

From Atget to Candida Hoffer, via Walker Evans, the history of photography is rich with melancholy images of architecture and interiors. Martin Caiger-Smith talks to the English photographer John Riddy about space, time and romanticism

Martin Caiger-Smith: There's a feeling of almost deceptive calm in these pictures. John Riddy: They're about stillness and silence, about resolving light, tonality, and space – but there are contradictions in there too. It's like hitting a note somehow. I look at a print and I think – is it alive, is it screaming? One of the things I've learnt from photographing sculpture is that the most interesting images are often not the perfect ones. They're the images with dirty washing in.

MC-S: For years you've photographed buildings and sculpture for artists, galleries and architects. Now you're exhibiting your own work... JR: What I try to do when I work for an architect or an artist or a gallery, is explain building or sculpture; what I'm doing here is rather different. I make images which describe a distanced view of some fresh experience. I respond to space, and to sculptural incident. I'm interested in spaces which appear to have been isolated, to have slowed down or stopped. It's a bit like finding a window or a frame through the present and arresting that view. I respond to spaces which are often complex but which have a particular coherence that I feel I can resolve in a photograph. I like a situation that allows me to take time to resolve it slowly.

MC-S: The time involved in making the work seems part of the point, almost JR: Well I think absence of event is important; I often choose to take pictures at the end of the day, when people have gone away... or, with the interiors when things are quiet. In general the art I find most compelling is the art which doesn't show the hard work behind it, which appears to have happened very easily – like in cinema, where all the work happens behind the screen. I find the cinematic experience more poetic than the theatrical, because the work is elsewhere and what you're left with is the illusion. It's more convincing somehow when it doesn't appear hard fought for. Like a snapshot.

MC-S: Your pictures are a long way from snapshots. JR: Yes. Someone wrote somewhere that the difference between snapshots and more considered forms of photography is that snapshots do not convey space. When I read that I understood why I didn't take snapshots. They don't have the presence, the texture or the space of a photograph composed on a ground glass and made on a large negative.

MC-S: You don't work close to home. JR: Mainly because I don't want to make biographical images rooted in a British documentary tradition and subject matter. I'm happier as a visitor, even a tourist.

MC-S: Do you feel the danger of your work being categorised? JR: I'm not desperate to fall into a tradition of architectural photography either. I didn't set out to take photographs of architecture. But buildings make up places, and are an incredible record of people's presence over time. It's hard for instance to take a photograph of a contemporary building and end up with an image which is mysterious and complex in the same way. For me, Grand Central Station is an exception, but then it's an exceptional building. It's like a non-religious temple, its atmosphere is so dense it's like walking into Chartres. Of course it's much photographed, it has that whole other history,

but I like to think the images I made there are innocent of all that.

MC-S: In other, domestic interiors, there's a more personal kind of history. JR: Maybe, although I'm not really interested in personal biographies. What I find exciting in a wardrobe in a strange room, for instance, is not an imagined narrative, but the complex relationship set up between its poise in the present, the history it holds and the way it returns its own mirrored illusion of empty space. Mirrors, windows, paintings, photographs – they all act to extend time within the image.

MC-S: Your work has been described as romantic. JR: I think it is, if 'romantic' means believing you can transform reality through representing it. I guess there's a kind of melancholy, or rather pathos, in my work, similar to Atget's or to the Bechers', for whom the photograph is clearly a record of an industrial architecture that is passing away.

MC-S: Do you feel close to the Bechers' work? JR: I find their images interesting, but the concept of the typologies less so ... what I like about their images, the different atmospheres which contrast with one another, is probably not what they themselves find most interesting. I prefer to look at their images individually on the page, not in a grid or row.

MC-S: Thomas Struth spoke in an interview of using the camera in a 'shy way'. JR: Yes, that's nice. I like that, that kind of reticence carried into the work. I am drawn to buildings that appear to have an anonymous or fleeting existence. I like images that have a fragility, where both the scene and the pictures seem to teeter on the edge of falling apart. Atget could do this, and Walker Evans too. It's the beauty of a contradiction, of a moment of light falling on a solid building that holds the scene in a kind of enduring frailty.

MC-S: Why make this kind of work now? JR: I think there's space, among the many quite different treatments of photographic imagery today, for singular activities like mine. I can't say whether the work I make is relevant or compatible with the trends of the moment. I know that for me the way to find my particular kind of imagery is to stop and make it.

MC-S: It's hard to escape from tradition, though... JR: Photography was born old. I love Dutch interior painting, much of which exploited the vision of the camera obscura. I enjoy images within images -like the full-frontal facade of a house, which appears almost to have it's own independent pictorial structure ... but you have to be careful. You can get hooked on the delight of bringing that sort of thing into your work. It can become like a sort of reflex. Sometimes you make work in a very knowing way, at other times it just seems to happen. The images I value most are those that turn out more complex than I'd intended. Philip Guston spoke once of how much he admired the training of Chinese Sung painters, which involved making the same image thousands and thousands of times until it's as if someone else does it, not you, and the rhythm moves through you. Guston said he had had that experience, a moment of pure innocence. That's what I'd be happy with•

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