

# SOURCE

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## Looking Obliquely at the Landscape

Brighton Photo Fringe 2008  
Various venues

The discourse of landscape has undergone a Renaissance of sorts in recent years, with fields like cultural geography and landscape architecture turning their back on established definitions of landscape as a place or a representation of external nature, and embracing it as a cultural agent that is complexly linked to particular ways of seeing, being and doing.

Recent landscape photography, it would appear, has yet to undergo a similarly critical self-examination. Inspired by the coolly anthropological aesthetic of the New Topographics, scores of landscape photographers, particularly in North America, spent the nineteen-eighties and nineties subjecting landscape representation to a rigorous ideological critique. The last ten years, however, has seen the revival of concerns that were spurned by the critical landscape practice of the last two decades. At the dawn of a new millennium – and in the face of looming global political and environmental crises – landscape photography is revisiting the aesthetic and figurative expressions of landscape that were so roundly critiqued only a decade earlier. Today's landscape luminaries – Ed Burtynsky, Simon Norfolk, Robert Adams, John Davies, and others – superimpose beauty and politics, metaphor and documentary, sublimity and social commentary with an assuredness that would have been anathema to many of their precursors.

My visit to the Brighton Photo Fringe was part of a wider project to put some of these apparent inconsistencies into context. Of the ten or so exhibitions I visited, four stood out – *Human Endeavour*; *Greenland*, *Motherland*; *Spectre*; and *Entre-Deux: From Picardie to Sussex*. Between them, these four exhibitions presented a broad cross section of some of the issues concerning landscape photographers at the turn of the millennium.

For many of the Fringe photographers, landscape imagery functioned as a vehicle – an allegory for the human condition or a mirror for human events – rather than an end in itself. In Simon Roberts' atmospheric *Motherland* series, the solemn beauty of the northern landscape reflects changes in Russian life and culture fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Wendy Pye's study of the coastline around Beachy Head is represented by a series of images (*In Memory Of*) documenting memorials left by the friends and families of suicide victims. Visible in the distance, the East Sussex coastline is both a symbolic site, and a metaphor for the damaged human psyche. In Richard Chivers' photographs, land scarred by quarrying activity acts as an emblem of greater devastation elsewhere.

*Entre-Deux* examined landscape through the lens of the local and the personal. Six photographers – three from Picardie, France, and three from Sussex – participated in a cross-channel exchange, taking a week to produce a body of work in response to the places they visited. Jim Cooke's images of the Vallée de la Somme are shaped by the area's history and topography as well as the 'metaphoric presence' that he brought with him to the location. Claire Dignocourt's dream-like images of the Ashdown forest are deliberately incomplete traces of an experience of place. While Adriana Wattel depicts the East Sussex coast as a cheerfully domestic landscape, as frumpy and unspectacular as its elderly inhabitants, Benjamin Teissèdre's vision of the same landscape is steeped in the anachronistic melancholy of a faded postcard.

Themed around the penetration of the natural world by capital, the work in *Human Endeavour* dealt most explicitly with the social and political forces shaping the land. Alex Currie's images of bland postindustrial sites reflect on the way that such non-places have increasingly come to characterize the European landscape. In Simon Carruthers' *Cycles* series, tyre dumps and junkyards occupy the near space, while the pristine English landscape of hedgerows and fields (itself a creation

of the agricultural revolution) is relegated to the distance. His ironic juxtaposition of the English pastoral and the late capitalist industrial sublime comments on the ecological consequences of mass consumption; the estrangement between foreground and background in his images is as unsettling and incongruous as the sites themselves.

Global political and economic paradigm shifts are responsible for the rapid and often brutal transformation of land and landscapes. Increasingly, the landscapes that once gave shape to individual and collective subjectivities are lodged in memory and representation rather than lived as material realities. Seen in this light, it's all too easy to vilify contemporary landscape photography for its seeming indulgence in the local, the aesthetic, and the personal.

Such work may appear less political in its motivations, less decisive in its questioning, and less adventurous in its strategies than the work of the New Topographics and their ilk. Yet the status of landscape – what it is, and how to represent it – is far less straightforward today than it was for previous generations of photographers, and it would be a mistake to condemn it for privileging less urgent concerns over social and political issues. At the heart of much of this work is a concern with some of the more subtle and intricate dimensions of perception and environment; with the way that the aesthetic and symbolic conventions of landscape representation play into our understanding and experience of landscape as a medium.

Today's landscape photographer is dealing with geopolitical realities too complex to submit easily to straightforward documentation, and with ideologies too intricate to expose simply by peeling back layers of representational false consciousness. The ethical ambiguity of contemporary landscape imagery should not be read as a failure to engage critically with its subject, but as an acknowledgement of the difficulties of representing space, place, and time at an uncertain point in history.

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