

John Riddy

John Ruskin: *Praeterita*

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The text opposite the image reads *The Springs of Wandel*. The black-and-white photograph has a distinctive patina, a silvered tonality, and shows a steamer moored in the Thames. For a moment, the boat almost persuades you that this is not a contemporary image, but then the vinyl banner draped on its side, advertising function suites and nightclub for hire, allows the image to unfold into the present, the Millennium Eye in the process of being erected in the background.

It is perhaps not coincidental that this image features two different symbols of the evolution of the modern Labour movement – the ex-GLC headquarters County Hall and Millbank Tower, the home of the New Labour party machine – within its horizon, when the image is located as the first in a new sequential work of 28 images that the British artist John Riddy has made in response to John Ruskin's autobiography, *Praeterita*, on the centenary of his death. Known predominantly as an artist and critic, the prolific Victorian was also a political and social visionary whose thinking, which although little known today, laid the foundation for the modern Labour movement.

Perhaps one of the most distinctive in British contemporary photography, John Riddy's practice exists in a singular relationship to a particular photographic inheritance that many would consider, like Ruskin's influence, to be eroded to the point of non-existence at the beginning of the 21st century. Riddy's black-and-white images are in some ways articles of belief in the possibilities of photography, positioned as transparent condensers for the subjects they capture. They are meditations on the particularity and poetry of place, which convey the layering and compression of space and time that surrounds us with an almost sculptural physicality and a lucidity belied by their transparency, but which is in fact due directly to it.

As Riddy began to explore Ruskin's writing in some depth for the commission, he discovered an affinity between his preoccupations and that of Ruskin that is at the heart of *Praeterita's* structure. Riddy has not illustrated the narrative of the autobiography but has rather paralleled the acts of travelling, stopping, looking and describing that preoccupied Ruskin with the same structure that lies at the



Praeterita 1: The Springs of Wandel



Praeterita 8: Vester, Camenae



Praeterita 9: The Col de la Faucille



Praeterita 15: Cumae



Praeterita 17: The Simplon



Praeterita 6: Schaffhausen and Milan

centre of his own practice. Continuing this mirroring, Riddy views the book of his images to be the primary realisation of the work rather than the exhibition that will accompany it, positioning his own *Praeterita* in the same artistic space as Ruskin's. Each of Riddy's images in the series relates directly to a chapter of Ruskin's autobiography and is reproduced on the right hand page, opposite the title of the corresponding chapter. Set adrift from the narrative of the autobiography, Ruskin's titles form a collage of allusion that weaves a web from the familial to the mythic, the geographical to the classical, the political to the affectionate. In juxtaposition, Riddy's photographs create a sense of a fluid ebb in space and time, of moments and spaces from the past coexisting with the present. This atmosphere is often discernible in Riddy's work but here has a particular relationship to the way that time's normally accepted boundaries dissolve and become confused in Ruskin's autobiography, much of which was written in between bouts of mental illness.

Sometimes Riddy's images are a visual reference to what he believes to be the absolute hub of Ruskin's existence at that time, such as the encounter with the abbey at San Riquier in *The Col de la Faucille*, which was the first time Ruskin placed his appreciation of architecture within its social context. On other occasions, they are incidental moments, a space fleetingly described by the writer that has a resonance outside of his own narrative. In many, Riddy has excluded reference to the contemporary world, allowing the spaces depicted to exist in a flux between past and present, an unspecific time. When it makes itself felt, the present is mostly quietly implied through subtle details – a rack of tourist leaflets in a hotel lobby, the vinyl banner on the steamer. Rarely, Riddy allows his awareness of the compression of co-existing times to manifest itself with a violent beauty. *Rome* depicts the monumental architecture of the city's classical past engulfed in the morass of the contemporary cityscape, Riddy creating a poetry of collision that was laced through the body of work he recently completed whilst the Sargeant Fellow at the British School at Rome in 1998/9.

