

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

2007 recipient of the Vic Odden Award, Simon Roberts FRPS has spent the last six years documenting the British landscape, both literally and from an economic and political point of view. He tells David Land about his latest project, *Pierdom*, and how his background in geography and journalism informs his practice



“It’s important to create a sustained body of work”, says Simon Roberts FRPS. “There is a tendency to expect to do a few weeks’ work, and come out with an award winning project, but that just isn’t reality. What I’m doing isn’t necessarily fashionable, but I’m thinking about what will have value in 20, 30 or 40 years’ time.

“We’re experiencing an extraordinary period in Britain just now, and it’s important that somebody is making a concerted

effort to document it.”

Simon has been working on his long term project, *Landscapes of Innocence and Experience*, since he got back from Russia in 2007, where he had been shooting his project, *Motherland*. It encompasses *We English*, *The Election Project*, *Let This Be A Sign*, *XXX Olympiad* and *Pierdom*.

“It’s a study of the British landscape”, he says, “which I will continue with until about 2015. It’ll cover work that I produced during *We English*, but it won’t necessarily be the same pictures.

“What’s interesting for me was that I started *We English* – a study of the English at leisure – coincidentally almost to the day with the collapse of Northern Rock in August 2007, so while I was shooting *We English*, there was this kind of unravelling of the economic grounding of Britain – although nobody quite knew what was happening until September 2008, when Lehman Brothers collapsed.”

In 2010, Simon was selected as the official British Election Artist, an appointment made by the UK Parliament Committee on Works of Art, to create a historic record of the 2010 General Election. This gave him an opportunity to continue with the landscape work, but this time looking through a prism of politics.

With each year, a new event worth documenting has unfolded, and Simon has extended the project accordingly.

“The Olympics came during a period of austerity with the coalition government”, he says, “and just like the 1948 Olympics, it was a rallying cry and a big PR event for Britain. So I’m bringing all of these things together in a big landscape study.”

To better comprehend Simon’s work, you need to understand his background, which is rooted in both geography and journalism.

“Labels are quite dangerous, so I try not to assign myself to one”, he says. “I suppose I would describe myself as part photographer, part artist, part geographer, part ethnographer. Predominantly, I’m interested in communicating ideas through photography.”

Simon studied for a BA Hons degree in Human Geography at the University of Sheffield, graduating in 1996. It is a subject that appears inextricably linked to the work he now produces, and I ask why he chose to study it instead of photography.

“I had done both photography and geography at school”, he says, “but I felt that having a wider social, economic and political background would be valuable in terms of grounding my photographic practice and taking it forward.

“I also thought that, if I had experience in another field, then at least I’d have a fall back if a photography career didn’t come to fruition. To some extent, there was the parental fear that photography wasn’t a ‘proper job’, too. My parents said that, if I was still interested in photography when I finished university, I could carry on from there.”

Due to the wide umbrella of subjects it cov-

ered, Simon found his course in geography very enriching. “It was primarily landscaped based”, he explains. “It was about space and place, and how different factors affect those elements, whether they be political, social, urban or third world development. In some ways it was quite cross-disciplinary.”

Upon graduating Simon was still interested in photography. Wanting to do a vocational course about understanding stories from a visual perspective and the legal issues surrounding photography, he enrolled for a photography diploma with the National Council for Training of Journalists in Sheffield, under the renowned Paul Delmar, recipient of The Society’s inaugural Award for Outstanding Services to Photography in 2011.

“Having already spent three years in an academic environment, I wanted to do something much more practical”, says Simon. “However, I only ended up being on the course for six months, because I began working for a press agency in Leeds.”

Simon stayed at the agency for six months, an experience he describes as ‘grim’, although he adds that he learnt valuable skills.

Simon also embarked upon his first long-term photographic project at this time, about a boxer.

“He had trained with Prince Naseem Hamed [former professional boxer], but he also tap danced, so I was trying to subvert the stereotypical boxing story”, says Simon. “I try to do this with a lot of my work – to move away from ordinary expectations.

“He was a 13-year-old boy being groomed for success, and had this enormous pressure being piled on him. I wanted to make a piece of work about that pressure. The tap dancing element made it slightly more intriguing, and took it away from being just gritty black and white.”

The project initially took about a year to complete, although he is still shooting it now, and gained him an ARPS and the Ian Parry Scholarship [an award for a young photojournalist, sponsored by *The Sunday Times*, named in memory of Ian Parry, a 24 year old photojournalist killed while on assignment in Romania in 1989].

