

EUROFILE ART



4

▶ From page 39

levels of child poverty in the country. But this photograph is far removed from poverty porn. Rather it's an elegiac image of lives foreclosed by power that resides elsewhere, out of sight like the putative entertainment. A place where even the bread and circuses are a bit s**t really.

As David Chandler writes in his introductory text *Gatherings*, while Roberts' imagery affords a sense of detachment, at the same time a connection to the 'commonness of places' is achieved and often thereby an empathy with the subjects of the photographs.

In *Download Festival, Donington Park, Castle Donington, Leicestershire* young faces, almost all wearing trademark Kiss-inspired make up, staring up at the photographer's lens – many of Roberts' photographs were taken from the top his camper van – is a celebratory gathering

redolent with tribal warmth and belonging. But, again, we later learn that it was here at Donington Park in 2015 that Leicestershire Police force defended the act of scanning 90,000 festival goers' faces so as to check them against a list of wanted criminals. Black stars, black bats, black ops.

Ashley Vale Allotment, Bristol is a fabulously verdant scene of interactivity. Not just the gleeful face of the mother beaming at her child or the more pensive smile of the man off to the right who has paused mid-dig to observe his kid's antics. The carrier bags on sticks to ward off birds, the laughter on the mother's mouth, the path to the houses above the man's head from where traffic can probably be heard... this is the sight and sound and lush texture of folk working the earth as, in turn, that task contributes to making them the people they are.

It might be objected that I'm unnecessarily shoe-horning factual

4) Griffin Youth Club event, Blackburn, Lancashire, 23 July 2008

information back into Roberts' work while the photographer chose to keep them separate. That the pictures can speak for themselves. They can't. Not definitively. Or not in the many registers that Roberts' work operates. As visual ethnographer Sarah Pink reminds us, it's more productive to acknowledge that photographic "images can be thought of as visual spaces in which a number of different meanings may be invested. As such they are used to represent or refer to diverse persons, activities and emotions that may not obviously or directly form part of the visible content of the image".

But, as I've said, while Roberts, in terms of initial presentation, lets pictures stand alone, with only a prosaic title indicating place and occasion, the fact that *Merrie Albion* is punctuated with perceptive, insightful texts by a number of excellent writers suggests the range and depth of engagement these complex images can provoke.

Roberts' notes to the apparently Edenic *Ashley Vale Allotment, Bristol* remind us that "a 2017 study by food policy experts from three universities has learned that departure from the EU raises such urgent complications for food and agriculture that without focus on the issue 'the risk is that food security in the UK will be seriously undermined', leading to dwindling supplies and erratic prices".

This isn't socio-economic concern tacked onto a creative visual practice. Roberts studied human geography prior to becoming a photographer and a more and less obvious but always deep concern with the state and fate of people appearing in his work endures. Not many in the UK currently cultivate their allotments out of stark need. The idyllic image of the Holker family arguably shows what's at stake more effectively than academic reports or government statistics, if allotments were ever required to be turned over to a regimen of food production because of scarcity.