

'I LIKE THE COMEDY AND TRAGEDY YOU CAN GET WITHIN A LANDSCAPE'

He has been exploring identities and belonging for more than a decade. Ahead of a talk at RPS House, Simon Roberts HonFRPS explains why

WORDS: GEMMA PADLEY



Camping with Sasha and Paval, Russia, 2004

PREVIOUS PAGES

'The Kamchatka Peninsula, one of Russia's most isolated regions, was the centre of its Pacific nuclear submarine fleet and closed to individuals without military permission until 1991. Paval moved to Kamchatka and worked as an engineer for the state oil company for 30 years. Sasha was a fisherman.'

Keynes East Country Park Beach, 2008

ABOVE

'In a number of my We English images, modern-day leisure takes place on what were once industrial sites. Looking at leisure activities struck me as a thought-provoking way of exploring shifting cultural and national identity. They can reveal as much about how we see ourselves as how we wish others to see us.'

Brighton West Pier, 2011

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM

'I've lived in Brighton for many years and feel very connected to the sea. I shot Pierdom, a project about Britain's last pleasure piers, from 2010 to 2013 as a kind of homage to Victorian engineering. There's something very appealing about these strange and eccentric structures that poke out of our coastline.'

THINK OF THE CONTEMPORARY PIONEERS of British landscape photography, and Simon Roberts immediately springs to mind. His work – large-format colour images depicting people interacting with the landscape – taps into notions of identity and belonging. It also poses fundamental questions about our collective relationship with the land – who has access to public spaces, who owns and manages these

spaces, and what does the landscape mean to us? Roberts studied cultural geography at the University of Sheffield and describes himself as 'part geographer, part ethnographer, part photographer, and part artist'. Named an Honorary Fellow of the RPS in 2013, his work is very much about time and place, and his images, loaded with cultural references and densely layered, invite us to study every inch of the frame. They are meticulous in their depiction of British society and the landscape. A typical Simon Roberts photograph can contain many mini narratives, and be interpreted and pondered in many ways.

'I've always been interested in history painting, in those



Abandoned Warship in the Kola Bay, Murmansk, Northwestern Region, Russia, 2005

LEFT

'Motherland is a key body of work for me because it marked the point when I decided to become more of an author of my work. I spent a year travelling around Russia with my wife. It was one of those epic journeys at a time when Russia wasn't quite the autocratic state it is now. I made this image on the edge of a naval base during polar nights, a period when the sun struggles to reach above the horizon.'



BEST SHOTS

**River Esk at
Trough House
Bridge, Eskdale,
Cumbria, 2014**

THESE PAGES

'This image is from a series that looks at landscape owned on behalf of the nation. We think of the landscape as being open, but in fact companies or trusts own much of it and we are granted access. This is common land in the Lake District. I like how it looks as though the girl is about to disappear into the landscape. There's something quite ordinary about the scene – it's people enjoying a summer holiday and there's an element of nostalgia – but it also hints at danger. I like that tension.'



BEST SHOTS

Between the Acts
– Part I, 2018,
Version 1 (top) and
version 2 (below)

RIGHT

'I was invited to create a poster in response to Brexit for which I paired a photograph of people on the edge of the iconic white cliffs at Seven Sisters in Sussex with a quote from a novel by Virginia Woolf. The poster was displayed on billboards in UK cities including Brighton. When the local council instructed it to be removed, I reimagined the poster without the cliff. The second poster created more of a reaction and the work became on one level about the notion of censorship in public spaces.'



• large tableaux that depict scenes, whether it's a naval battle or William Powell Frith's *The Derby Day, 1856-8*, he says. 'Not just in British art, but if we think about the Dutch and Flemish winter landscapes, those amazing detailed narratives and naturalistic landscapes with figures going about their daily lives. There's humour and there's a banality about them. I like the comedy and tragedy that you can get within a landscape.'