This proved a major stepping stone, as it enabled him to move to London and start working for *The Sunday Times Magazine*.

Then, based in London, he started the independent photographers’ agency Growbag, with Greg Williams. “We ran it for three or four years”, says Simon, “during which time I was predominantly working on self-assigned projects, which I’d sell to magazines in Europe, America and the UK.

Simon says that The Society was important to him during the formative years of his career. “I used to attend Visual Journalism Group meetings”, he says. “They were great because, as a young photographer, I was getting to meet people like Tom Stodart, Grace Robertson, and Jane Bown. It was a very rewarding experience. I’ve had a close link to the RPS almost since starting photography: it’s an important institution, and has a lot to offer.”

Another milestone in Simon’s career



Left Brighton West From Pierdom.

Right Saltburn. From Pierdom.

occurred in 2003, when he was among 120 photographers nominated for the World Press Joop Swart Masterclass, and went on to be among the 10 selected, each of whom had to spend the next six months working on a project, before meeting up in Amsterdam to discuss it with the masters.

“I spent a couple of months documenting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, looking at landscapes related to the war there”, he says. “I was shooting mostly on a Hasselblad in square format.

“My participation in the masterclass pushed me to think more about my own practice, and I came to the realisation that working in the editorial environment gave me the opportunity to critique my own work and push boundaries.

“I met people from different elements of the industry on the masterclass, but all of them echoed the theme that you need to develop your own sense of authorship.

“This takes time and effort, which is difficult when you’re running around London trying to earn a living. I decided that I needed to take quite an extreme approach to giving myself some time out.”

Simon made plans for his next significant project, *Motherland*, which he created while spending a year travelling across Russia with his wife, a former Russian language student.

It was almost 15 years since the fall of communism, yet Simon felt that the photographic dialogue with regard to Russia hadn’t changed, and he was determined to create something new and contemporary.

“Part of the importance of doing that work was that it wasn’t commissioned”, he says, “so there wasn’t any outside influence being piled on me.

“A lot of the photography coming out of Russia at the time was very much about disintegration, decay and collapse. There was this sense that you had to make black and white photographs of poor Russians drinking vodka or, on the flip side, represent the vulgar expression of wealth in Moscow.

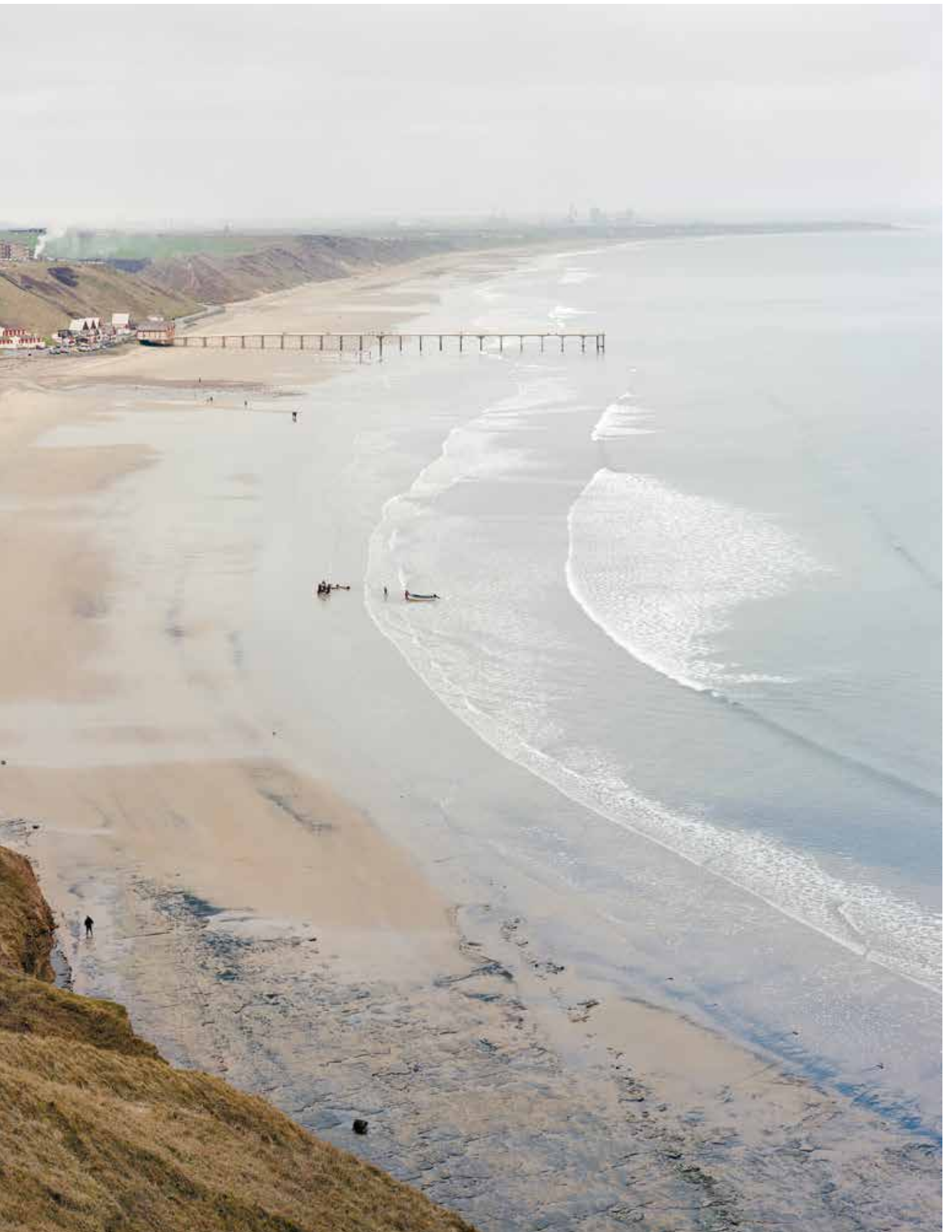
“There didn’t seem to be very much in between. There was an emerging middle class in Russia, and they just weren’t being represented.

