

‘Pierdom’ by Simon Roberts

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Simon Roberts is a British photographer whose work centres on questions of people and place, particularly in regard to the construction and promotion of national identity. From 2011-2013 these interests fuelled a project titled *Pierdom* (<http://pierdom.com>), for which Roberts toured the British coastline capturing the country’s 58 surviving pleasure piers as well as a few ‘lost’ piers with an old-fashioned 4×5 inch field camera. In a bid to prompt a countrywide discussion on the historical significance of these seaside structures an unusual national exhibition followed in 2014 whereby 13 coastal venues simultaneously exhibited up to five works from the series, including their most local pier. In October 2015 all but a handful of Roberts’s pier photographs came together at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery (<http://brightonmuseums.org.uk/brighton/>) in Sussex, on the south east coast of England – an appropriate end point to the project given that Brighton is home to the most visited pier in the UK, the Palace Pier, as well as the sculptural remains of the country’s first Grade 1-listed pier: the West Pier.

It was Roberts’s photograph of the now derelict (and fast diminishing) West Pier that greeted us as we entered the first floor exhibition rooms dedicated to *Pierdom*, a curatorial choice that was very much in line with the 2014 national exhibition in that the venue prioritised a local pier, but also a choice that emphasised the compelling visual qualities of these intricately-designed but ultimately fragile Victorian structures. The photograph is one of only three in the series that looks down the groin of the pier, encouraging the eye to move past the playful figures in the foreground who paddle in the shallow waters of Brighton beach, and towards the haunting iron framework of the once glorious pier-head pavilion. The dark lines of this skeletal structure puncture the blue-grey expanse of sea and sky, anchoring the viewer in the landscape by providing a sense of distance in the absence

of a clear horizon. In this first encounter content and composition are combined to (re)assure the visitor that Roberts' considerations extend beyond capturing the piers' traditional offers of leisurely walks over the sea or the now oft-found additions of manufactured entertainment – chiefly fair-ground rides and arcade games. The photographer's project is also clearly an attempt to think about the pier as architectural spectacle.

In our interview with Roberts he confirms that the visual appeal of these coastal structures was an important driver in the development of *Pierdom*.

For me [...] the pier functions in two ways. You've got the tourists who go to the pier, and then you've got everybody who sits on the beach and looks at the pier. So actually, the pier is also a vista [...] a focal point in the sea, which I think people really engage with.



Fig. 1: Brighton West Pier, East Sussex, April 2011. Photograph by Simon Roberts.

His assessment gains strength from positioning the project outside the realm of traditional historical and sociological discussions on British piers, which chiefly focus on the structures as an essential component of Victorian seaside tourism – and their collapse in the twentieth century as evidence of the substantial shift in the population's holiday preferences.[1] Indeed, a more productive consideration of *Pierdom* stems from placing the project amongst other British art works that seek to record and represent the country's piers. These works might include: J.M.W. Turner and John Constable's incorporation of the now vanished Royal Suspension Chain Pier in their nineteenth century paintings of seaside Brighton; Anthony Gross' postwar lithographic print of Kent's Herne Bay Pier; and Mark Romanek's short but significant use of Clevedon Pier, Somerset, in the film adaption of *Never Let Me Go* (2010). In this way then Roberts' admiration for the design of these innovative seaside monuments, how they function as a 'focal point in the sea', can be regarded as an artistic interest that spans three centuries of British visual culture.



Fig. 2: Clevedon Pier #A, Somerset, February 2011. Photograph by Simon Roberts.

However, it is clear as we move beyond that first encounter with the 'lost' West Pier photograph that Roberts' interest in the strange and striking form of piers prompted a more controlled approach than evidenced in the textured surfaces of Turner's canvases or the lively colours of Gross' work. The

large-format[2] photographs that adorn the early sections of the first exhibition room, including Southsea South Parade Pier in Hampshire, Bognor Regis Pier in West Sussex, and Bangor Garth Pier in North Wales, were all shot out of season, their cast iron trestles (Southsea South Parade and Bognor Regis) or steel lattice girders (Bangor) located in sparsely-populated marine landscapes of muted browns, blues, and greys. Roberts explains that the restrained style anchored the project, especially in its early stages as a more selective series commissioned for a 2011 summer feature in *The Daily Telegraph Saturday Magazine*.

