

# How did we get here?

# Where do we go now?

## An exhibition by Simon Roberts

T.S. Eliot once wrote that the point of any journey is to find out where you came from. This urge to document one's homeland and question our collective identity is a powerful one. It has occupied the efforts of writers and artists for centuries. In this vein, much of Simon Roberts' practice over the past fifteen years has been based on journeys around Britain. His work, which spans photography, video, and installation, explores identity, belonging and the complex relationship between history, place and culture. It exposes our post-imperial predicament, the complications of New Commonwealth immigration, the Brexit schism, and the possibilities of UK devolution.

Often creating expansive, tableaux photographs, Roberts sets up visual narratives which chart the ambiguities and complexities of post-industrial Britain. The photographs require scrutiny and contemplation. They have a visual command that comes from their expansive nature and scale, where most are taken from an elevated perspective (often from the roof of his motorhome) and with a large-format camera.

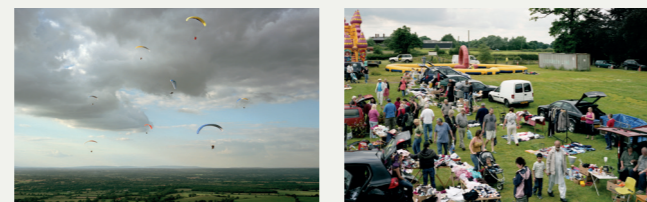
The exhibition, housed over two floors of a former H&M store that shut its doors in summer 2021 in Chester's Grosvenor Shopping Centre, brings together several different projects that Roberts has worked on since 2007. As well as a journey through a changing Britain, it is also one through Roberts' evolving artistic practice over the past fifteen years.

We English (2007-2008) and Pierdom (2010-2013) cover the external walls of the upper floor of the store and are laid out geographically, forming the four compass points. These record an idyllic portrayal of Britain seemingly at ease with itself. The central area of the upper floor concentrates on his Merrie Albion (2007-2017) and The Brexit Lexicon (2016-2018) series, which chart the mood swings of a diverse national culture grappling with various social, political and economic challenges. There's also the premier of a new video piece, An Avoidable Loss, A Failure of State (2023) exploring the UK government's response to the corona virus pandemic.

In the lower floor of the store Roberts presents a large, immersive installation work, Beneath the Pilgrim Moon (2021) where a series of fabric prints are suspended and illuminated in the darkness. Each print depicts a veiled sculpture photographed during the second Covid-19 lockdown whilst London's Victoria and Albert Museum was closed to the public. The work speaks of these extraordinary recent events.

***“Simon Roberts records the spaces, places and events that define the British social landscape. Chronicling the communal experience through shared idiosyncrasies, the artist reveals truths hidden in the collective consciousness. A nostalgic practice conflates past and present, disrupting traditional notions of the picturesque by responding to political events.”***

Aesthetica Magazine



## We English (2007-2008)

For his first major work looking at his homeland, Roberts traversed England in a motorhome - with his wife, Sarah, two-year-old daughter and a large-format film camera - photographing the English at leisure. The work was made after returning from Russia where he had created photographs for his first book, Motherland, an ambitious and sweeping inquiry into Russian nationhood and culture at a time when Russia was emerging from years of decay after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Roberts' examination of how the geography of this huge country defines and forges its people finds new expression in We English, in which he turns his attention to how British landscape is a complex cultural terrain where conflicting versions of national identity are played out.

Focusing on how landscape is used for leisure and referencing a pastoral idiom, in which the vocabulary of 19th century naturalistic landscape painting and commentary are echoed and where notions of an imagined, fabled England are scrutinized, Roberts' topographic photographs offer a critique of the issues of belonging, social cohesion and class which are manifest in Britain today.

Recreation is a key motif. It is the location of people in the landscape that is the focus for Roberts' multi-figure compositions. The elevated viewpoint, and distant perspective used, can make the human subjects seem

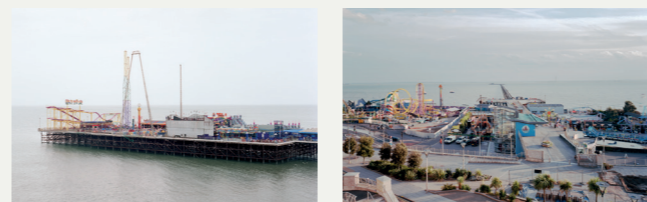


dwarfed by the surrounding terrain, becoming bit-part players in large-format tableaux. Each narrative of leisure reveals something of what it means to be English and how this is tied to a specific surrounding landscape, and its increasing commodification.