“I wanted to slow down the process of making the photographs. I’d used medium format predominantly before that, but because I was now moving to landscape photographs, I wanted a format that wasn’t square or 35mm. I worked on a Mamiya 7 6x7 rangefinder, because it was impossible to use a plate camera due to temperature, distance and cost.”

Before leaving for Russia, Simon approached publisher Chris Boot about the potential of turning his project into a book.

“He was very encouraging”, recalls Simon. “He said, ‘It’s all very well you travelling around Russia for a year, but if you come back with an eclectic mix of images that don’t hold together, then it will have







Both images From XXX Olympiad.

been almost pointless. It's important that you develop a sense of process before you go'.

"I decided to shoot a mixture of landscapes and portraiture. The landscapes were overviews of space, whereas the portraits took you into the landscape and brought you face to face with the Russians. I didn't use any lighting or reflectors. I didn't want to cart all that stuff around, and the more equipment you have, the less interaction you have with your subject."

Simon travelled a vast distance, shooting in colour as he went, allowing the work to be dictated by the people he met.

Chris Boot published the project, as the book *Motherland*, on Simon's return to the UK in 2007. Its success enabled Simon to approach The Photographers' Gallery and curators of museums. He was still facing challenges however, and says that his journalistic background meant that he was not initially held in high regard by the art world.

"There was this cynicism that I had to get round", he says. "The art world does look slightly begrudgingly on those who haven't come from an arts or humanities background, so I had to make a longer journey. But there is no doubt that *Motherland*

helped move my practice into a different area, while *We English* cemented it."

For Simon, achieving success has coincided with the rise of social media and blogging, and I ask how this has impacted on his work.

"With *We English*, because I was inviting people to collaborate, the blog was integral to creating the work", he says. "People could submit ideas for things that I could photograph, allowing me to engage with ideas surrounding representation: 'Who are the English?' I wanted an English audience to be involved with that discussion."

"Alongside this, I created a blog where I began discussing how you go about a project like this. I made notes about how I was doing the project, how I'd got the funding, and the camera I was using, and I continued with it, right through the research period, production and editing."

"There was a real thirst from the photography community to engage with all that. In some ways, the *We English* blog was the foundation of the actual book."

The Election Project involved public collaboration, too. Simon created a website where people could upload their photographs to a gallery. "It was important to use social media as a way of reaching a large audience in a short period", he says.

Simon considered last year's Olympics a vital event for anyone documenting Britain

in recent years, and he was able to gain accreditation to photograph them, a rare accomplishment for someone outside sports photography.

Says Simon, "I sent a copy of *We English* to the Olympics' Head of Press in Switzerland, and said, 'Look, here's my pitch. It's important that you give access to somebody who is going to take a different stance: who is going to be looking at the impact of the Olympics on the landscape', and to my amazement, they agreed."

