The English at leisure

Simon Roberts broke out of the editorial market with a year-long study of Russian identity that became a highly successful book. Now he's working on another that focuses on his own motherland. Diane Smyth meets him.

'Venida was so open-ended - it was me, travelling across Russia with a camera,' says Simon Roberts. 'Everything was a photograph, everything was possible. It was so intense, I just couldn't do it again. For my next project I felt I needed much more of a framework, I couldn't just wander around with a camera waiting for moments.'

Motherland was the Brighton-based photographer's first book, a study of Russian national identity, and that next project became We English, an exploration much closer to home currently in edit. Shot on 5x4 during a six-month trip around his homeland, it needed tight parameters. Given the static, cumbersome nature of the camera, he was unable to snap spontaneously at any potential image he saw, and he also needed a central, unifying theme to help him look anew at the country he's known since birth.

'In Russia there's this very strong sense of the Motherland, but I didn't really know what it meant to be English, so I wanted to explore that,' he says. 'I knew it was going to be landscapes, and I knew what size the people were going to be in the landscape - they weren't going to be too close. I wanted to say something about people's relationship with the land and how they interact with it. It was planned to be quite anthropological.'

'That meant it was a more of a case of finding the landscape I was interested in, setting up the camera and then waiting for something to happen. In that sense it was quite set up, and one thing I was worried about was spontaneity - it takes a long time to set the camera up and I wondered what effect that would have on my subjects. What actually happened was that I'd set up somewhere and at first everybody would be looking at me, thinking 'What on earth is this guy doing?' but then after a couple of minutes they'd get bored and carry on with what they were doing. So I was able to get quite natural, spontaneous images.'

Leisure class

Given those interests, Roberts also decided to shoot people at play, rather than at work - keen to see what the English do when they're free to choose, rather than compelled by economic imperatives. As a result many of his images are, as he puts it, quite 'pastoral', depicting leisure in parks, fields, rivers and beaches. And they're also aesthetically appealing, because he wanted to reflect his subjects' sense of enjoyment and pleasure.

'It wasn't so much a celebrating England as trying to see that particular place or landscape through the eyes of the people who use it, who feel some kind of attachment to it,' he says. 'Even if I don't particularly like it they do, so even though there is litter on the floor or building work, if I can create something beautiful out of that scene I can show there's some value in it.'

In Blackpool, for example, there was a particular scene where there's litter on the floor and they're building a tide breaker, and I thought, 'This is Martin Parr territory.' And I had to stop and think, 'I don't want to do something that's derivative of Martin Parr, but at the same time there are people who are attached to this space and enjoying their time there, so should I photograph it?' I decided I should, but that I should try to make it a beautiful picture rather than something cynical. Some people will look and say, 'Isn't it grim?' But I wanted to feel that I'd at least tried to create something with a bit of empathy.'

Beauty is different for different people. When I shot Motherland I tried to find beauty in things that, at first sight to a Westerner, aren't beautiful, like a Soviet block of flats, because of course to the people who live there, there is an inherent beauty. So in that project, I tried to use pastel colours and careful framing to...
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Roberts kept the site updated with blog entries on how the journey and his work were progressing. He intended to keep this going until We English has been published and exhibited — making the site a project-specific production, rather than an open-ended blog. But, most importantly of all, he used the site to generate content and feedback from visitors, who he encouraged to suggest relevant areas and events.

I set up a site for Motherland and found the feedback people gave really interesting,” he says. “In particular, it was fascinating to see what Russians made of the way I’d depicted their cultural identity. For this project I wanted to make it even more interactive, and get people involved in the planning stage. I have plenty of my own ideas about England, but I was interested in what it meant to other people. I got comments from about 300 people, which I might publish, unedited, as an appendix in the book.”

Getting backing

The book will be published next year by Chris Boot, who produced Motherland. This time, though, Roberts had set up the deal before he started shooting, and he also put together a raft of funding from patrons as diverse as The National Media Museum, the Royal Photographic Society, the Caravan Club and O₂. Day to day the roadtrip was also helped along by a weekly spot in The Times, which included a shot by Roberts plus some text asking readers to recommend other subjects.

At the beginning of last week ideas were submitted, but they were all over the place, so I quickly realised I needed to have a route planned,” he says. ‘So every Monday The Times published a picture with some text stating “Next week Simon is in…” to encourage people to suggest ideas in specific geographical areas. And it helped me cover costs. That’s how you have to approach a body of work now – you have to have a multilayered approach.

It was much easier to get funding for this having done Motherland, but it still took quite a long time. You have to be quite targeted in what grants you apply for – there’s no point in applying for everything, and it takes quite a long time. Also I’d say some photographers need to just read the bloody instructions – the National Media Museum grant, for example, specifically says “This is not a travel grant” and yet half the applicants pitched saying they needed money for flights and travel.

Roberts is also canny about how he sheds his projects. While working on Motherland, for example, he took some extra time to shoot a separate, though related, body of work on the Polar night in Northern Russia, which he subsequently sold as a separate story, and which is now marketed as a separate set of prints by his galleries. Currently he’s editing the We English images, while contacting galleries for an exhibition in 2010, doing the last press and PR for the Motherland project, and starting to get together ideas and funding for his next project, an anthropological look at life in a city.

“It takes a lot of energy but this is the way I want to work now,” he says. “A project every two years. Motherland was such a crucial project for me because it allowed me to move on from what I was doing (largely editorial commissions) and start to really explore what it was I had to say.”

Online

For more information on the photographer and his latest project, visit we-english.co.uk or simonroberts.com. Simon Roberts is speaking at BP’s annual event for pro photographers, Vision, on 07 November. For more information visit bp-photography.com/Vision.English or British identity over the years. Roberts researched their work thoroughly before starting his project, first to ensure that he didn’t duplicate it, and secondly to help him find his own voice. He also looked at tourist guides and brochures from across England, as well as painting depictions by artists such as LS Lowry. This research, which might usually remain in a personal scrapbook, was then posted on a website, we-english.co.uk, which Roberts updated as the project progressed – from a motorhome.

“I wanted to work on the project for a solid amount of time on a journey, rather than breaking it up by going off on work on it, coming back home, going off, and so on,” he says. ‘I like the idea of a road trip as a vehicle for making work and some of the photographers whose work I really appreciate – Joel Sternfeld or Stephen Shore – both worked that way. Doing it in a motorhome was cheaper than driving in a car and paying for accommodation, and meant I could travel with my wife and daughter.’

Top: From We English;
Middle: From Polyamorous Niche;
Bottom: Roberts, with his wife Sarah, and child, in front of their motorhome; Opposite: From Motherland.