

WE ENGLISH - REVIEWS



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“*We English*, the title of Roberts’s engrossing exhibition of large-scale color photographs (and the related book) 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 (golfers before a line of cooling towers, race contestants sloughing through the mud of a river at low tide) are decidedly contemporary.”

Vince Aletti, *The New Yorker*, October 2009

Simon Roberts travelled throughout England in a motorhome between 2007 and 2008 for this portfolio of large-format tableaux photographs of the English at leisure. *We English* builds on his first major body of work, *Motherland* (2005), with the same themes of identity, memory and belonging resonating throughout. Photographing ordinary people engaged in diverse pastimes, Roberts aims to show a populace with a profound attachment to its local environment and homeland. He explores the notion that nationhood - that what it means to be English - is to be found on the surface of contemporary life, encapsulated by banal pastimes and everyday leisure activities. The resulting images are an intentionally lyrical rendering of a pastoral England, where Roberts finds beauty in the mundane and in the exploration of the relationship between people and place, and of our connections to the landscapes around us.

SELECTED REVIEWS

“*We English* is a complex body of work - photographically simple in one sense, but imagistically complicated, with many different inferences, not all of them immediately appearance, so one can be grateful for the book’s size, which enables one to see much of the detail in the pictures. Whether it can be considered as art or documentary, I don’t care - the so-called painterly aspects of the work interest me the least. What does interest me is that Simon Roberts has produce an intelligent and persuasive vision of our contemporary English mores - a Tony Ray-Jones for the 21st century.”

Gerry Badger, *Ag - The International Journal of Photographic Art & Practice*, Issue 58/Winter 2010

“Best new book on England for many years.”

Martin Parr, *The Telegraph*, December 2009

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“While many of Roberts' images adhere to our traditional notions of beauty spots, others are of noisy, packed events like Derby Day. In each, however, the framing is such that the subjects are fixed firmly within their environment. Individuals are rendered small but, significantly, we can still read them by their expressions, their clothes and what they're doing. It's a technique that links back to landscape painting and the layered canvases of the 16th century. As a contemporary record, however, Roberts has captured a nation beautifully and brilliantly.”

Creative Review, The Photography Annual, October 2009

“They are first and foremost pictures of the English at leisure, but they would be little without their topographical backcloth. His depiction of the English landscape is sublime in the true, Romantic sense of the word, wide and deep in their prospect, a blurring in the distance, rugged hills under shifting skies that flit between now and everlasting. They work best when the pleasure-seekers are reduced to constellations of tiny figures in the foreground. Roberts replaces the shepherds and rustic folk of yore, though, with trekkers, golfers, paragliders, picnickers and revellers.”

Lucy Davies, The Daily Telegraph, March 2010

“Quite simply, the images are beautiful, though perhaps not immediately revealing - their beauty can encourage the clumsy habit of overlooking what they contain. The best of these photographs are remarkable in the layers that Roberts's has managed to capture - environment, group and individual. And truly the three inform and shape the others.”

Sarah Bradley, Photo-Eye Magazine, January 2010

“The movement that Ray-Jones began and Parr continues is also one in which Simon Roberts is at home. His monumental study *We English* manages to combine a fascination with social rituals such as St George's day pageants and visits to the seaside with the type of huge-scale and distant large format 'grand views' that appear to come straight out of the American tradition....For Roberts, landscape is a site of leisure pursuits, and this viewpoint fits well with both contemporary social thought and the consumption-obsessed imagery of much current documentary. But he manages somehow to allow the sublime beauty of many of these settings through, and to make pictures of lasting quality.”

Peter Hamilton, British Journal of Photography, November 2009

“A gorgeous series of lyrical, light-strewn photographs that the artist took of the English at play on a tour of his homeland.”