"This enabled me to produce a series of photographs taking a more oblique look at this global sporting bonanza, and subsequently to create an archive – recording a moment in history that it is unlikely we'll see again in our lifetimes."

Simon's latest project, *Pierdom*, is a homage to the country's remaining Victorian pleasure piers. Over the last two years, he has travelled the British coastline shooting each of these iconic structures. The full series will be released this month, alongside the launch of a monograph and an exhibition at Flowers Gallery.

"Part of the reason for producing this book was because there was no contemporary study documenting these extraordinary structures", he says.

"British identity is heavily linked to the fact that we're an island, and piers are



these things that reach beyond our borders. There's a sense of them reaching out, looking out as almost an imperialist project.

"They tie very closely into the fortunes of the British coastlines, so there are echoes of *We English*, but at the same time there is something slightly new as well, which is enjoyable.

"I have moved away from my usual aesthetic slightly in this project. Some of the pictures are about architectural structure, some are about landscapes, some tend toward the pictorial, while some are more formal.

"There are different elements in there and, in some ways, maybe it's slightly more commercial than some of the other work I've been producing."

Simon likes to produce something tangible that is a physical representation of his documentary work, and creating books is important to him.

"The book is an archive document", he says. "What I like about the book is the sense that it will sit in libraries and on people's bookshelves. It's not disposable. My books are supposed to be one part of a wider mosaic, looking at Russian and English identity. I'm not the only one who has produced work on these topics, but the hope is that my books are a part of that debate, and add another voice."

In order to finance his projects, print sales have become increasingly important to Simon. He also explores other avenues, such as grants and stock agencies.

"I've been lucky that, for the past five years, my print sales have been healthy, and the galleries have been supportive", he says.

"Print sales don't necessarily have to be at the high end of the market. More and more photographers are doing special edition books with a print, which are more affordable.

"Looking at the way that the market is going, we've got a stretched middle class who aren't going to be spending £2000 on a print, but they might spend £200, so it's about looking at different ways of engaging.

"And if you're not searching under the word 'photography', there are actually a lot of grants out there. If the work is about looking at population change for example, then you need to look at people who fund work into those kinds of studies, not just from a photographic perspective."

Stock agencies provide another source of income for Simon. He says, "There's no point having my archive in a cupboard or on a hard drive. I've got 15 years of work that could potentially sell."

He works with American agency Gallery Stock, which has offices in London. "I use Gallery Stock because it enables me to have

control over my work", he explains. "It approaches me when it has a potential buyer. Its model is higher end photography: it's not 'stack-em-high-sell-em-cheap'.

"I'm starting to do a lot more art commissions, too. I'm currently doing a commission for Sunderland University, making a series of new work for the Sunderland Photo Festival. And I'm doing a commission for Bristol Royal Infirmary, making works to go in its new wards.

"Education is another way to raise funds. I run workshops and do masterclasses for photo festivals around the world. Most recently, I did one in Switzerland this summer."

From the outside looking in, it seems that Simon has achieved that much sought after balance: creating work that he believes in, while making money doing what he loves.

While broadly agreeing with this, he cautions, "It's not easy though, and it's not like I've got a big house and a speedboat.

"If you live frugally, then it's possible, but it's a lot of work. You have to be nimble and pragmatic. You have to try new things. But if you're open to change and looking at new ways of doing things, and you work hard, then you will succeed.

"The biggest challenge is bringing the art and the commerce together in one line, because often they diverge. If you can bring those two things together, where you're



making work that you feel is important, and also earning a living from it, then that is a very rewarding place to be.”

Recently having been awarded an Associate Professorship at Nottingham University with the Geography department, it would seem that, more than ever, Simon will be combining his passion for geography and photography.

“I’m going to be collaborating with the the university’s Cultural Geography team on this project”, he says. “What’s interesting is that cultural geographers are now looking at photography, so in some ways these two subjects are becoming more collaborative, which is really exciting.” **David Land**

info

SIMON ROBERTS FRPS

Pierdom

Dewi Lewis Publishing, Hardback, 160 pages, 81 colour plates, 246x305mm, ISBN 978-1-907893-40-7, £35

• Until 31 Oct, you can buy the book at a members’ special discount price of £30. Contact the publisher, quoting your membership number.

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Top From We English. **Above** From XXX Olympiad.