I wanted to photograph them [the piers] as architectural studies, so not as post-cards [...] not in relation, necessarily, to the landscape. But more try[ing] to find ways of photographing them such that we could almost make [...] a taxonomy of these weird structures [...] your eyes are drawn to the structure and then the details on the structure.

It was the positive response to the early commissioned work that led Roberts to consider extending the project with a book and an exhibition. At this point he began consulting previous photographic work on British piers, of which there is very little. The German photographer Richard Fischer has made one of the few photography books on this topic, *British Piers* (1987), but it has a looser focus than *Pierdom*, with pictures taken from more varied positions, including underneath the structures, presenting, in Roberts's words, 'an eclectic mix of material'. [3]



Fig. 3: Exhibition view. Photography by Simon Roberts.

Considering the lack of a comprehensive photographic study of British piers, Roberts quickly felt compelled to provide one. For the ambitious project he looked to the National Piers Society's official list (<http://www.piers.org.uk>) to pinpoint the locations and discover the (mis)fortunes of all the pleasure piers that were built around the coast of Britain since the first public pier opened in 1814, at Ryde on the Isle of Wight. The list helped him to come to the conclusion that:

For this to work I needed, really, to photograph every single one. [...] I could do a book of some piers but, then, what's the point? [...] The value in it is it becoming a historic archive – well photographed.

As a result, Roberts' work recalls the endeavours of Francis Frith, who sought to document every British town and village in the mid-nineteenth century and then established a company to continue his topographical record of Britain (<http://www.francisfrith.com>). However, the influence of Frith on *Pierdom* extends beyond Roberts' methodical tour of all piers in Britain – it also shaped his decision to photograph the structures using a traditional field camera mounted on a aluminium tripod, despite his reliance on technological innovations elsewhere (in particular Google Street View for sourcing vantage points). About his choice of camera, Roberts says:

Because this is [...] almost a classifying of piers, in the sense that it's a record, there is no other medium really – other than an architectural drawing – that gives it that sense of here and now. [...] I wasn't trying to put too much [...] artistic representation on it [...] If you were doing a painting you could do it from memory, you could add other elements [...] This is about me being there. Using a camera which is for architectural photography so that you are always getting the verticals completely straight. So it is as objective as possible [...].

Roberts' choice of words to describe photography's distinctive capacity for objectivity, especially in comparison to painting, undeniably evoke those of André Bazin in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'. In this essay the camera is hailed as a 'nonliving agent' offering 'an image of the world [...] formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man'. Indeed, Bazin states that

[t]he personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind. Although the final result may reflect something of his personality, this does not play the same role as is played by that of the painter. [4]

As we wander the exhibition rooms the extensive efforts of Roberts to capture and catalogue the piers without inserting any overt visual suggestions is clear, not least in the use of long exposure, which somewhat blurs the moving sea water (and obscures falling rain in several photographs) while the pier structures themselves remain sharp.

When Roberts discusses his interest in objectivity he does not make direct reference to Bazin, but he goes on to acknowledge that the issue led him to think about the work of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher during the project's three-year shoot. Certainly, the core concern to photograph all of Britain's remaining pleasure piers resonates with the Bechers' rigorous efforts to systemically photograph threatened industrial structures from the 1950s onwards, including water towers, gas tanks, and pitheads. Moreover, Roberts' choice of a restrained style, chiefly his deliberate attempts to minimise shadow detail by shooting on overcast days using long exposure, is very much in keeping with the Bechers' impersonal, almost clinical, aesthetic. The earliest photographs in the exhibition, such as Somerset's Weston-Super-Mare Grand Pier and Clevedon Pier (of which there were two different images), offer perhaps the strongest links to the Bechers' work – featureless skies, precise lines, and drained of colour to the extent that they almost appear as black and white photographs.



