

"THE MAIN PRECEPT OF WHAT I DO is one that says the world is more interesting than my reasons for describing it." In the photographs of John Riddy, the world in question seems at first glance to share the reticence of this statement by the artist regarding his intentions. It's a world that gives itself up slowly, by sleights and increments; this despite the frontal address of Riddy's camera to its (typically architectural) object: a technique he arrived at quite independently of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their Düsseldorf acolytes. Riddy's strict and often symmetrical compositions arose in part out of his early role as photographer of other artists' sculptures: "The objective there was to describe clearly the work and the space it occupied and altered." In his most recent photographs, currently on show at London's Frith Street Gallery, Riddy's world is as subtle and austere as always, its symmetries sufficiently skewed to suggest that occupying and altering space might be one and the same thing.

"There will probably be only nine pictures on the wall, but I'd like people to come away feeling that they have seen something more than that equation suggests. I'd like the show to be a generous experience in that respect." All of the images in the show, titled *Low Relief*, were made in London as part of a series in which he has further refined his straight style by photographing the flat surfaces of the city. "I've made a conscious effort to take perspective out of the pictures", he says; "I think it's an attempt to use a more 'primitive' way of composing the image so that you end up with something more guttural, where flat planes are suspended in a different pictorial space." The result is a London that seems built out of stage flats or *trompe l'oeil* hoardings, a city fabric made of grey facades on which are inscribed the traces of alternate histories.

"I'm drawn to anything that by reference, association or description expands the time contained within the image", says Riddy. "That's the great illusion of photography for me. It's what allows it to be transcendent." His photograph of a brick wall on

OUT OF TIME

The flat London surfaces in John Riddy's latest photographs hide layers of meaning and history

cinematic stream to them, like a frieze that could potentially link together, or the unfolding view from a car, framed by the windscreen or window." There are several sorts of frames in the new work. A statue of Sir John Soane, architect of the Bank of England, recedes dolefully into a classically rectilinear alcove as street markings in front of him describe diagonals like cartoon indicators of motion or speed. A darkened exterior wall of the Garrick Club is interrupted three times by glimpses of its gleaming interior and a collection of paintings that promise, in their use of traditional perspective, more dimensions than Riddy allows himself: "I like that old-fashioned moment when the viewer is suspended between the still image and the world of movement and changing light that they are standing in."

words BRIAN DILLON

Weston Street, near London Bridge, is perhaps the signature image in this regard. Framed by tarmac, double yellow lines, a soot-black gutter and a downpipe that seems to have sunk between the bricks, the wall is a palimpsest of pollution, paint and graffiti, oddly punctuated by a vertical row of stencilled numbers: '2, 1, 4, 23'. Amid the minutely gridded chromatic chaos of aged brick, it takes some time to register the presence of an arch, now bricked in, that once opened the flat surface to the third dimension that Riddy has worked hard to deny. The effect is oddly claustrophobic, not so much opening the image up to the city at its edges as forcing the viewer to focus on the precise intersection of planes that once occurred here, as if oblivious to the adjacent space.

It's a quality often remarked on, this tendency of Riddy's photographs to shun the idea that they are bordered by infinite space—or even, as here, by the wider topology of the city. Instead, he proceeds by a montage of consciously restricted views: "I wanted the show or the images as a series to have an almost

Riddy's images of modern architecture are equally palimpsestic, just as overwritten with anachronism as his earlier photographs of Roman ruins abutting busy roads and outdoor cinema screens, or his oblique record of 28 views or locations that appear in John Ruskin's autobiography, *Praeterita* (1885–9). "I'm forty-nine", he says, "and I think modernist architecture has a particular resonance for people of my age. It's become a matter of history, yet it represented something very different when I was growing up. It's historically antihistorical." In these latest photographs, Riddy's modernist London is scratchily archaized: low-rise flats in the Heygate Estate decorated with faux-Victorian doors, coach lamps and white picket fences.

Riddy's interests are always primarily visual, and his methods, however well informed, essentially happenstantial: "I like Larkin's line, 'what happened to happen', as a description of what I'm going out to look at, and I think that implies that there has to be a random aspect to it. You cannot make, and no one would look at, photographs devoid of the photographer's personality. Nothing is as important as having a voice. However, I don't work well from preconceived ideas. I need to end up with something that defeats my expectations."