Research, he says, is a big part of his work and, while he often spends a lot of

'I've always been interested in history painting, in those large tableaux that depict scenes such as a naval battle'

time planning, his images are always from and about real life. 'My pictures do look quite theatrical and to some extent staged, and part of that is because I have already considered the exact location, how I'm going to take the picture, who is going to be where when,' he explains. 'This idea of the stage and photography as a way of experiencing the world from that vantage point is important in my pictures.'

He adds: 'I'm not trying to offer a truth, necessarily. I want to provide a sense of how I see the landscape and

Equestrian Jumping Individual, Greenwich Park, London, 2012

ABOVE

'The idea was to not just focus on the sport at the London Games, but how it was set within the landscape. I love the assemblage of figures, objects and buildings. There is the Queen's House in the centre and in

the distance Canary Wharf under cloud. London 2012 was in one sense an attempt to kick-start the British economy after the 2008 crash. With this image it was about creating layers of meaning.'



PROFILE
SIMON ROBERTS HonFRPS
 Based in Brighton, Roberts is one of the UK's foremost photographers. He has published four monographs, and his work is exhibited widely. In 2010 he was appointed official British election artist by the House of Commons Works of Art Committee and commissioned to produce a record of the UK general election.



• how I see what we do in the landscape. I don't want to hold your hand through the picture. I'm offering my view of the world.'
 Indeed, vantage point is important in Roberts' work, not just metaphorically but literally, since he frequently photographs from an elevated perspective, which enables the viewer to really see what's going on. It is an approach he started using between 2007 and 2008 for *We English*, a project he made while travelling across England in a motorhome.

SIMON ROBERTS HonFRPS; LEWIS KHAN

Flares and Fire Pit, Desert Blast, Nevada, 1999

ABOVE
 'From a clandestine pyromaniac gathering in the desert outside Las Vegas. Enthusiasts set off explosives and homemade bombs, which would never happen in a post-9/11 world.'



'After a year in Russia I wanted to make work about my own country ... to look at how the landscape suggests something about national identity'

'When I came back to England after spending a year in Russia (2004-05), I really wanted to make work about my own country,' he says. 'I wanted to look at how the landscape suggests something about national identity, and to photograph people in the landscape. If you have an elevation in a picture it opens up more opportunities to explore how we use the landscape, so that vantage point – that kind of panoramic view – gives more of a sense of how we interact with one another and the landscape. I'm offering a viewpoint that is different from the reality you would get if you were there yourself. It's a balance between being able to identify what people are wearing and how they are inhabiting the space, and what the landscape looks like.'

The fruit of those labours is *Merrie Albion – Landscape Studies of a Small Island*, a 10-year survey of the British landscape that was published in book form by Dewi Lewis in 2017. In light of

recent turbulent political goings-on Roberts' work feels timelier than ever. *The Brexit Lexicon*, a video work exploring the language of the Brexit negotiations, is especially pertinent.

'I was interested in the language used by the "remain" and "leave" campaigns, and how important that was in terms of how people voted,' he explains. 'I collected various phrases used by journalists and politicians, and created a lexicon, which a newsreader read from a teleprompt. Given that most of us receive this language through the media, I was trying to think about how you could visually represent Brexit.'

'Like many I'm angered and frustrated by Brexit,' he adds, 'which is part of the reason I've disappeared into ancient British woodlands for my newest series.'

The Society is hosting an open conversation with Simon Roberts HonFRPS at RPS House in Bristol at 7.30pm on 26 June. See rps.org/events

Gordon Brown (Labour Party), Rochdale, Greater Manchester, 2010

ABOVE

'I made this during my tenure as the British election artist, on the day Gordon Brown called pensioner Gillian Duffy "bigoted". The vantage point here, from the roof of my motorhome, gives the feel of a bird flying over the scene. All this activity was happening around Brown and I like how you can see different elements of the drama unfolding. I wanted to create as dense a picture as possible so that the longer you look, the more you can read into the details.'