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17 September

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Moving graphics bombard us from all sides, but the still image retains the power to document the moment and define how we see ourselves. John Stones previews two shows where photography proves the ideal medium to explore ideas of national identity

It's only relatively recently that Englishness has been allowed back into polite society. Following devolution, the rigid enforcement of 'Britishness' was relaxed and regional English identity was no longer the preserve of the Far Right. While Englishness was once defined by painters such as John Constable, George Stubbs and William Hogarth, today it falls largely to photographers to create the aesthetic world in which we find ourselves.

The most notorious recent example is the rather unflattering portrait of Britain presented by Martin Parr, whose seminal shots of England date from the 1980s and early 1990s, a period notable for the social polarisation and hostility influenced by the policies of Margaret Thatcher. Rather than a 'green and pleasant land', he famously presented the garish world of The Sun and seaside outings.

'It's still a novel idea - crap towns, the rather trite way Britain rebuilt itself in the 1960s and 1970s,' asserts Parr, who adds he strongly believes photography should 'reconnect with things that are real'. 'Art directors and designers think we want to see famous people, and perhaps they are right,' says Parr. 'But I still think we should take pictures of real people instead.'

'I think of my photography as a form of collecting,' says Parr. And as well as capturing little glimpses of our lives, he has built up a sizable collection of ephemeral graphics, such as photographic trays and limited-edition packaging.

Thomas Weski, a curator at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, saw this sprawling collection and decided to curate it alongside Parr's recent Luxury series, and so the travelling exhibition known as Parrworld was born. Some of the items included, such as the kitsch ceramics of Thatcher, are the kind of gaudy ephemera that chime with his concurrent photographs. Others, however, such as graphics created in support of the 1980s miners' strikes are less expected. 'People don't know how endangered things like this are,' says Parr with an evident collector's passion, and also more than a hint of social conscience that has not always been read into his photographs.

Parr has also been busy buying the work of other photographers. 'I've been collecting my peers, in effect. Is that unusual?' he asks. Some of the images are similar in vein to his own work, or influenced by it. Other photographs, however, are quite different, such as the gritty Watching the Parade, one of Chris Killip's seminal Newcastle images of the early 1980s.

One of the younger photographers included in Parrworld is Brighton-based Simon Roberts, who has just completed a large project entitled We English that will be the subject of a major exhibition at the National Media Museum in Bradford next year. In its subject matter it is clearly indebted to Parr. 'Whatever you think of the actual photographs, Parr has influenced me and a whole generation of photographers,' Roberts says.

Like Parr, Roberts wants to swim against the tide of so much modern photography. 'A lot of photography today is so boring, so removed from reality. Everything has to be critical and pessimistic,' he says. 'I wanted to produce something that is quite beautiful, but not a chocolate box image.'

As a result, We English looks at the country with a lyrical pastoral gaze rather than irony or sarcasm. 'Certainly, you will find some of the kinds of scenes that Parr would have worked. But it is a more sensitive look, more about a poetic relationship with the landscape.' Taking his cue from Dutch landscape painting, Roberts shows people engaged in group leisure activities presented small in the frame and with light that is unfashionably undramatic.

It's a body of work that is unfashionable not only stylistically and in subject matter, but technically too. To take the photographs, Roberts covered his head with a dark cloth to peer through the concertina of a large-format view camera, essentially unchanged since the 19th century, and shot on film. 'Using a view camera was a really good experience. It's a very public statement about making a photograph and, as you're static, you're not threatening,' Roberts explains. 'It takes five to ten minutes to set up, so the results are actually quite spontaneous as people get bored with what you are doing. It would have been much more difficult with a smaller digital camera.'

Parr himself is back to pointing his camera at Britain. He, too, is working on a book on Britishness and is just back from visits to Scotland and the seaside resorts of Ramsgate and Broadstairs in Kent. 'Britain frayed at the edges' is how Parr describes it, adding, 'It's as quirky as ever.'

It's perhaps telling that only galleries in the North of England are staging both Parrworld and We English. While Parrworld has been shown in major venues such as the Haus de Kunst in Munich and the Jeu de Paume in Paris, London galleries declined the show.

Perhaps London is still too wrapped up in the global cult of glamour and celebrity, and the kind of photography essential to its maintenance. But fashion often makes what is parochial or old hat one day, the height of fashion the next.

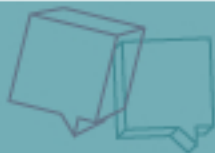
Parrworld runs at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, from 17 October to 10 January 2010

We English runs at The Photographers' Gallery (Print Room), London, until 18 October and at the National Media Museum, Bradford, from 12 March to 5 September 2010

We English by Simon Roberts is published by Chris Boot, priced £40

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READERS' COMMENTS (1)

QM | Thu, 17 Sep 2009 4:37 pm

I'm sorry, but Englishness has never been the province of the far right, that has always been the territory of the British national Party, whose symbol was the Union Flag, not the Cross of St George.

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