

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 enquire into our collective identity is a powerful one. In this vein, much of Simon Roberts' practice over the past fifteen years has been based on journeys around the British landscape photographing events, rituals and rites where people are drawn together in public. Together, the work 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.

Roberts is known for his tableaux photographs which explore the ambiguities and complexities of post-industrial Britain with expansive scale, most made with a large format camera. Land is charted with a particular focus on how it is used for leisure. This taps into a past pastoral idiom and 19th century naturalistic landscape painting, suggesting notions of an imagined, fabled England. His tone is sympathetic, distanced, that of a careful observer, slow to criticize and alert to nuance, encouraging us to take time, to consider.

His projects take time to compile. *We English* explores our varied engagement with British landscape and conflicting versions of national identity. Working as the official 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. This gradual reveal emerged from multiplane compositions and an elevated perspective, often photographing from the top of his motor home. His large format images are taken with great technical precision, using formal devices associated with the picturesque to create commanding visual tableaux.

A vital conceptual element in Roberts' work is that of public participation. As context for his topographical journeys, he invites people to contribute research ideas and photographs to a specially-created blogs and websites. A collaborative approach informed his major project, *Merrie Albion - Landscape Studies of a Small Island*. Here a decade of British history (2007 – 2017) is presented and framed within the finale of the decisive Brexit vote. As he explores momentous national events, his practice has expanded to investigate the visual and verbal narratives disseminated by the media and their impact, exposing the economic and political theatre that has defined our shared recent history.

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*, to *Jamia Mosque, Bristol* or examining searing recent social and political events: in *After the Riots, London Road, Croydon*, and *Grenfell Tower, North Kensington, London*.

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 both 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 rich and diverse culture, discreetly opening up complex ideas about the abiding influence of a country's past on its ever expansive and fluid present.

More recently, Roberts has turned his attention to more introspective themes, including *The Weeds and the Wilderness* (2017-2019), a meditative take on our cultural and sociological insularity post Brexit. *Between the Acts: Parts I-IV*, includes *The Brexit Lexicon*, a two-part video work, where Roberts has created a compendium of the most common terms that have shaped the discussions of Brexit in both 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 explores the way Brexit was reported. It asks questions about the function of mass media, the relationship between politics, news media and truth, and explores how language has been wielded in the process of campaigning and reporting.

How did we get here? Will present these various works Roberts has made. While the second element of the exhibition, *Where do we go now?* will offer the public an opportunity to participate in a series of workshops and open sessions where visitors will have an opportunity to respond to current social climate to create a new artwork (*The Public Gallery*), which will develop over the course of the exhibition.

Together, the two elements of the exhibition will also provide a debate about the function of the British High Street, a place which is going through turbulent time as the future use of urban spaces are increasingly debated. It will tap into many social and economic issues, whilst also bringing art to an audience who might not normally step into a typical museum space.

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For more about Simon's work, visit: www.simoncroberts.com