New York Magazine, October 2009

“*We English* does not necessarily present a wholly Romantic view of the countryside for Roberts, more often than not, hones in on manufactured scenes. Indeed, Roberts also fits in largely within the tradition of photographing England....His work is unashamedly beautiful, more subtle in its discovery and representation of forms of cultural character and identity which actually, upon closer inspection, reveals a much great richness of detail and meaning. With a Simon Roberts it is a case of the more you look, the more you see. *We English* has tremendous historical and anthropological interest; it takes us on an amazing journey through ideas of belonging and memory, identity and place. It is one of the those rare books than you can and will come back to time and time again.”

Tim Clark, 1000 Words Magazine, Issue 06, Fall 2009

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“Roberts' book is a kind of gentle celebration, its images captured on a large-format 5x4-inch camera and owing as much to the English landscape painting tradition as any photographic precedent. It's a grower.”

Sean O'Hagan, The Guardian, December 2009

“Roberts' photographs [in *We English*] are indeed beautiful. The light is often luminous, the colour rich and intense.....The pictures are sumptuous.”

Jane Fletcher, Source, Winter 2009/2010

“*We English* looks at the country with a lyrical pastoral gaze rather than irony or sarcasm...Roberts shows people engaged in group leisure activities presented small in the frame and with light that is unfashionably undramatic. It's a body of work that is unfashionable not only stylistically and in subject matter too. To take the photographs, Roberts covered his head with a dark cloth to peer through the concertina of a large-format view camera, essentially unchanged since the 19th century, and shot on film.”

John Stones, Design Week, September 2009

“Capturing everyday English residents occupied in an assortment of activities, the artist uncovers the aesthetic of ordinary life. The majority of Roberts' images depict the exquisiteness of the English landscape and reveal those who are attracted to its landmarks.”

Katie Clifford, Hotshoe, Issue 162, October/November 2009

“A project of this size can often take an unexpected turn and the final edit is sometimes the most challenging part. It's tough to step back from the creation of the photographs, allowing yourself to see the pictures in the way a viewer will, and not as you remember them....Simon has achieved all he set out to, and much more. The pictures are in themselves undeniably beautiful, but their real power comes from the collection as a whole. To remove from the stream of time a series of moments that are instantly recognisable as being part of life in England is a real achievement, and one that will ensure this collection will become the defining study of life in England at the end of this decade.”

Phil Coomes, BBC News Online, October 2009

“The first place he photographed was the beach at Skegness in Lincolnshire, where people have holidayed since the nineteenth century. It's a bit grim. The sky is overcast and the water brown, there is litter and everyone is bundled up, wearing coats. The scene is mundane and familiar to many, but Roberts has managed to bring a lyrical quality to it. The sea and sky are huge, the view is elevated and looking down we get a vast sense of space....There are two stories in his photographs: one is everyday, the other is eternal.”

Hannah Duguid, The Independent, October 2009

“*We English* has all the hallmarks of a great body of work by a photographer of considerable depth. It shuns the flashy “in-yer-face” tactics so commonplace in favour of quiet thought and subtle observation. It is work that repays the reader through frequent re-examination: full of humour, but more subtle than Erwit; full of commentary, but less judgemental than Parr; full of beauty, but without cliché.”

Michael Cockerham, Blue Filter, October 2009

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"In August 2007 award-winning photographer Simon Roberts embarked upon a 13-month journey around England...The resulting photographs are lush in their painterly composition but defiantly mundane in subject matter, conceived as an unflinching and unbiased exploration of what it means to be English today."

Stephen Ledger, *Eluxury*, September 2009

"A handsome book chronicling the English at play outdoors, often in coastal locations, taken on a large-format camera. Even the scruffiest bunch of daytrippers becomes transformed into something still, beautiful and timeless by the superb quality of the photography."

Clare Gogerty, *Coast Magazine*, Issue 44, November 2009

"Most of us experience nature along pathways and shorelines trodden for decades, if not centuries. This rueful truth is known in the bones of the English, who have pieced and parceled their half of an island since the Bronze Age. Simon Roberts gently mocks his compatriots as they search for weekend inspiration in these well-groomed landscapes, even as he reminds us why such lovely places were, and still could be, wellsprings for poetry."

