

The traces of time

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John Riddy

At Camden Arts Centre, Arkwright Road, London NW3 until 28 May and the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea from 8 June to 16 July



Above: John Riddy's *Rome (Flaminio 2)*. Below right: an unorthodox view of the De La Warr Pavilion

Among the photographs by John Riddy on show at Camden Arts Centre are two interior views of Mendelsohn and Chermayeff's De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea. One is taken on a landing of the seaward staircase that usually features when the building is represented; the other is from the less flamboyant, seldom-seen stair that looks north towards the town. Through the gridded, curving glass is an unbroken rank of bay-windowed, gabled, pitched-roof housing, the Bexhill norm which the pavilion disturbed. But the staircase wall is in disrepair; Modernism admits its age.

There are other reminders of the Modern Movement's heyday: one of Lubetkin's Whipsnade bungalows appears, as does Goldfinger's 2 Willow Road. But, at the heart of the show, the time-frame expands with a series of photographs which Riddy made last year in Rome.

Before commenting on them, it's worth noting the appearance of the exhibition as a whole. Over the last two decades or so, as

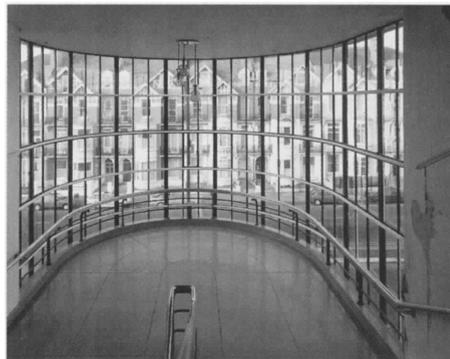
photography has escaped the confines of specialist venues and increasingly invaded art galleries, its practitioners seem sometimes to mistake size for substance; the 2m-wide print, mounted on aluminium, becomes a sign of seriousness. Riddy doesn't follow suit; nor does he install his work in idiosyncratic ways. All his (silver gelatin) prints here are only 38 x 48cm; they are uniformly framed, and grouped rhythmically at a constant level around the walls. They don't hector the viewer, and the impression of calm is reinforced by their composition: Riddy frequently opts for a frontal, flattening viewpoint, a centralised subject (not multiple foci), and near-symmetry.

Riddy gives some idea of what motivates him when he writes that 'the particularities of place are being submerged under the deadening gloss of Post-Modern unification; anaesthetised through processes that cover surfaces and forms unique to where we stand.' Resisting this, he wants to capture 'the complex histories, the very rub of the world'.

'Histories' implies the passage of time, and Riddy's photographs are most memorable when that temporal dimension really tells. Sometimes it does so in an anticipated way. *Rome (Verano 1)* shows mausolea in a cemetery being swallowed by luxuriant vegetation, while the trees behind, hung with ivy, have strangely distorted profiles. This image is arresting, although in essence it only reiterates a Romantic commonplace.

Rome (Flaminio 2) is more complex in its registration of the built and natural worlds. A headless, handless statue is at the centre of the photograph; the screen-like wall behind it draws the domed church on the left, and the columns and pediment on the right, into a continuous built backdrop. Three trees at different stages of growth are rooted in the unkempt foreground: the small pollarded one looking as abruptly shorn as the statue, and the fissured bark of the big one contrasting with the smooth stone and render. On the trunk of the third, an eye-like knot peers back at the viewer, as an almost Surrealist component to the scene. All the disparate elements – the sacred and secular, the monumental and mundane – cohere around the mutilated statue, which remains the insistent focus.

Simpler in form, *Rome (Villa Adriana 2)* is just as resonant. We are at the bottom of a bare chamber apparently open to the sky, although we only see its patchwork walls. Conspicuously eroded in places, they combine brick with large areas of lozenge-



pattern *opus reticulatum*, while the ground is alive with flowers. This is one moment in a season amid the passage of centuries.

Riddy's photographs reveal the workings of time but without irony or, for that matter, any strong sense of melancholy. This is the way of the world, he would seem to say: things weather and are sometimes disfigured or abused, and Modernism is no more immune than the imperial past - though the flowers return. To the optimism of a developer's brochure or an architectural manifesto, he supplies a sobering corrective.