

David Ryan

John Riddy –
time and
the photographic image

Modernity Illuminated

John Riddy's photographs continue to involve a very particular exploration of places and spaces. Often characterised by stillness and silence, one feels the 'gaze' of those spaces or the unique presence of things within them. Generally, but not always, absent of human activity or intervention, there is a sense of an amplification of the personality of a place: clearing a path for us not only to 'see' but also – in what might seem a strange reversal – to be 'perused' by the images themselves. They emphasise the complex relationship between our consciousness of those spaces we inhabit and their literal presence. Riddy's subject matter is broad, and ranges from the unassuming domestic interior to images which might appear emblematic of a particular time or place. It is in the latter category that his *London (Millennium Wheel)* 1999 can be located. Unusually for Riddy, it is a colour photograph, permeated by an intense blue with the night sky reflected in the depths of the Thames. As an image for the Millennium, the wheel itself is strangely nostalgic in its function as a marker for a time of transition – it could almost be a nineteenth-century artefact. As in most



John Riddy, *New York*, 1994

of his photographs, Riddy plays on these temporal dislocations and associations. The wheel becomes a monolithic clock-face against the illuminated metropolis, which in itself signifies its own 'modernity'.

Throughout the last century, the city at night functioned as symbolic of a kind of raw energy; New York, to take a typical example, could not develop into the megalopolis of skyscrapers it now is until the problems of lighting these huge structures were solved. By the mid 1930s, this technical challenge had resulted in a grand spectacle, symbolic of the power and confidence of the city as centrifugal financial and social force. To get a sense of this we need only consult the proliferation of photos, from the 1930s onwards, of New York at night. Modernity illuminated, literally, and an aggressive projection into the future. Yet Riddy's 'clockface' wheel presents a different picture, so to speak: placed behind it, London's illuminated skyline already evokes the past. It is a complex sense of time that is revealed in Riddy's photographs, and it manages to elude the time of 'reportage' or, on a simple level, the sensation of 'that has been' in connection with a photographic image. This photographer has an eye for what we might call 'embalmed moments' which speak of a multi-layered time, perhaps closer to painterly incremental time than to the instantaneous photographic 'operation' of time. To this we might add his extraordinary feel for light, and an empathy with the very 'lightness' – in a different sense – of modernist architecture itself.

Formal clarity and restraint has also been a consistent concern of this artist. We can see this exemplified in *New York 1994*, depicting Grand Central Terminal, a place where journeys begin and end, and yet miraculously Riddy has captured it without bustle – empty and majestic, temple-like. This visionary image might have been plucked from the background of a Flemish painting, the austere symmetry of its presentation suggesting an ambiguous nature as regards the space's function. The orb-like chandelier centralises light as a pivotal point in this photograph. Grand Central, as a structure, was a recipient of embellishments over a period of time – its Beaux Arts flavour added after its construction – and Riddy relishes the fact that such layers can reveal themselves in a particular image. His recent pictures of Rome explore this aspect extensively. Rome itself, as Riddy has suggested, 'can expand to be outside analysis': this is partly because it is impli-



John Riddy, *Rome (Argentina)*, 1999

cated in its own mythology – a myriad of histories and ideologies which are now sedimented within its structures. Consider the multitude of gazes, of camera clicks that have attempted to ‘capture’ each landmark, producing a visual ‘collective consciousness’ of the place, one which undoubtedly precedes any direct experience of it. Such saturation spurs Riddy on to discover a fresh image, a fresh look, and he has had no difficulty finding it; nor does he shy away from treading in the footsteps of those who sought instruction and experience there: the original tourists. *Rome (Argentina) 1999* is just one of the fruits of Riddy’s Rome visit: this very beautiful photograph displays the ruins encircled by illumination, most strikingly by the projected advertisement for Concorde, here pictured mid-flight. Layers of time and of sensibility are figured simultaneously in an image that seems to step outside any notion of temporality itself.

If *Rome (Argentina) 1999* presents, on one level, the weightlessness of the contemporary illuminated city in conjunction with the grounded gravitas of the ruin, then Riddy’s exploration of modernist architecture closer to home examines architectural structures as vehicles for light. The De La Warr pavilion is one such building: commissioned by the mayor of Bexhill-on-Sea, it was constructed by Mendelsohn and Chermeyeff in the mid 1930s and remains an extraordinary example of regional modernist experimentation.

The structure incorporated large amounts of sheet glass, and Riddy’s photographs play on this fact. One of them features the famous staircase (itself photographed by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy) smoothly spiralling from floor to floor, each of these presenting – through large glass windows – a view to the sea; while another interior presents a curving wall of glass, cinemascopic almost, ironically



John Riddy, *Bexhill on Sea (De La Warr 7)*, 1998

overlooking English suburbia. Riddy has spoken of the ‘pathos’ of such images – the strange disjunctive quality between the ‘intentions’ of a particular building and its perception today. In the case of the De La Warr pavilion, those intentions were to allow the aesthetics of modernist architecture to permeate the domain of the everyday: via its structuring of leisure and culture, the building – and, indeed, its sensation of light – was designed to project a particular view of ‘modern life’. Riddy manages to encapsulate in these pictures a sense of this utopian gesture and also its loss, or its unfortunate miscalculation. This didactic element in modernist architecture makes some of its

finest examples now appear rather like beached whales, spectacular yet tragic, and Riddy’s cool eye seems to inscribe this very ambivalence into the photograph itself.

In Riddy’s architectural images, the monuments of modernism are held under an unblinking gaze; they are neither lauded nor accused, they simply exist within the fabric of the present. Their strangeness is heightened by his photographs; as is the difficulty of reflecting upon their actual inheritance – not just as an aesthetic but also as a belief system, or as a means of ‘thinking’ the future. Which brings us back to the Millennium Wheel. Why, we might ask, does this appear such a melancholy image? The answer might lie in some prophetic statements Jean Baudrillard made in connection with the city, back in the early 1980s. In comparing the modernist ‘city of lights’ with the growing acceleration of the speed of electronic information systems, Baudrillard asks what would happen if, relatively speaking, the speed of light appeared to be slowing down. Rather like the stars, long since extinct and yet still a presence for us light-years later, the city’s boundaries, its physicality, its actual material manifestations, would appear to us more and more like ghosts – there and yet not there. There is something of this in Riddy’s Millennium ‘portrait’, with its quality of hallucination, a quality, in fact, that many of his photographs possess. He also appears to pose a crucial question, not just for artists, as we enter this new temporal phase: what place is there for the contemplative image in the twenty-first century?

The photograph on our cover was commissioned at the suggestion of Matthew Collings.

‘John Riddy and Juan Cruz’, 7 April – 28 May 2000, Camden Arts Centre, London.

Touring exhibition starting at The Ruskin Gallery, Sheffield, 3 June 2000.



John Riddy, *Bexhill on Sea (De La Warr 1)*, 1998. All photographs courtesy Frith Street Gallery, London