

YOU BLIGHTED KINGDOM



THE MODERN TRIBES OF A FRACTURED NATION

A new exhibition of photographs by Simon Roberts shows a fractured, uneasy country, says **ADRIAN BURNHAM**



Do try and get along to the Flowers gallery, London E2, to see a selection of large-format prints featured in a new monograph of Simon Roberts' photography. From dizzyingly vast social panoramas to achingly intense studies born, it would seem, of a discreet and privileged access to families and small local gatherings,

Roberts' work celebrates the ebb and flow of group activity by which our society seems to breathe.

Except, for me, there's a choking feeling too. Be it air show, music festival, countryside event, protest or civic assembly. At one level these denotations of culture afford ideas of positive collectivity in the face of the supposed social disintegration commonly associated with our ever more digital age.

But there's desperation also. An unsettling murmur of dismay attends almost every scene. Turning the pages of Roberts' recently published monograph *Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island* the over-arching narrative that emerges is one of a dislocated, compartmentalised society: a very much dis-United Kingdom. We might blinkeredly co-exist in this realm but we

Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet, 19 June 2008

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struggle in any real sense to equitably share in it.

Merrie Albion presents imagery of a decade from the tragic events of Shoreham Air Show 2007, when a pilot was killed when his Second World War fighter crashed, to the signing of Article 50 in 2017. It is also, of course, the ten-year period of societal woes born of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity politics.

Social anthropologist Tim Ingold observed that a "place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to the sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience. And these, in turn, depend on the kinds of activities in which its inhabitants engage". Roberts' photography memorialises people's engagement with the world and the

unique significance they lend places.

In *Broadstairs Dickens Festival, Isle of Thanet* women in their bathing caps and pantaloons seem at ease paddling in the spume, reaching out to hold hands with one another. The men appear less comfortable, regimented, looking somewhat convict-like in their striped onesies.

Apart from the bloke in the broader blue striped get-up and the one at the back in the Panama hat – which wasn't a Victorian tifter as far as I know – this work at first conjures if not the repose of a Eugène Boudin beach scene then certainly an innocent glee. Until you notice him. Crouching behind the only female bather hesitating at the shoreline, there's a man taking a picture with his cameraphone. An intense 21st century focus folded inside this faux 19th century