

LONDON

ART FORUM SUMMER 2009

## John Riddy

FRITH STREET GALLERY

In the critical writing on John Riddy's photography, a divergence of interpretation emerges. For some, his images embody "spatial illusion and dreaming": They reverberate "with what is not shown or displayed" and demonstrate "photography's capacity to conflate time and its ability to evoke the history of a place." Others read the photographs rather differently, as "relentlessly hard-nosed and formal" documentaries that lack "any sense of nostalgia."

So is Riddy a romantic or a realist? That such an uncertainty can exist is a function of the extreme subtlety of this photographer's



John Riddy, *London (Westminster)*, 2009, archival pigment print, 28 3/4 x 36 3/4".

*London (Weston Street)*, 2009, offers the most extreme example. The evenly dark-toned picture of part of a railway arch near London Bridge station in essence, an invitation to stare at a brick wall. The subject is shot parallel to the picture plane. The dark bricks bear evidence of ancient whitewash and a few incidental details, such as stenciled numerals and the trace of a blocked-up opening. Dirty yellow road markings form a margin along the image's bottom edge. This is less than promising raw material, yet concentrated looking allows the umber richness of the flaking, sooty wall to register. Janus-like, the image has two faces, one dingy and banal and the other unexpectedly beautiful.

image-world. Exploring muted ranges of color and tone, and often representing unremarkable locations that would never make it into any tourist guide to London (postwar housing developments, the underbelly of a concrete overpass, nondescript riverside views, and so on), the ten landscape-format color photographs that comprise "Low Relief" invite descriptors such as "quiet," "subdued," or even "self-effacing."

"Low Relief" focuses on London's characteristic but normally negligible brownish-gray plumage as an object of aesthetic attention. Its expanses of Portland stone, stucco, concrete, and London stock brick (a light sandy-brown material, usually blackened with decades of grime) are revealed as a subdued riot of ochres and chocolates, murky browns, beiges, khakis, and battleship grays. *London (Wapping)*, 2009, depicts a string of riverside buildings on an overcast day, setting their assorted dark browns, russets, and blacks against a murky gray-green river and an almost equally murky sky. Hanging next to it is another river view, *London (Limehouse)*, 2009, shot at night with what looks to be a very long exposure time. In the exhibited print, sky and river form sleek sheets of glacial dark slate gray, and the streetlights on the far shore have turned into stars.

Yet the aestheticizing effects of Riddy's photographic processes are strongly mitigated by factors that prevent easy consumption. Apparently uncharismatic subjects are addressed frontally and often framed symmetrically, as if to resist "artful" or picturesque effects (the view of Westminster Abbey's north portal, a chunk of boringly dutiful Gothic Revival, in *London (Westminster)*, 2009, or the tree that forms the main subject of *London (Burgess Park)*, 2009). Spreading across the image surface, all details seem to share equal weight. Human presence is avoided. Viewpoints have a floating, ungrounded quality: In the case of the architectural subjects, this may be due to the use of a perspective control lens; in the river views, to the absence of any foreground detail other than water. Photography's documentary traditions are hinted at (for instance, by Riddy's titles), but both literally and intellectually, it is hard to tell "where one stands." In an interview, Riddy has sketched a criterion for his image selection: "Is it screaming?" Quiet though the images in "Low Relief" may be, some do indeed "scream"; unsurprising, then, that this highly absorbing practice has garnered such apparently contradictory characterizations.

—Rachel Withers