

PHOTOMONITOR - FARMED BOOK REVIEW

Simon Bowcock - November 2016

Paul Hart's second monograph consists of fifty-six black-and-white photographs of the farmed flatlands of the Fens. Crafted by traditional analogue means over six years, these exquisite pictures are more complex than the simple studies of light and land they may first appear to be. Hart's managed landscapes and reclaimed marshes quietly question our relationship with a human-altered topography. In this sense Hart is more a Robert Adams than an Ansel Adams, or – in British terms – more John Davies than Charlie Waite.

Any comparison with Peter Henry Emerson, that much earlier chronicler of the English East, is fleeting. Hart offers no bucolic idylls, no pastoral symphonies. Instead he gives us grey, exposed, cold, uninviting, corporate farmlands. And if the many trees which disappear into the many mists lend a slightly romantic, even pictorialist quality, this is more than countered by the precisely photographed, starkly modernist geometric lines. At times, Hart's pictures have an almost typological rigour, faintly echoing the deadpan industrial depictions of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Of course the British canon of countryside photography can be felt in the work, but only occasionally : Hart does not eulogise the land like, say, a Fay Godwin; nor does he have the overtly humanistic focus of a James Ravilious.

No people at all appear in these silent, still landscapes weighed down by their intensive monoculture. These are among the most fertile lands in England, but you wouldn't think it by looking at Hart's photographs: for all the evident cultivation, they look bleak, even barren. But this doesn't mean the pictures are unappealing or lack poetry. Hart can (and does) make a corrugated barn look like a thing of great beauty, in harmony with the land and sky in shape and shade. Almost natural, even. But as Hart constantly and quietly reminds us – with an arrow-straight ditch here and a dead level bank there – almost nothing is natural in these drained, manufactured farmlands.

In these gently challenging pictures, it's as if the land is in quiet conflict with the roads and the tracks, the power lines and the telegraph poles, the trenches cut into it and the invisible machines which have ploughed it. Buildings are slowly swallowed by trees, derelict caravans are abandoned to the land, and pylons disappear into the fog. A quiet tussle between humans and nature is being fought. How long will our mastery over these flatscapes last before nature takes them back? The pictures pose such questions without declaring a victor, or even taking sides.

Classic, but neither modernist nor pictorial, *Farmed* evokes photographic history without over-relying on any of it. Sagely ambivalent, it looks simple and obvious, but is complicated and weighty. And it is – in its own quiet way – extraordinarily beautiful. Can we ask any more of art than that?