

SIMON ROBERTS

New Vedute – Alternative Postcards from Rome

by Flavio Scollo, Curator

In a nutshell, we might call Simon Roberts a landscape photographer. As is often the case, however, this comes nowhere near to describing his photography. His landscapes are almost always connected to the social fabric of their inhabitants and it is in this relationship that Roberts works his small, alchemical magic. The people arranged geometrically in the frame naturally become part of the landscape, on a par with the trees or other elements, as though they had always been there and always would be. Yet although all seems calm and ordered, none of the original dynamism is lost. It becomes, quite simply, contemplative.

The series New Vedute may appear quite unlike the rest of his work, yet we find even here many of his typical elements. Roberts superimposes his own contemporary snapshots over postcards, idealised images from disparate places and times yet all depicting the city of Rome. The meaning of each image is influenced by the original text written on the reverse of the postcard which becomes the title for each piece. The result might often appear disorientating and the end goals are quite diverse: sometimes it is the geometric void of an empty piazza that is re-populated, often with unsettling inverted proportions; sometimes his intention is openly ironic and sometimes the superimpositions become juxtapositions, offering a sharp cross section of Rome's modern history and its contradictions. The overall image that emerges is the typical experience that a hypothetical tourist would encounter when visiting one of the most touristy cities in the world. A city that, with its ancient ruins and many historical monuments, is very much a picture-postcard city yet also an urbanised space. This is the precise dual identity that Roberts investigates by combining contemporary images with postcards, drawing out the internal tensions and exploring the competing images.

Through the postcard manipulation process, Roberts not only rearranges and interrogates the importance of cultural emblems and the concept of the landscape, but singles out the very nature of the postcards. They are presented here as ordinary objects that undergo an extraordinary process, only to be then repositioned in an extraordinary frame where they have to imitate a familiar domestic dimension. The exceptional nature of the ordinary is perhaps the leitmotif of his Rome project, but we might even venture that it is also Roberts's stylistic calling card. The two great photographs that precede the postcard series are more similar to the rest of his artistic production and contain the same features, although, in this case, the exceptional nature of an ordinary tourist destination such as the Altare della Patria is accentuated by the sense of apprehension provoked by the sight of the Italian flag at half-mast following the earthquake that struck central Italy.