Drawing from a rich history of British landscape photography and painting - from William Powell Frith's panoramic group studies of Victorian life, Derby Day (1856-8) and JMW Turner's land- and seascapes, to surveys by British photographers such as Martin Parr, We English pays tribute to and builds on the legacy of these artists and photographers. In this way, Roberts' series of lyrical colour vistas provides a unique contemporary topography of the English at play.

***“We English, the title of Roberts' engrossing exhibition of large-scale colour photographs might lead you to expect gently satiric social studies in the style of Martin Parr. But the focus of the work is primarily landscape, and several of the images are broad, handsome vistas with only a few people scattered about the terrain. Even the photographs that include larger groups were taken from a distance—a perspective that echoes classical painting, although the subjects are decidedly contemporary.”***

Vince Alelli, The New Yorker



## Pierdom (2010-2013)

From 2010 Roberts spent three years travelling the coastline of Britain creating a comprehensive photographic record of the country's remaining pleasure piers, in homage to these monuments of Victorian engineering and eccentricity.

Predominantly constructed during the 19th Century in the context of expanding Victorian seaside resorts and railways, these structures were often erected as landing docks for pleasure steamers and other sea craft. Growing to accommodate the needs of day-trippers escaping the smog of the city, engineers began to incorporate bandstands, cafés and music halls into their designs, embracing the notion of 'pleasure seeking' by the seaside.

At the turn of the century the British coastline boasted over 100 piers, some modest and functional, others elegant, exotic Victorian structures thrusting out into the sea. Now under half remain, the others destroyed by fierce weather and fires, with many dismantled during the 2nd World War to prevent German boat landings. Britain's piers have become cultural landmarks, tracing history, national identity and economic fortunes from Victorian industrialism and post-war boom to an economic downturn in the 1970s and now a slow re-awakening of our appreciation of these cultural and historic landmarks.

***“As Simon Roberts' exquisite photographs show, pleasure piers combine strength with fragility, enmeshing our imaginations in the beauty of the far away, leading us from the humdrum to the infinite, and sometimes leaving us there.”***

Howard Jacobson, Novelist

## Merrie Albion (2007-2017)

The title of this work is an amalgamation of two words, Merrie [England], which is a utopian conception of English society and culture based on an idyllic pastoral way of life, and Albion, the oldest known name of the island of Great Britain.

Since 2007 Roberts has photographed events and places across Britain that have drawn people together in public, reflecting on the nature of our shared histories and communal experiences. Merrie Albion - Landscape Studies of a Small Island, covers a decade of British history and is framed within the finale of the decisive Brexit vote. The work brings together iconic images and many previously unpublished photographs, recording social practices and customs linked to the British landscape, as well as some of the economic and political theatre that has helped define recent history.

As Roberts explores momentous national events, his practice has expanded to investigate the visual and verbal narratives disseminated by the media, exposing the economic and political theatre that has defined our shared recent history. Working as the official British Election Artist in 2010, he sought to capture the tensions and paradoxes of the democratic process, working antithetically to traditional news reportage to expose the longer span of political theatre that played out as we struggled to understand our selfhood.



Roberts has also photographed events with a more immediate, topical significance in Britain's make-up, collectively crafted like a national survey, forming a visual chronicle of the times through careful, detailed observation. In works such as 'Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet', the landscape resembles a stage set for the costumed characters performing on the beach. We share experiences of significant gatherings from religious festivals, such as 'Eid al-Fitr Celebrations, Jamia Mosque, Bristol' or examine searing recent social and political events: in 'After the Riots, London Road, Croydon', and 'Grenfell Tower, North Kensington, London'.

