PHOTOGRAPHING THE NATION: SIMON ROBERTS AT FLOWERS GALLERY

Simon Roberts, Untitled 3, Murmansk, Northern Russia (From the series Polyarnye Nochi), 2005, 76 x 101 cm, 29 7/8 x 39 3/4 in, Edition of 6 plus 2 artist's proofs

Simon Roberts
Flowers Gallery, until January 12
529 West 20th Street
New York NY 10011

By DANIEL MAIDMAN January, 2019

Consider the strange case of Simon Roberts, whose dazzling show *Homeland* is on display at Flowers Gallery in New York until January 12th.

An English photographer, Roberts traveled throughout Russia in the early 2000's, photographing people and places with a majestic detachment abetted, in part, by his large-format camera. As a foreigner, his own gaze, like that of his camera, drifted weightlessly above the scenes unfolding before him. He was not entangled in individual lives. His wide view encompassed the Russian people, the Russian land, and Russian history and culture. His work expressed a sense that these four elements – people, land, history, and culture – expressed facets of a single unity. The work that emerged from this period is called, aptly, *Motherland*. Some of its images are included in the show at Flowers.

Simon Roberts, Camping with Sasha and Pavel, Kamchatka, Far East Russia, from Motherland, 2004, 76 x 101 cm, 29 7/8 x 39 3/4 inEdition of 6 plus 1 artist's proof

In her excellent introduction to Roberts's book *Motherland*, Rosamund Bartlett quotes several essential thinkers on the subject of the Russian concept of the motherland, including Andrei Tarkovsky, who for my money is the greatest filmmaker who ever lived. Bartlett quotes Tarkovsky reflecting on his exile from Russia:

"I wanted to make a film about Russian nostalgia – about that state of mind peculiar to our nation which affects Russians who are far from their native land. I saw this almost as a patriotic duty in my understanding of the concept. I wanted the film to be about the fatal attachment of Russians to their national roots, their past, their culture, their native places, their families and friends; an attachment which they carry with them all their lives, regardless of where destiny may fling them."

Roberts, it seems, glimpsed this profound linkage during his travels, and, moreover, came to feel something of the tender expatriate's love which Tarkovsky describes here. He turned his transformed gaze back on his native England, seeing it from that same majestic elevation with which he saw Russia. England now seemed to him of a kind with Russia: a unique synthesis of people, land, history, and culture.

Here, for example, is a picture which, without background, appears to be a random group of nutters on a beach:

Simon Roberts Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet, 2008 Fujicolour crystal archive print 121.9 x 152.4 cm, 48 x 60 in Edition of 4 plus 2 artist's proofs

Well, they may be that, but their odd costume is part of the Dickens Festival they're celebrating. And that castle up on the hill behind them, rising above the modern buildings, is where Dickens wrote *Bleak House*. To us, Dickens is an idea of greatness. To these people, he is also an ancestor who wrote his stories just over there. These are the English people, celebrating English culture, at the same juncture of English land, sea, and sky where the events of their history took place. To us, this picture is well composed, beautiful and funny, dense in information and implication. But to those of the Isle of Thanet, it must be both banal, in its unremarkable familiarity, and evocative, if they can conceive of their way of life vanishing, in a way we may imagine but never exactly share.

The stark evaporation of specific meaning, leaving behind only formal qualities and the ghosts of information, is seen again in this perplexing image:

Simon Roberts, Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, Shoreham Air Show, West Sussex, 2007, Fujicolour crystal archive print, 152.4 x 182.9 cm, 60 x 72 in, Edition of 4 plus 1 artist's proof

What can we understand of this, without assistance? It is an air show on a sunny day, attended by a crowd. Planes fly overhead. An explosion and a column of smoke dot the countryside, further enhancing whatever sort of reenactment this is.