Fig. 4: Clevedon Pier #C, Somerset, February 2011. Photograph by Simon Roberts.

It is somewhat unexpected then that Roberts' disciplined approach also provides some of the more whimsical elements of the exhibition. For example, in the photograph of Brighton Palace Pier, the commitment to straight, sharp lines not only calls attention to the pier's architecture (the cast iron columns and the elaborate pavilion that rests on them) but also the horizontal figure slumbering close to the shoreline on an otherwise empty beach. This representation moves the project beyond a facile celebration of piers as monuments of Victorian engineering and offers a strikingly different image to the ubiquitous 'postcard' views that position seaside piers against beautiful sunsets. Instead, it tells the story of how people enjoy piers as part of everyday life and, more broadly, how British identity relates to the seaside. Roberts elaborates:

I think it was taken five in the morning after a Bank Holiday weekend so [folks] were sleeping it off, and I wanted that [image] because that tells me something about Brighton, and about [...] how people interact with Brighton and to some extent the pier is just a backdrop in the theatre of people's lives.



Fig. 5: Teignmouth Grand Pier #A, Devon, July 2011. Photograph by Simon Roberts.

The interactions between British people and their piers is again evidenced in the photograph of Teignmouth Grand Pier in Devon, where the sharply-

captured pier combines with a particular perspective to amusingly suggest that its cast iron piles offer one small individual an effective, albeit dangerous, climbing wall – on closer inspection, we see that this figure is actually a paddle boarder standing a little further away. The Brighton Palace Pier and Teignmouth Grand Pier photographs are an important indication that Roberts' approach is controlled but not strict and, moreover, points to the looser style that developed after the initial 2011 shoot.

I could have photographed in a much more strict fashion, like I'd started [to...] but, actually, I thought [...] I don't want to be that strict because what I wanted to do was give a sense of seasons and time and, therefore, open it up [...] So, that, actually we begin to think about how these things have changed over time, [...] the different weather patterns that they've had to endure.



Fig. 6: Brighton Palace Pier #B, East Sussex, April 2013. Photograph by Simon Roberts.

Indeed, the final exhibition and accompanying book provide a fascinating insight into the rich assortment of piers that still exist in Britain despite the challenges issued – and losses incurred[5] – by pounding waves and battering winds over the decades. This variety extends from the delicate wrought iron structure of the spider-legged Clevedon Pier to the robust, almost brutalist, concrete structure of Deal Pier in Kent; from the quaint Teignmouth Grand Pier, with its higgledy-piggledy scattering of small buildings, to the

imposing Weston-Super-Mare Grand Pier in Somerset, which now accommodates a large warehouse-like structure built to house slot machines and arcade games – the bland addition part of the commercial entertainment industry's efforts to protect its revenue from the perils of British weather.

More fascinating though is how the exhibition portrays piers as lived experiences shaped by the mood of the time and the socio-cultural make-up of their location. Roberts captures details which reveal the small economies of British seaside tourism: the £3 Donkey rides (Southport Pier, Merseyside); a beach picnic out of a supermarket plastic bag (Cleethorpes Pier, North East Lincolnshire); the crazy golf course, or the parking lot next to the pier (Ryde Pier, Isle of Wight). Moreover, as Roberts begins to move the framing outwards in some of the larger photographs we start to see the context of piers in the landscape as well as the imprint of economic changes in these coastal regions, such as the image of Harwich Ha'penny Pier in Essex, where the pier is dwarfed by a dauntingly-sized cruise ship in the background. Roberts notes:

... when you look closely at the pictures, you might see a kind of fishing trawler, or you'll see a shipping container or you'll see wind farms in the distance, or you'll see [...] decrepit, derelict buildings, so suddenly you actually start to see more how we relate to the coastline and how that may have changed over time.

