

A closed circle of deckchairs

The Great British Seaside, National Maritime Museum

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Published in *Source: The Photographic Review*, Issue 94, Summer 2018, pp. 51-2

I travel inland from my seaside hometown to examine these images. Hordes of holidaymakers, packed densely onto beaches, cheek by jowl in shirt and tie or novelty hats, are arrayed around mostly empty spaces. It's a glorious day in Greenwich so few come into the shade to take in the scenery. Six decades of seaside escapades unfold through interlocking rooms in the galleries through four interlocking points of view. Tony Ray-Jones, David Hurn, Martin Parr and Simon Roberts each photograph the rituals of British coastal leisure. Despite their differing methods and time periods, their images are in silent conversation. Roberts leads the discussion, most literally through the films on display on the specially built 'Seaside Cinema' beach hut, complete with painted shingle and plastic seagull. Through a series of archival explorations (in the case of Ray-Jones, deceased) and artist interviews (with Hurn and Parr), the films reinforce the four's shared seaside inspirations - the photography of Paul Martin and Francis Frith, for example - and shared seaside fascinations: enduring rituals, large scale popular practices and absurd details.

Perhaps like all who are fascinated by visual culture, each of the photographers likes to look at people looking. The beach photographer, for example, is pictured by the beach photographer in a 1963 image at Herne Bay, Kent, where tourists could pay to be depicted atop a full-size stuffed camel on the shoreline. Hurn cleverly cuts off the head of the sitter in a witty reference to popular photographic technique. Ray-Jones, a few years later in Blackpool, focuses on a sunbather in full formal clothing, who rests – one among many on the ranks of deckchairs – with a twisted hanky shielding his eyes from the sun and his glasses comically resting on top. The image is intriguing for

the tiny concession made to relaxation at a location where permissiveness and informality are expected, but the improvised blindfold also evokes the blinkered and myopic motifs that punctuate the show. Here is Britain, after all, at the very edges of its island territory, yet here are Britons positioned firmly behind windbreaks as defences against the elements and the vast expanses beyond; they huddle together in circles of seats with their backs to the sea. Photographs repeatedly feature boundary markers, breakwaters, railings, danger signs to keep off the groynes. The message is less of a looking outwards than a warning cry to *Look Out!*

This state of insularity may be one of the peculiarities of collective character that the show seeks to provide. From the title onwards we are encouraged to think of the work in a nationalist frame. But there's also insularity in the points of view of the photographers; they are from different generations but each is white, male and British-born. Their view of the seaside is remarkably homogeneous; it is a kind of self-reflection. Undoubtedly this makes for a smooth and coherent show. The shared themes unfold across practitioners and endure across time, whether the prints are small-format or large-scale, presented in monochrome or in hard, bright colour. From the earliest photographs on display to the museum's 2017 commission of new work from Parr, the seaside is figured as a site of constancy. For Parr in particular, a sense of timelessness is part of the seaside's charm; he states that a photograph taken on a British beach today could look the same as one taken in the 1950s. The same could be said of his brassy seaside repertoire; ruthless seagulls and gaudy skies have so long punctuated Parr's oeuvre that his photographs of the last thirty years are almost indistinguishable. I say *almost* because he works with new material in his recent study, focusing on the ethnic mix on Essex beaches, from Hindu celebrations at the water's edge on the last day of Shravan festivities to Sikhs drinking Smirnoff on the sand. Community, family and ritual still figure large in these images but Parr seems on less familiar territory. The subjects are treated with careful curiosity rather than trademark ridicule; this is self-consciously 'them' rather than 'us'.

Roberts led the conversation in the Great British Seaside films and he has the final say at the end of the show. The charcoal greys of the Ray-Jones and Hurn rooms give way to cool pastel pinks in the finale. Brighton and Blackpool are pictured again, as they were by Ray-Jones in the 1960s, but Roberts stands apart from the action, surveying scenes from an elevated position atop a gantry on his camper van; a seagull's-eye view, if you like. In works from the 'We English' series from 2008, tiny figures dot the landscape, picked out in fine detail. Seen from a distance, and viewed in vast prints, the industrial scale of seaside pleasure is writ large. The 'Lost Children Centre' on Blackpool prom, built from a converted shipping container, indicates the quantities of bodies the seaside must sustain, yet despite the large populations, on the beaches of Woolacombe and Saunton in Devon, these holiday-makers are dwarfed in turn by expansive sand, sky and sea.

The British seaside is a huge subject, but here there's a singular point of view, representing a face of the seaside we've all seen before. The emphasis is on leisure rather than labour, holiday getaways rather than home life. I take the train back to the south coast and take in the sea view from the end of my road. It takes in the last of the fishing industry, a newly-built hydroelectric wind farm, an ageing population and stoned youth in the bus shelters. There isn't a bucket or spade in sight.