

John Riddy's stark and intense photographs take us on journeys of the unexpected. Of cities we may have thought familiar – London, Rome or Lisbon, say – he manages to create images that chart the hidden psychology of a space, expose different layers of time and disclose an ambience utterly new and unfamiliar.

Well-known landmarks feature in his photographs just as much as non-spaces, but Riddy's treatment articulates the Colosseum or the Millennium Wheel, Fontainebleau or the Simplon in a language that seems at odds with our own experiences. Riddy re-invents or translates them into an idiom both foreign and strange, proffering an oblique look, a view from behind the scenes, an unaccustomed perspective, yielding a sense of dislocation, uncertainty and wonder.

Riddy works with single images but often composes sequential works of two, four or sometimes six parts. Of his various themes, architecture holds perhaps the strongest fascination for him, and his acute glance encompasses the domestic and the public, ancient and modern, ecclesiastic and secular. Though Riddy has recently introduced colour, his work is mostly associated with rich black and white tones. His original training as a painter is unmistakably shown in the careful composition of the images and the almost painterly way he handles the balance of light and shade.

In 'Rome', a six-part work following the ancient city walls (?) on the Via Campania, Riddy presents us with the opposite of a vista, with a barrier, frontal, austere and uncompromising, allowing only an occasional glimpse to spaces beyond. Like a walk along the walls themselves, the sequence follows the rhythmic pattern of the architecture, its arches and windows, highlighted by the strong play of shadows. Occasionally, shadow seems to obliterate most of the image, enveloping it in a chiaroscuro, and a deep, saturated, saturnian black. In other images, winter sunshine throws a spidery silhouette of bare trees against the old bricks like dark lace. The present is only hinted at - by a parked car, traffic signs, or a tiny background view of more recent architecture.

This sense of a layering of history and the use of the formal device of a barrier, and the lateral progression along a road is also evident in the earlier Portuguese works, 'Lisbon' and 'Alges'. In the latter, an advertising hoarding and a web of electric cabling criss-crossing the sky are juxtaposed with the odd grandeur of a wall crowned by castellated towers. There is a sense of anachronism, melancholy and displacement, but also of tenderness, in Riddy's allusive depiction of a place on the periphery.

'Lisbon (Avenida de 24 Julho)' is probably the starkest and most forbidding of this group of photographs. Eschewing the magnificence generally associated with this city, Riddy takes us along another deserted road with its

leafless trees and parked cars. The houses are low, peeling paint meanders across their façades like a high-water mark, windows are reduced to hermetic black squares. A gate, giving a view of an industrial crane, provides the only clue to the nature of this neighbourhood. Silence, like all the sites Riddy is drawn to, seems to engulf the place.

Riddy photographs are akin to architectural still-lives. His chosen subjects here are unassuming and presented as matter-of-fact, yet they brim with austere poetry. In portraying our urban environment (without any human presence) Riddy achieves an arresting distillation of a sense of place and time.

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