This theme connects *Pierdom* to one of Roberts' earlier major projects, *We English* (2008-2010), where he explores 'the diverse pastimes of ordinary people in the context of the English landscape'.[6]

British seaside resorts have been in economic decline since the late 1970s due to cultural and economic changes in how the population spends their holidays and leisure time.[7] This development is reflected in the precarious status of many surviving pleasure piers, including several that were significant live music and popular entertainment venues in early and mid 20th century Britain. The ballroom on Hasting Pier in Sussex, for example, played host to several major bands in its heyday – The Rolling Stones, The Who, Jimi Hendrix – and, due to an unusually vibrant local youth culture, continued to serve as a central place for the music scene up until the early 2000s. Photographed by Roberts in 2011, Hastings Pier features in the exhibition as an example of a pier almost, but not quite, lost. It is captured in a state of serious disrepair, adorned by a big banner that is both heartbreaking and hopeful. It reads: 'YOU CAN SAVE ME'. In this photograph then, it looks as though Hasting Pier is going to add to the numbers of piers now

lost from the British coastline – several of which are captured by Roberts in the form of poignantly open seascapes.



Fig. 7: Hastings Pier, East Sussex, March 2011. Photograph by Simon Roberts.

The three images of the sea where Kent's Margate Jetty, Middlesbrough's Redcar Pier, and the Isle of Wight's Shanklin Pier once stood create a powerful moment in the exhibition. Situated in the second room, and therefore after the visitor has contemplated the numerous ways in which the surviving piers remain both compelling to look at and engage with, these images serve as a haunting reminder of their fragility. Roberts notes how these photographs serve an aesthetic purpose by providing a visual point of difference in the exhibition (and book) but also how they shape and serve a narrative, offering the visitor a pause in the piers' story, a 'quieter chapter break'. In Roberts' words, the photographs of the lost piers have become 'points of reflection', and often these images prompt more abstract contemplations of 'what comes after the loss of something'. In general, Roberts' distanced yet deeply humanist view allows audiences to engage in their own personal and affective readings of the images.

For us, the exhibition brings confirmation that piers are totemic assets – they bring people together in a local area because they are seen as symbolically 'belonging' to the entire community. Our own research within the AHRC-funded Connected Communities project 'The People's Pier' is track-

ing several case studies, including the almost lost Hasting Pier, where the local community has rallied to save their unique piece of coastal architecture by instigating a 'collective' takeover based on a community-share ownership model (<http://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/thepeoplespier/>). As difficult as it is to imagine from Roberts' 2011 photograph, summer 2016 saw the reopening of the completely restored Hastings Pier as a 21st century pier and a trailblazer as a community pier. Moreover, the pier's open deck design provides an expansive and immersive open-air exhibition space that has most recently displayed this photograph along with a selection of other works from the *Pierdom* series, printed in large size on weatherproof boards. *Pierdom* is an important contribution to work that recognises the continued presence and purpose of piers on the British coastline, in particular their value as local heritage assets deeply integrated into people's everyday lives. While the impact of changing patterns in tourism on the British seaside is well-documented, similar attention must now be given to seaside leisure spaces from the perspective of the local community, and specifically to the seaside pier as a contested cultural space bound up with notions of identity, social class, nostalgia, taste, and morality.

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Notes

- [1] See for example Walton 2000.
- [2] The prints are in two sizes, 20×24 inch and 48×60 inch.
- [3] Since Roberts completed his shoot an English Heritage and National Piers Society book has been published to mark the bicentenary of the first public pier. See Wills & Phillips 2014.

- [4] Bazin, 2005, p. 13.
- [5] More than half of the original British seaside piers have been lost.
- [6] See <http://www.we-english.co.uk>
- [7] See for example Gray 2006, Shaw & Williams 1997, Walton 2000.