Well, the title tells us a bit more, that this is a memorial of the Battle of Britain. More, we must learn from somebody who knows the scene: the foreground explosion is part of the show. And the background column of smoke is a downed airplane. The flyer was killed. This is, in fact, a jarring modern version of Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. As in the Bruegel, the actual death happens off to the side, tiny and unnoticed, in a landscape crowded with the unruly activity of human life. People everywhere can understand the Bruegel because Icarus is an inheritance of civilization itself. This image, however, takes on that particular tragic irony only for people of West Sussex who remember what happened. On one level, Roberts is making art for everyone, for any individual cast up into Flowers Gallery from New York's global flow; and on another level he is making art of and for England.

And this brings us to what is so strange about the case of Simon Roberts, which is that he is a nationalist photographer. I've asked, and am assured that as a person, as an analytic thinker, his liberal, #remainer credentials are as impeccable as one would expect from a successful artist. But his vision as an artist, irreducible to parts, perhaps incomprehensible to Roberts the man, is, I think, nationalist. If nationalism is an ethos venerating the nation as a unique synthesis of people, land, history, and culture, then Roberts the artist is a nationalist. Roberts's nationalism precedes and opposes the State. Consider this:

Simon Roberts, Download Festival, Donington Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire, 2008, Fujicolour crystal archive print, 152.4 x 182.9 cm, 60 x 72 in, Edition of 4 plus 2 artist's proofs

This is the music festival at which the increasingly totalitarian English state first added facial recognition technology to its pervasive surveillance. What do we see here? The effort undone by the English people, cheerfully rendering themselves unidentifiable under KISS makeup. The gesture is likely inadvertent on the part of the crowd, and I would imagine Roberts took the opposed forces of computerized facial recognition and KISS-based facial obscuration as comical counterpoints. But the picture is not funny at all. When seen in context, this piece of artwork suggests that the unified body of the people – the human part of the nation – is prior to the state, and may cast off the state if pushed. They're not joking. That's war-paint. The picture hums with the pre-revolutionary tone that has electrified Europe and America these several years.

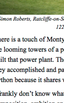
Let's have one last image from this remarkable body of work.

Simon Roberts, Ratcliffe-on-Soar Power Station, Nottinghamshire, 2008, Fujicolour crystal archive print, 102 x 122 cm, 40 1/4 x 48 1/4 in, Edition of 9 plus 1 artist's proof

There is a touch of Monty Python to this photograph of old men playing golf, dwarfed by the looming towers of a power plant. One must add, therefore, that these particular old men built that power plant. They return to spend their leisure time at the foot of the mighty thing they accomplished and pass on to their children. It absolutely does have a touch of Monty Python because it shares with Python the grand eccentricity of the English.

I frankly don't know what to make of Roberts. His photography is stunning in narrative and composition, ambition and scale. It has just enough of the wistful and even the cold-eyed to distinguish it from house-style *National Geographic* anthropology. I cannot imagine he is much of a nationalist himself, and yet his portraits of Russia and of England make a powerful argument for nationalism, for the nation as a loving and living force in the world: as home.

Take a look for yourself and see what you think. If you cannot get to Flowers or afford an original print, Roberts's photography of England is gathered in a book called (of course) *Merrie Albion – Landscape Studies of a Small Island*. **WM**



DANIEL MAIDMAN

Daniel Maidman is a painter and writer. His art is included in the permanent collections of the Library of Congress, the New Britain Museum of American Art, and the Long Beach Museum of Art, as well as numerous private collections, among them those of New York Magazine senior art critic Jerry Saltz, Chicago collector Howard Tullman, Disney senior vice president Jackson George, and Gemini-winning screenwriter Jeremy Boxen. He has produced paintings in collaboration with best-selling novelist Chris Melville, award-winning poet Kathleen Rooney, independent film icon Martin Donovan, and noted installation artist Erika Johnson. Maidman's art and writing on art have been featured in ARTNews, Forbes, Juxtapoz, Whitehot Magazine, Hyperallergic, American Art Collector, International Artist, PoetsArtists, MAKE, Manifest, and The Artist's Magazine. He blogs for The Huffington Post. He lives and paints in Brooklyn, New York.

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