***“Roberts' work presents the viewer with complex relationships between people and places and incongruous juxtapositions of history and contemporary culture that create gentle ironies and underlying tensions across the images. Played out through particular local and regional contexts, it is these tensions that ultimately deny any consistency of mood and resist the coherent, and possibly seductive sense of binding national characteristics.”***

David Chandler, Writer & Curator

Across the entirety of Merrie Albion the work creates an edgy incongruity - echoes of remembered history butt up against contemporary culture and very particular local and regional contexts. These tensions are exposed in a non-judgemental

way as Roberts layers ideas of national character through relationships to place and particular moments in time. His apparently quiet, detached chronicling of the events and public atmospheres of Britain's recent past charts the mood swings of an increasingly diverse culture, discreetly opening up complex ideas about the abiding influence of a country's past on its ever expansive and fluid present.

## The Brexit Lexicon (2016-2018)

The Brexit Lexicon is a two-part video work, creating a compendium of the most common terms that shaped the discussions of Brexit in politics and the media during Britain's exit from the Europe Union.

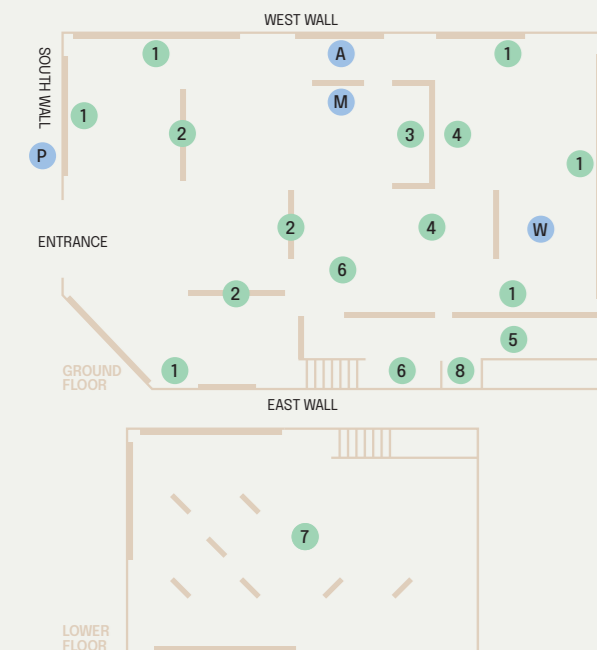
The video was shot in a real news studio, with a professional news reader, yet the event is orchestrated as a stage-set. This artifice is key to how Roberts wished to explore the way in which Brexit was reported. It asks questions about the function of mass media, the relationship between politics, media and truth, and explores how language has been wielded in the process of campaigning and reporting.

To make the lexicon, Roberts undertook a type of 'fieldwork', collating newsprint from British media organisations, newspapers, campaign websites, Facebook pages and official documents issued by the British government and European Union. Over the course of two years, he gathered notable headlines and the terminology used to describe the Brexit progress. This together forms a database containing nearly five thousand individual words.

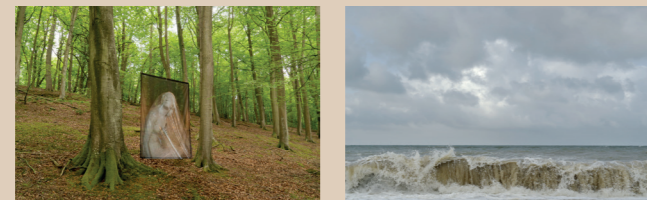
***“A real socio-political mood piece, the power and urgency of which reminds us why Roberts is regarded as one of the leading UK photographers working today.”***

Tim Clark, 1000 Words

## You are here



- 1 We English and Pierdom
- 2 Merrie Albion
- 3 The Election Project
- 4 Let This Be A Sign
- 5 Brexit Lexicon
- 6 Between the Acts
- 7 Beneath The Pilgrim Moon
- 8 An Avoidable Loss, A Failure of State
- M Merchandise Counter
- W Public Workshop Area
- A Artist Posters / Flying Leaps
- P Public Gallery



### Between the Acts (2018-2021)

The Brexit process dominated Britain's news agenda between 2016 and 2021, when the UK officially left the European Union. During this time Roberts created a series of individual works under the title Between the Acts. Several are exhibited here and include: The Brexshit Machine, an LED artwork which scrolls through all the new terms that were created during this time using the letters 'Brex-' as a prefix. Folly Marches On collates news photographs of Theresa May, only the second female British Prime Minister, who served 1,095 days during which time she failed to pass the Brexit legislation on which she had staked her reputation. The news images reflect a specific public perception of her character and reinforce an imbalance in the media's representation of male and female characters in the public sphere, in particular politics.