Richard B. Woodward, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 2009

"Several of Simon Roberts' shots of his country and her inhabitants, call to mind Massimo Vitali's swarming beach images, yet Simon's gatherings of people are different - somehow more English. The spaces come across as less tidy. Other motifs remind us of Martin Parr's soft touch, just more sublime and somehow more honest."

Frank Schmidz, *Go See*, Issue 38, September 2009

"The influence of past masters is evident, but Roberts's wide-open images allow in as much landscapes as possibly. This shows we leisure-practitioners in context, organic elements within a larger canvas. We look as dull as the topography and weather, occasionally lit up by a Turner-esque ray of sunshine. While Roberts is not the first to find beauty in bleakness, or in the mundane, even moronic, weekend habits of the English, he brings to the treatment an irony-free and lovingly meditative gaze."

Chris Morris, *Timeout London*, October 2009

"His large format colour prints of epic scenes resonate with blurry memories of classical landscape paintings, but are actually built around the theme of the English at leisure today."

Sue Steward, *The Arts Desk*, December 2009

"*We English* takes the much photographed people and landscapes of England, and re-imagines them on a monumental scale; creating a classic, elegant, dignified, quiet body of work: social observation without presumption. Roberts isn't just ticking boxes: he's seeing what's there, in all its subtlety and complexity, producing work which is completely at variance with all the imagery of England to which we have become so accustomed over the years."

David Land, *RPS Journal*, Volume 149, December 2009

"True to his word, Roberts' pictures are unmistakably his own. Photographed in colour with a tripod-mounted 5 x 4 plate camera, they exhibit a disciplined compositional restraint, a richness of palette, and - often - a wealth of narrative incident....His intent to mine the country's overlooked moments - the trivial and the quotidian - is made good."

Guy Lane, *The Art Book*, February 2010

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“Photobooks from publisher Chris Boot always show a real attention to detail and appreciation of the images presented. Simon Roberts' *We English* series particularly benefits from the large format and clean, elegant design chosen for this beautiful book. Leafing leisurely through the pages, it's easy to become drawn in and absorbed by the detail in each image, all representations of 21st century English people at leisure, whether at the races, by the sea, or in nature.”

Jim Casper, Lens Culture, November 2009

“*We English* adopts the slightly elevated vantage point known from painting, using a large-format camera. The photographs indeed look like paintings, with their often vast vistas, in which people often are mere specks...Given the universality that I find in *We English*, the book has an appeal that extends beyond the borders of England. Whatever the people in those photographs are doing might define them as "the English", but it can also relate to other people. And what better portrait of your own country could you create than one that does talk about our human condition?”

Joerg Colberg, Conscientious, October 2009

“Many of the photographs [in *We English*] have a style reminiscent of landscape paintings by well-known nineteenth-century English artists. As such, the book looks less like a series of photographs and more like a calendar in oils. Each picture has a personal touch, which avoids the kind of antiseptic artificiality associated with much wide-angle photography....While there is romance in these scenes, there is also an earthy reality. They show the English as they are today, but many of the activities in which they are engaged—like pigeon racing, and messing about on the river—provide continuity with the past, while newer activities include pastimes such as paragliding. This expresses the old English paradox of wanting the comfort of the familiar, while embracing the excitement and novelty of the future. Roberts' book is not a collection of chocolate-box imaginary English countryside pictures, but an honest account of the way new and old, town and country, sit side by side in today's England.”

Alexander Betts, Albion Magazine, Spring 2010

“Roberts' photobook *We English* is a wonderful mixing pot; an autobiographical and cultural narration placed in generous landscape settings about those who call themselves 'English'.... While utilizing a large format camera and what appears is a small aperture, Roberts creates beautiful color photographs that are rich in content, color saturation, sharp in focus and loaded with details.”

Douglas Stockdale, The Photobook, August 2010