

In New York, Peering Through Simon Roberts' Eyes

BY CONNOR GOODWIN | DECEMBER 04, 2018



"Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, Shoreham Air Show, West Sussex, from Merrie Albion, 2007-2017, Simon Roberts.
(©Simon Roberts)

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"As it is so strangely ordained in this world," wrote the great Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol, "what is amusing will turn into being gloomy, if you stand too long before it, and then God knows what ideas may not stray into the mind." This phenomena rings true in the photographs of Simon Roberts, a British photographer who achieved much acclaim for "We English," a series of color photographs of his native England, some of which are included in "Homeland," on view at Flowers Gallery through January 12, 2019.

The other half of the exhibit consists of photographs taken during Roberts travels through Russia. Taken together, these photographs are a meditation on identity and landscape, understood in terms of nationalism.

Shot from a distance, the photos are made up of simple elements: a bounty of natural light, a gathered crowd of people, and, although one sense there is an event afoot, the theater of action is offstage as often as it is in view.

Roberts's strength seems to lie in his use of distance, which appears to be two-fold. There is a literal distance that allows him to capture a panoramic scene and which imbues the photograph with a matter-of-factness. Even when up close, Roberts creates distance by elevating himself, as in the case of the "Download Festival, Donington Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire," 2008, which depicts a group of young KISS fans at a music concert looking up toward Roberts's pulpit.

The other distance is subtler and only appears in some photographs and has to do with action. When the action is offstage, so to speak, Roberts focuses instead on the viewers and the act of looking. This is especially true of "Keynes Country Park Beach, Shornecote, Gloucestershire," 2008, which shows a crowd of beachgoers scattered on a lawn, oblivious to Roberts and his camera. The composition recalls Seurat's famous Impressionist painting, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," 1884, but with a twist of K-Mart realism.

With a few exceptions, the photos of Russia, while beautiful and moody, are unimaginative. Or rather, they are precisely what we Westerners imagine when we think of Russia: dispersed, bleak, dingy. The "Untitled" series shot in Murmansk in northern Russia are centered around hulking machinery and monolithic buildings, awash with locomotive steam and the glow of untrodden snow. Unlike the other photos, which have an unexpected quality, here Roberts seems to impose a viewpoint. But perhaps this is merely endemic of the traveler abroad. Even the trained eye of a photographer finds it difficult to override the mind's eye. Nevertheless, Roberts manages to transform the ugliness of industry, using its own elements, into something beautiful.

In "Camping with Sasha and Paval, Kamchatka Peninsula, Far East Russia," 2004, one man wearing flannel, a gold chain, and a pink apron tends to a fire, while another man, dressed in camouflage and rubber boots, lies on the ground, hands over his belly, peacefully exhausted from gathering wood. Between the pink apron and the man who appears like a fallen soldier, the subjects appear costumed and the scene staged, but it is Roberts's steady eye that patiently waits for this uncanny moment.

The underlying tension in these photographs lies between the carefree jubilation of being on holiday and the weight of collective memory. This collection shows leisurely rounds of golf, afternoons at the boardwalk and on the beach, fairs and festivals, and, of course, Roberts's extensive travel throughout Russia. The occasion for each of these holidays, festivals, and so on, is, more often than not, historic in nature.

This tension is expressed most pointedly in "Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, Shoreham Air Show, West Sussex," 2007. Overhead, a flock of jets spearhead through the open sky. Below, throngs of people at a fair with a blow-up bounce house, radio personalities, baby strollers, and a crowd of onlookers comfortably positioned on a hillside. In the not-far distance, a fireball explosion blazes, as if the photograph itself were on fire. The spectacle of violence, though controlled and bloodless here, has long attracted crowds and been used to advance state control. In this case, the state expresses itself through not through fear, but pride.

"Homeland" is on view at Flowers Gallery in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City from November 15, 2018 through January 12, 2019.

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