But even these moments of intense implosion occur within an expansive, spatial silence that the artist creates with the levelling stillness of his lens. This atmosphere also envelopes the different micro-climates present in the series. The images taken in Britain, for example, are predominantly matter-of-fact, solidly rooted in their site. The wooden park gazebo in *Vester, Camenae*, veers towards the prosaic, its municipal litter bin and ►



Praeterita 14: Rome



Praeterita 16: Fontainebleau



Praeterita 25: The Grand Chartreuse

crazy-pathed paths a counterpoint to the pastoral Herne Hill of Ruskin's childhood. However, the European sites, frequently classic stops on The Grand Tour, such as *Fontainebleau*, have a more Romantic quality. It is the reoccurring images of the Alps that are most elusive; *The Simplon* appears like a solidifying vision, symbolising in its austere grandeur the loci of Ruskin's Romantic inspiration. Mount Blanc in particular haunts the series. Riddy shuffles Ruskin's allusions to the place with his own, introducing a dislocated space between them. In *The Grande Chartreuse*, Riddy presents us with a hotel lobby, but it is unspecified whether this is the contemporary interior of Ruskin's haunt L'Hotel Du Mont Blanc. As in Riddy's earlier image *Soule*, 1996, which depicts the interior of a small cafe in the Pyrenees dominated by a mural of the exterior landscape, the interior in *The Grande Chartreuse* is not the subject itself but a pictorial structure, a space redefined as a frame for the represented exterior in the painting of the Alps that hangs on the wall.

The image that actually bears the name of *L'Hotel Du Mont Blanc* does not depict the establishment. Riddy's image shows a fragment of a rather ordinary village in the Swiss Alps – a clutch of scrappy, nondescript buildings and some scrubby grass interlaced with trees. Two equally scrappy, nondescript small cars are parked at right angles in the centre of the image. The totemic presence of the mountain is written over the scene, but only faintly, its form almost bleeding into the white of Riddy's sky. The image is strangely reminiscent of so many pictures of deserted villages we have been exposed to over the duration of the Balkan conflict. Some other Europe, where the majesty of landscape sits in equal coexistence with a hard fought existence and an inheritance that, if you are lucky, consists of some scrubby grass and a nondescript second-hand car. The image is perhaps one of the most important in the series, its rather disheartening atmosphere seeming to make a form of mute comment on our communal inability to fulfil Ruskin's social and political vision.

Ruskin's *Praeterita* and Riddy's own practice are in their own ways autobiographies in the form of travelogues – a belief that it is in temporarily leaving behind the place where you are from and attempting to describe the place in

which you have arrived that we come to understand what place we have in the world. On their mirrored journeys both artists found themselves standing at the site of the battle of Waterloo outside Brussels, which Ruskin had visited on his travels in Europe and to which Riddy followed to create the image *Schaffhausen and Milan*. If time was to compress at that spot Ruskin and Riddy would share their view over the mist covered fields with the contemporary German writer W.G Sebald. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that these three would intersect here and that Sebald too should share Ruskin and Riddy's deep involvement with place as the catalyst for reflection. Sebald recounts his visit to Waterloo in his hypnotic *The Rings of Saturn*. Ostensibly, the book is a travelogue, underpinned with the structure of a walk across the distinctive landscape of Suffolk. But Sebald's narrative is more an extended essay on the mutability of human existence within the complexities of time than any conventional understanding of fiction; fluidly looping and wheeling between recollection and experience, melting between different times and spaces – often separated by entire centuries and continents – and linked together more by the associative processes of the landscape of the author's life and knowledge than by any reference to the English countryside within which he walked.

In some ways Riddy's practice is the visual accompaniment to Sebald's prose. The diversity of geographical and historical moments which the artist captures are woven together perhaps more by his act of describing them with the camera than by their inherent qualities. Riddy's images are suffused with a stillness that is the condensation of his contemplation of our limitations within the greater actions of time, which parallels Sebald's own attempt to illustrate the transience of the individual within history. It is a position with which Ruskin would have held more than a little sympathy.

Praeterita is organised by The Laboratory at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, University of Oxford, as part of the programme of events to mark the centenary of the death of John Ruskin in 2000. A fully illustrated publication is available at £20 (ISBN 0 9538525 0 4) telephone 01865 276940.