In the stairwell of the exhibition, a large photographic print featuring an extreme close-up from a scanned newspaper of Boris Johnson's eye, one of the architects of Brexit, stares back at us. Finally there is The Brexshit Times, a newspaper Roberts published on 1st January 2021, to mark the official end date of the Brexit process.

***"His photographs function as a visual record of time, providing us with a means to reflect on, and distill this period in a way that was nearly impossible amid the tedium of the covid lockdown."***

Hana Kaluznick, V&A Museum

### Beneath the Pilgrim Moon (2021)

A collection of photographs taken at London's Victoria and Albert Museum while it was closed to the public in the second Covid-19 lockdown. Photographing the marble sculptures housed in the Dorothy and Michael Hintze Galleries, which at the time were covered for their protection during the site's renovation, Roberts conceived of the veiled statues as metaphors for our wider experience of the pandemic. The images speak of the extraordinary events of the past years, of us as a nation shrouded by PPE and covered up behind our masks, suspended in time, restricted in our movement and freedoms. We were forced to separate from one another, or if we were to meet, to hug through thick plastic sheeting, or wave through windows.

The images, printed on fabric and suspended from the ceiling in a darkened room are revealed almost as apparitions. Elegant and melancholic, each sculpture seems absorbed in timeless contemplation, trapped in their own mineral universe.

***"Roberts' captivating and technically accomplished large-format pictures reveal much about modern humanity-a tapestry of the beautiful, the poignant, the surprising and the surreal. He encourages us to slow down, to spend time contemplating his images and, in turn, contemplate the complex society in which we all live."***

Susanna Brown, Curator

### An Avoidable Loss, A Failure of State (2023)

A new video work, An Avoidable Loss, A Failure of State is a re-working of Simon Roberts' Daily Sea photographic series. When the UK entered a nationwide lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus known as Covid-19 Roberts began posting a daily photograph to his Instagram account, focussing on the

sea near his home and pairing each seascape captured with a related poem or quote. His daily records continued throughout the year covering all three national lockdowns, finishing on 19th March 2021.

A Daily Sea represents an extended meditation on this most significant time in our shared history. Through repetition, itself a meditative act, we see one sea in 365 ways, sometimes rough and tumultuous, other times serene and mellow, from dawn to dusk. The photographs of this ever-changing body of water are unified by one horizon throughout: the point at which the sea seems to touch the sky.

In this new audio-visual work, his photographs are combined with fragments of recordings of British politicians from the daily Government Covid-19 press conferences, voices of families remembering loved-ones, and a monologue by actor Rory Kinnear voicing the names of some of the deceased. Kinnear lost his own sister to Covid. It later transpired that she was buried on the same day as one of Johnson's No.10 lockdown parties.

Part memorial, part indictment of the Government's mismanagement of this crisis, the work reflects on the painful national theatre of the Covid-19 pandemic, which involved Boris Johnson's own near-death Covid experience and personal rule-breaking.

### Where do we go now? The Public Gallery (2023)

During the course of the exhibition visitors are encouraged to participate in a series of workshops and open sessions where they are given a unique opportunity to respond creatively to the current social climate and ideas raised in Roberts' exhibition, culminating in a new artwork that will develop over the course of the exhibition and will be unveiled in the third week of June in the storefront window.

## Simon Roberts



Portrait © Lewis Khan

Simon Roberts (b.1974) is a visual artist based in Brighton, UK. Recognised for his tableaux, large-format photographs of the British landscape, his practice also encompasses video, text and installation work, which together, interrogate notions of identity and belonging, and the complex relationship between history, place and culture.

