

MARTIN PARR: HUMANITY IS NOT PRETTY

THERE IS A BELIEF HELD BY SOME WITHIN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COMMUNITY OF THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE THAT A SELF-AWARE SOCIETY, ENCOURAGED IN THAT SELF-AWARENESS BY DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY, IS BETTER EQUIPPED TO DEAL WITH ITS OWN SHORTCOMINGS.

Or at the very least, it must admit their existence as proven by the camera even if not forced to rectify them.

That truism may help explain why documentary photography is still alive and well in Europe and to a lesser degree in the United Kingdom. It also explains why such a unique photographer as Martin Parr is doing rather well here. Success has brought him more than his fair share of controversy too, as much to do with the photographs themselves as the wide exposure publication in magazines, books, tv programs, critical articles and exhibitions in unconventional venues bestows on them.

Parr's elevation to full membership status of the Magnum photographic agency did not follow a smooth path either, when he was evidently tagged by some members as an anti-humanist, and so out of step with an organisation that prides itself on its old-style humanism. It was a contentious meeting when his entry was to be voted on, with one former Magnum president actively lobbying members against Parr. But he got in and, as one industry insider observed, has proven that Magnum needs him more than he needs Magnum.

The path Parr followed to become such an unlikely Magnum member is equally unlikely. I visited him in his home in Bristol, to find out how he became the globe-trotting photographer he is today. He related how his grandfather was an amateur photographer, a 'bromoil worker' who followed the fashion for 19th century Pictorialism popular in the regional camera clubs. Parr would visit his Yorkshire gran'da

during school holidays, and watch tantalised as grandfather worked his magic with silver salts, oil and pigment. Parr decided to be a photographer, too.

He told me that 'I looked around at the courses that were available to me, applied for four, got accepted by most but I didn't get very good exam results. So, I went to Manchester Polytechnic. I was 18 at the time, so I was pretty naïve, not exactly worldly wise. While I was at art college, I did this project called *Home Sweet Home*, which was a living room that I built as part of my final exams. This was wallpapered and had different kitsch items spread around in it. After that I put the show on in a couple of other locations.'

Following this brief foray into early 1970s installation art, Parr took up the 35mm documentary style that was to establish his name on the photography gallery circuit. Throughout the 70s, black-and-white photography in public spaces and usually with the Leica rangefinder camera, was defacto the officially sanctioned style of serious photographers. People from a traditional photojournalistic background like David Hurn, Patrick Ward, Tony Ray-Jones and Chris Steele-Perkins were balancing the demands of their careers with personal projects, and often taught in the new departments of photography sprouting up in polytechnics and universities all over Britain. Much of this activity was influenced by the vigorous book publishing and exhibiting that kick-started in the mid-60s. John Szarkowski of the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted the first retrospective show of British photographer Bill Brandt, which then toured all over the United Kingdom. This was followed by equally important shows of such photographers as Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, Bruce Davidson, Walker Evans and Edward Weston.

In the early 70s the Photographers Gallery opened its doors in London, and introduced many more American photographers to the British public. This exposure to two different monochrome aesthetics, one the rapidly reacting mobile style of the Leica rangefinder with Tri-X film and the other a more stately sheet film camera mode, was essential in encouraging rapid growth in photography as an expressive medium. Also, the Arts Council Of Great Britain responded to intensive lobbying by photographers and concerned academics like the remarkable Dr Mike Weaver (who also managed to persuade the Royal Academy to stage the 150th anniversary show of photography after it refused to recognise it as a creative medium throughout that period), appointed a photography officer, and

commenced to provide subsidies to publish books, fund exhibitions, and commission dozens of photographers to do documentary photography throughout Britain.

Parr benefited from this newly receptive environment, through his publication of a series of books and exhibitions catalogues, including *Bad Weather* in 1982, followed by *A Fair Day* and many others accompanying his shows in Britain, Europe and the United States. Then in the midst of his establishment as a prime monochrome documentarian of British regional life, Parr defected to the opposite camp, it appeared.

Continuing in his self-appointed role as iconoclast of art photography, John Szarkowski had thrown a spanner in the works by publishing *William Eggleston's Guide*, a book of photographs in the colour negative medium that on first glance appeared to be about nothing much at all, but that on longer viewing revealed Eggleston to be a lyric poet of the everyday. Parr was entranced by the newly revealed possibilities of colour photography, and so took it up with a vengeance.

Parr explained the reasons for choosing to now work in colour negative and with the Plaubel 6x7 wideangle camera: 'Colour was regarded as something for snapshot photography or the professional, not for the serious photographer in the UK. After *William Eggleston's Guide*, it had the official stamp of approval, and people like myself started to see this work where colour was such an integral part of the pictures. I use colour negative film because you can get the exposure wrong and still get a decent print, the prints are very attractive, and it's the best material. I find transparency difficult to expose well, and too contrasty.'

'The idea of using flash combined with daylight was to create a surreal effect, using those very bright colours. It's amateur film I use, so it helps give it extra saturation. Then the camera is a wideangle so you're in very close. All those things contribute to the look and feel of the photograph. I can't remember who actually introduced me to the Plaubel 6x7 camera, but when I saw it I thought, "God, this is fantastic for a 6x7 and very good quality!"' The first project Parr undertook in his new medium was *The Last Resort*, set in New Brighton. I spoke to Michael Collins, picture editor of the *Telegraph Magazine* and a confirmed admirer of Parr's photography, about this extremely controversial work.

'It was about him and his sad appreciation of this fairly miserable, rundown seaside resort which always held this hypothetical allure for him,' Collins commented. 'Martin always wanted to go there when he was a kid, and here

he is photographing it now. They are lonely pictures, and there's an awful lot there about the vision of the observer. He's very clever, Martin. His sense of composition is superb, but I can't use him that often because a lot of people find his work cruel, and he does have an angry sense of humour. Perversely, he's one of the most decent human beings you could come across, but he has quite a cutting eye.' Many commentators think Parr's eye so cutting that it draws unacceptable amounts of blood, and that he simply has it in for the working class depicted in *The Last Resort*.

'I am surprised at how controversial that show and book and indeed all my shows were. I am only photographing what is obvious, and part of my way of working is to tap into people's prejudices, and depict all aspects of things happening in today's society,' Parr explains. 'I give people an opportunity to air their prejudices, and if they want to say the working class is scruffy and dirty, then the pictures exist to illustrate that thesis.'

Parr's next project, *The Cost Of Living*, observed his own middle class at work and play amongst the fields of consumerism, and it got more backs up than ever before, but it was *The Last Resort* that became a classic of photography, and second-hand copies of it are in huge demand.

The next book to be published, *Small World*, is like all Parr's other recent projects drawn from photographs made on assignment for magazines. It is about global tourism, and so depicts people of all nationalities and classes. If the critical response is true to form, just about everyone's backs will be up everywhere.