

JULIE HENRY *GOING DOWN*

MARTIN PARR *Think of England*

NINA TOFT "The one I think I am..."

With these three exhibitions Presentation House Gallery brings to Vancouver work by artists from the United Kingdom whose aesthetic inquiries are directed at the 'real world'. Their images are also, for all their everyday qualities, intriguing probes into the nature of contemporary life as it is manifested in the global economy. But, their approaches are not reliant on global generalities – they depict social phenomena that are particular to the UK, that could probably not be found and photographed here in Vancouver even though each of their three broad subject areas exist in abundance in Greater Vancouver. Martin Parr looks at leisure, Julie Henry at sport and spectatorship, and Nina Toft at 'work' as it is seen in the daily ritual of commuting. The Vancouver area has many residents who trace their heritage back to the UK, many of whom have made frequent visits back to their 'homeland', a homeland that is presumably as mythic and clouded by the fogs of memory as one found anywhere else in the world. The UK is changing, but, as these works show, the changes occur in a context of a somewhat amazing continuity. Each of these artists has their own methodology for converting the phenomena of these familiar, mundane activities into an art that will inform future generations about what we were like, albeit the 'we' being people in the UK.

Nina Toft (Edinburgh), Martin Parr (Bristol) and Julie Henry (London) come from three very different parts of Britain but their work has an overlapping fascination with the mass movements of people through the contemporary world. Each artist is interested in the ebb and flow of humanity, the conditions in which people live today and fascinated with, as well as enamoured of the people who appear in front of their lens. Each of these artists operates at the interface between social documentary as pure research reflecting the world back to us, and art that creates a visual record that would not otherwise exist without their intervention.

New PHG books on these works by Julie Henry and Nina Toft are available in our shop. The texts in Julie Henry's book discuss her work in relation to the sociology of sport and link it to reception theory and reader-response criticism. Henry, who is a very avid football fan (Liverpool, so this is a good year for her) knows the madness and emotion of life in the stands firsthand. She understands sport as a religion and also as a substitute for religion. *Going Down* is a dual-screen video that is only a minute & thirty-two seconds long. It was shot at a match at Crystal Palace when Coventry scores a goal, capturing, in that brief span, sporting agony and ecstasy in condensed form. In other works Henry has similarly examined a broad range of popular culture activity, including game shows, talent contests, reunions and video game playing.

The writing in Nina Toft's book examines "The one I think I am..." in the context of documentary practice, the questionable work of the paparazzi and the ubiquity

of surveillance cameras in the UK. Shane Danielsen's text introduces Toft's piece by referencing a moment in an obscure Orson Welles film, *The Stranger*, in which a character expresses his shock at being photographed for the first time in his life – "There's not a photo of me in existence." Plausible as that might have been in 1946, it is inconceivable today. Toft's video is a gentle piece of public portraiture that is invasive of her subject's personal space, but in the quietest way possible. It was made in the main rail station in Edinburgh and her subjects appear to us as introspective, contemplative souls who are truly wrestling with serious issues while they are, in fact, just waiting for their train. Her interaction with them is one aspect of this work that links "The one..." with the entire history of public portraiture, whether staged or not.

Martin Parr's *Think of England* is a selection of thirty-one photographs from a body of work with that title made between 1995 and 2003. Parr is a member of Magnum, the global photo agency based in New York, London and Paris. He has photographed Britain over the past twenty years with a singular relentlessness. One result of his pursuit of the English is that his images are now 'the' England that we think we know and recognize. Yet, they don't look like an England that we have ever seen in pictures before. It is Parr's framing, composition and his use of foregrounded fragments that captures in spatial form what we know cognitively exists in the so-called real world. It is this pictorial structure, as much as the subjects of his photographs, that have established him in his position as the pre-eminent social documentarian in Britain.

Parr's England is charming in an other-worldly way, sometimes decaying before our eyes, product-obsessed, arcanelly ritualistic and, overall, a place where the seagulls look healthier than the people. Demographically, Parr shows us England's Defenders of Empire, its more recent arrivals, and its youth, all at their leisure, and all surrounded by the detritus that they have left behind in their search for a better life. Some have said that Parr's images are 'brutally real', but one could also say that they really only picture what is there, and that any brutality is not in the pictures, but in the world that is his subject.

These three exhibitions are part of a larger Vancouver-wide initiative called "UK Today: A New View", with other exhibitions taking place at the Vancouver Art Gallery this summer and at Artspeak Gallery in the fall – in addition to theatre and music events throughout the year. These exhibitions are supported in part by all of PHG's annual funders and by the British Council, to whom we extend our thanks. Nina Toft's talk is partially sponsored by HSBC Bank Canada.

Bill Jeffries