Roberts has had solo exhibitions at the National Science and Media Museum (UK), the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma (Italy), and the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow (Russia). Recent group exhibitions include 'Civilization: The Way We Live Now' at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (South Korea), 'Unfamiliar Familiarities' at Musée de l'Elysée (Switzerland) and 'Songs of the Sky - Photography & the Cloud at Les Rencontres De La Photographie Arles (France). His photographs reside in major

public and private collections, including the George Eastman House, Art Collection Deutsche Börse, Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago and Victoria and Albert Museum.

He is the author of several critically acclaimed monographs including Motherland (2007), We English (2009), Pierdom (2013) and Merrie Albion - Landscape Studies of a Small Island (2017), whilst his work has been profiled and published widely including in the New Yorker, Granta, National Geographic, ArtForum, Wallpaper, amongst others.

In 2010 he was selected as the official British Election Artist by the House of Commons Works of Art Committee to produce a record of the general election on behalf of the UK Parliamentary Art Collection, and, in 2014, represented Britain during the UK-Russia Year of Culture. He has been commissioned to make several large-scale public artworks and recognised with numerous awards including an Honorary Fellowship to the Royal Photographic Society, the Vic Odden Award and grants from Arts Council England and the John Kobal Foundation.

Roberts holds a BA Hons in Cultural Geography from The University of Sheffield and is currently a Visiting Research Fellow in the Institute of Arts, University of Cumbria. Outside of his own professional practice he is involved with several not-for-profit organisations. He is represented by Flowers Gallery, London.

[www.simoncroberts.com](http://www.simoncroberts.com)

## About the artist

### About Chester Visual Arts

Chester Visual Arts (CVA) is a registered charity established to bring visual arts in all its forms to the people of Chester and the surrounding region.

The result of 6 years of planning, CVA now works alongside Cheshire West and Chester Council to support the region's larger heritage and visual arts strategy.

CVA is governed by a Board of Trustees, comprising established business and arts professionals from the region. Through strategic partnerships CVA has presented four well-received international exhibitions in just 18 months.

Its current partners include Grosvenor Estate, Chester Cathedral, Marketing Cheshire Cultural Destinations and The University of Chester.



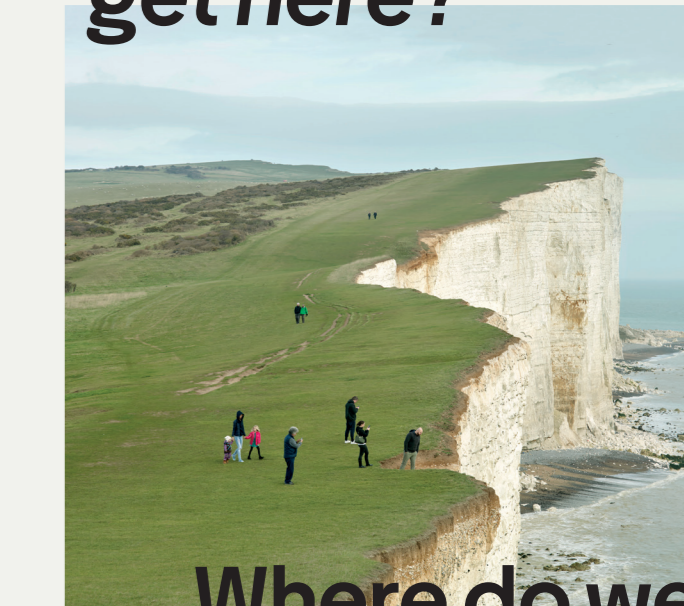
### Thanks

Cathy Pütz  
Cynthia & Ian Short  
Esmeralda Janson  
Hannah Wehbeh  
IS Group Signage  
Izzy Grey  
Julie Webb and team at Grosvenor Centre  
Len Horsey, Daniel Holcroft and Ben Gwilliam  
Niccoló Del Pizzo

Photoworks  
Redeye  
Spectrum Photographic  
Susanna Brown  
Thomas Rainsford Framing  
Tim Clark  
And all the team at Vivid

All photographs © Simon Roberts, courtesy Flowers Gallery

## How did we get here?



## Where do we go now?

An exhibition by Simon Roberts

20 May - 30 June 2023

Grosvenor Shopping Centre, CH1 1EA  
Open Weds - Sun | 11am - 5pm  
Free Admission