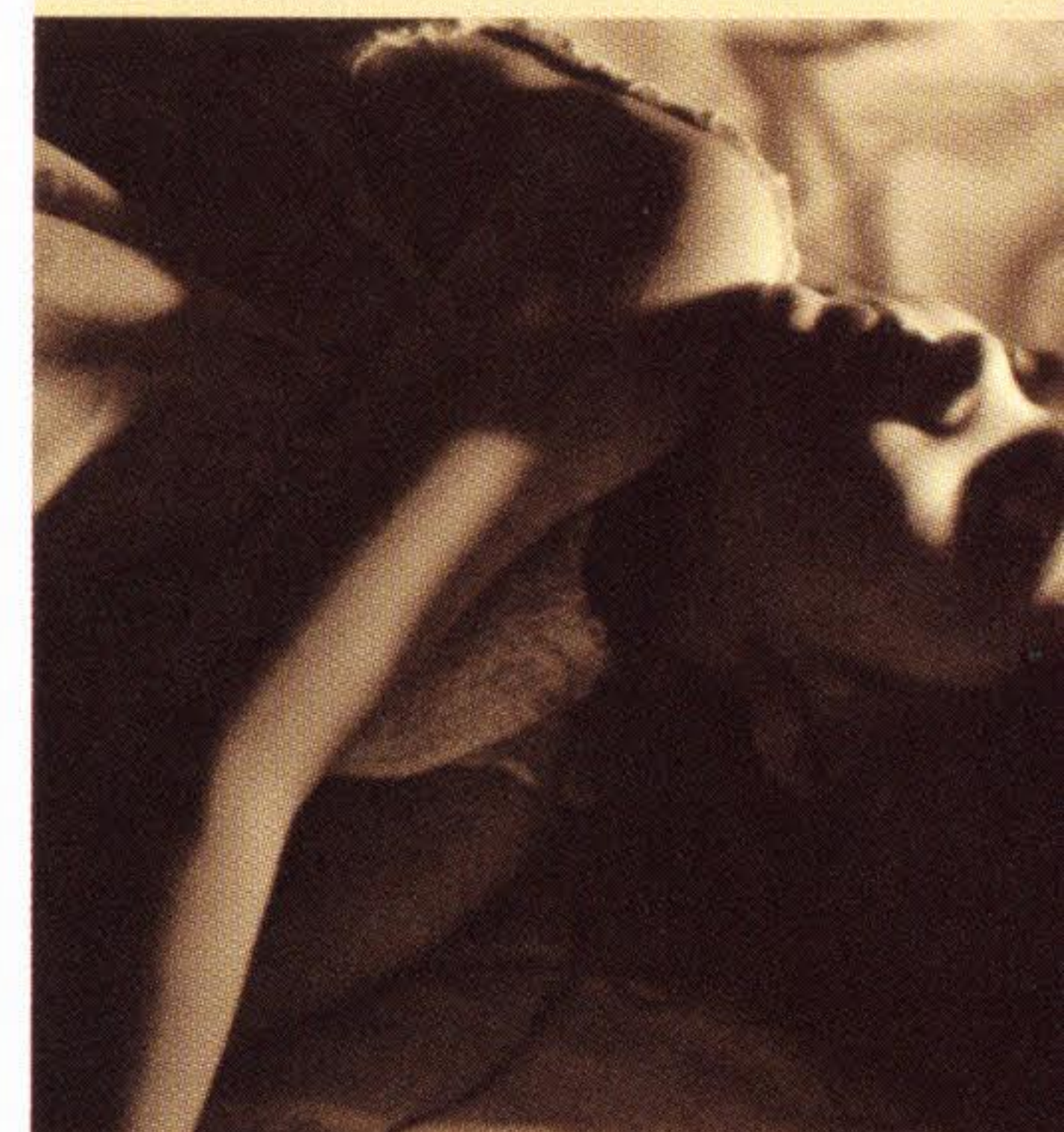
David Lee celebrates the rise of the photo magazine, in particular *VU* (left), first published in 1928.

86 | NEW IN PRINT

Our regular selection of newly published photobooks.

96 | BACK NUMBERS

Missed an issue? Check out what was in it – and buy!



↑ Cover Story: A contemporary stock library with a difference. Image © Andrea Morley – p22.

AD Coleman is a critic, educator and curator based in New York and Shenzhen.

Gerry Badger is a photographer, author, critic and curator, based in London.

Paul Gallagher specialises in b&w landscape photography.

Bill Jay, who died last year, was a photographer, writer and educator.

David Lee is a critic and editor of *The Jackdaw*, a newsletter for the visual arts.

Bill Lowenburg is a photographer and writer, based in Pennsylvania.

Green and pleasant land

Gerry Badger considers Simon Roberts' recently-published *We English* project

“ I don't believe our relationship with the *mis en scène*, 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.”

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 tilling something of an unploughed field. To be sure, we had a whole plethora of photographers in the 1970s and '80s 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 sexier 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 indelible 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 *mis en scène*, 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 lynchpins 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 swarming 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

Willen Lake, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, 29th June 2008.



River Lune, Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria, 17th August 2008.



Derby Day, Epsom Downs Racecourse, Surrey, 7th June 2008.

// 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, is at Crane Calman, Brighton, until 7 February. cranekalmanbrighton.com

We English, by Simon Roberts, is published by Chris Boot at £40, ISBN 978-1-905712-14-4. www.chrisboot.com.

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 claim 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 contests 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 beach, to the chagrin, no doubt, of bird watching and rambler groups.

Roberts also goes some way to scotching 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*. In a sense, this accords perfectly with the activities shown. We drive miles to some beach or park and then don't do very much – take a stroll, have a picnic – then pack the car and drive home. Like football, the picnic and the leisurely stroll seem to be pursuits we have exported to most of the world.

We English is a complex body of work – photographically simple in one sense, but imagistically complicated, with many different inferences, not all of them immediately apparent, so one can be grateful for the book's size, which enables one to see much of the detail in the pictures. Whether it can be considered as art or documentary, I don't care – the so-called painterly aspects of the work interest me the least. What does interest me is that Simon Roberts has produced an intelligent and persuasive vision of our contemporary English mores – a Tony Ray-Jones for the 21st century.

Gerry Badger



Fountains Fell, Yorkshire Dales, 3rd August 2008.



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



Camel 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.