

SIMON ROBERTS

The Anthroposcenic: Landscape in the Anthropocene by David Matless, 2018

The “now” in “Landscape Now”, the title of this special issue of *British Art Studies*, deserves scrutiny. One emerging definition of “now” is the Anthropocene—a now whose beginning remains open to dispute, but which will linger, if the label takes hold. A geological epoch defined as beginning in the recent past that might even outlast the study of British art.

This essay uses the term “Anthroposcenic” to explore how landscape art might depict a new epoch, beginning with an image of flood. In February 2014, Simon Roberts photographed a family looking from Burrow Mump over a deluged landscape: *Flooding of the Somerset Levels, Burrowbridge* (Fig. 1).

The image appears in Roberts’ 2017 collection *Merrie Albion*, a photographic exploration of landscape and identity over a decade, environmental tumult appearing alongside the political turmoil documented elsewhere in the book.¹ The flooded “Albion” shown here carries its share of national iconography, the Levels bearing historic associations with King Alfred at nearby Athelney, and mythic resonances via Avalon and Glastonbury. Roberts’ viewpoint, Burrow Mump, is a smaller version of Glastonbury Tor, complete with St Michael’s church ruin at its summit, whose tower stands behind the man behind the lens. Burrow Mump was donated to the National Trust in 1946 by Major Alexander Gould Barrett, a plaque on the tower recording it as a memorial: “that the men and women of Somerset who died serving their country in the Second World War may be remembered here in time to come.”

Roberts’ photograph lays a new landscape narrative over older iconography: new stories of anxiety and value, the temporal and precarious. In Britain, flood management had achieved newly political status in 2014 as a wet winter



Fig.1 Flooding of the Somerset Levels, Burrowbridge, 2014 from the series Merrie Albion

climate change and the future likelihood of extreme events to the fore. The government Environment Agency was accused of effectively abandoning Burrowbridge, and Royal Marines were brought in to reinforce defences; a line of white sandbags appears near the centre of Roberts' image. The embanked River Parrett flows in the middle distance beyond the A361, and has spilled into the fields to the west. The Quantock Hills are beyond, the river flowing to the right, north to Bridgwater and the sea.

Flood events can be both a disaster and a spectacle, and Roberts photographed the flood on 11 February, choosing the elevated prospect offered by the Mump, in part to register others looking. Roberts gains a perspective on a family's perspective on altered landscape, his own tripod-mounted large format camera capturing the adult family members moving phones to record events. Muddy foreground turf indicates that others too have been here for the view, though Roberts recalls that during his visit Burrowbridge was "eerily deserted", save for this one family.² As often in his

images, Roberts, who would have been conspicuous on the day, appears to escape the attention of the observed, hiding in plain sight, though the small child peering over the adult's shoulder does seem to catch Roberts' camera eye.

Roberts' landscape images are marked by careful social observation; we assume this is a family group, and from their dress, situation and lack of baggage, we might assume they are not tourists and are in fact familiar with the place already. Here are working people viewing a working landscape whose normal patterns of labour have been suspended by the weather. Cars are parked behind the industrial buildings below, so indoors things seem to be proceeding, and roads are passable, but field working is out. The family may, like Roberts, have driven here for the view, or walked up from home. This inter-generational picture indicates not only spatial but temporal prospects, viewpoints forward in time as well as outward across the landscape. Will this happen more as the children grow, as the adults age? The flood waters are vividly brown with sediment, signalling erosive disruption, yet also deposition for future fertility. Floods have made this landscape in the past, but will their increased frequency and severity shift the present balance, becoming in human terms destructive rather than constructive, anthropogenic climate change disrupting human habitat? As the world enters a proposed new geological epoch, whereby humanity has marked the rock record, the flooded River Parrett lays down new deposits. Future geologists on the Levels may find these Anthropocene sediments; future art historians, viewing Merrie Albion, might find Roberts' photograph Anthroposcenic.

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