POETRY OF PLACE : ROOTED IN THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

"Today, the radical act is not to hit the road and travel - but rather to stay put and lay down roots. An English photographer shares 13 years of careful, deliberate meditations on his surrounding landscapes."

Alexander Strecker - managing editor LensCulture

> "To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
> One clover, and a bee.
> And revery.
> The revery alone will do,
> If bees are few."
>
> Emily Dickinson

In the late 1940s, the budding writer Jack Kerouac took off ***On the Road***. At the time, amidst a stifling atmosphere of rapidly spreading suburbia (the first ***Levittown*** opened in 1947, the year of Kerouac's first trip) and rising homeownership, one radical response was to turn one's back on stability and take up an itinerant life.

This same spirit carried on throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s. While both America and Europe enjoyed growing economies and rapidly rising standards of living, young people were flooding the ***Hippie Trail*** that ran from Europe all the way to India. The spirit of "the road" was alive and well; the growing ease of travel offered the hope that seeing the world would open your eyes and provide salvation. In the United States, the idea of "studying abroad" became increasingly popular; meanwhile European students began to criss-cross Europe during their student years through the analogous Erasmus program.

But as with so many things, what began as a slowly building trend grew into a gross exaggeration. The nearly spiritual promise of wisdom and insight that could be gained through movement gave way to increasing convenience and commercialization. To wit: Ryanair, founded in 1984, was the first of countless budget airlines that began offering inexpensive fares and reduced comforts, transforming the luxury of flying into an experience akin to riding the local bus. Meanwhile, a growing number of youth hostels were just as soon swept away by the all-pervasive Airbnb. In a blink, you could be in a different country, in a local's home, pretending to live a different life. Finally, and most recently, Instagram ensured that places and experiences existed only to be photographed. The idea of radical travel was lost. One by one, undiscovered corners became thronged with weekenders, tourists, travelers, and most recently, "digital nomads" all looking for that perfect (like-ready) getaway.

Recall, for point of comparison, that Henry David Thoreau wrote ***Walden,*** his beloved meditation on solitude and self-reliance, in a cabin that stood just 20 minutes from his family home. For Thoreau, that short distance was vast enough to radically change his life.

Today, meanwhile, we travel to the other side of the world for escape only to discover that we've left nothing behind, including, most frustratingly, ourselves.

All of this indicates that we now live in a thoroughly different atmosphere of travel than when Kerouac sat down and hammered out *On the Road*. Perhaps, then, the radical act has been turned on its head; perhaps the greater revolution in 2018 is not to move, but rather to stay put. To lay down roots. To understand the infinite complexities of place via careful attention, repeated visits, and that one irreplaceable element: time.

Take the work of landscape photographer Paul Hart. In his retrospective exhibition at ***The Photographers' Gallery*** titled "*Poetry of Place*," we discover three interrelated series made at specific locations across the English landscape. Radically, Hart has been working on these projects for 13 years.

The first series, chronologically, is "*Truncated*," a study of a single pine forest plantation in Derbyshire, England. The project, reminiscent of Thoreau's self-imposed solitude on the wooded shores of Walden Pond, reveals what appears to be a self-sustaining community of individuals, a self-reliant group. Yes, they are trees, but thanks to Hart's careful framing and sensitive eye, each being that is depicted takes on a personality and life of its own, like members of a fully-developed society.

Next, Hart widens his gaze to understand the more complex interrelation between humanity and nature. The idea of "unspoilt" wilderness that we see in "*Truncated*" is tempered by the reality that man is, now, everywhere. In "*Farmed*" (also published as a stand-alone book by the same name ***previously reviewed on LensCulture),***Hart explores the Fens region of reclaimed marshland in eastern England. This earth, some of the richest arable terrain in the entire UK, has been put to work under the forces of agribusiness. The result is a largely cleared and featureless landscape, dominated by the unmistakable marks of humanity. The leftover landscape is, in Hart's words, "unsheltered and vulnerable."

Finally, in his latest series, titled "*Drained*," Hart reveals to us a unique area near "*The Wash*" in East Anglia. This odd confluence of estuaries, along the coast of a square bay, lies barely above sea level. Over time, the land has been reclaimed from the water (hence the series' title), while other sites have been steadily covered over with sediment. Settlements that were once coastal are now inland; amidst the seeming eternal calm, the place is also site to ceaseless, if subtle, change. The work also represents a subtle evolution in Hart's investigation of our relationship with nature. Man, here, is briefly in control. But as in "*Farmed*," the duration of this dominion remains under question.

Among many other resonant lines in *Walden*, Thoreau wrote, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." These words find fulfillment in the dedicated, delicate vision of Paul Hart. While other photographers dash to the corners of the earth to "discover" something new, Hart has realized that the challenge of seeing is great enough on its own and can be realized by simply opening your door and taking a fresh look at the world which is waiting, right in front of you.