

Review of Humphrey Spender - Humanist Landscapes

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Humphrey Spender - Humanist Landscapes

Deborah Frizzell

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Humphrey Spender's photographs have recently emerged, winking and stretching, from a vast and warren'd archive. And they win one over with their affection. They are energizing, modest, beautiful, and, from what we can learn from Deborah Frizzell's catalog, as earnestly truthful in their making as photographs can be. They are also, as far as I am aware, almost unknown in this country, and, until recently, virtually unknown in Britain as well. Shot primarily in the thirties, they foresee ideas of photographers as innovative as Robert Frank, Helen Levitt, Lee Friedlander, or Joseph Koudelka; and they bring us as subject matter an unsentimentally empathic vision of a depressed industrial England.

Spender, at the time these photographs were made, was a member of the upper-middle class radical circle centering on W. H. Auden and his own brother, Stephen. One of the many offshoots of this loose-knit group was a privately funded, enormously ambitious project called Mass Observation, an idea that eventually enlisted hundreds of well-off volunteers who "observed" the poor, taking notes, asking questions, and in Spender's case, photographing as unobtrusively as possible. The desired effect of this somewhat frenzied activity was both a revolutionary change (helped along by the dissemination of information that such a study would bring), and the creation of an archive, the benefits of which would be understood in the future. On both ideas, Spender worked passionately, but with a growing reticence, which emerged from his concerns for the people photographed. Would even the achievement of these high-odds goals warrant such an intrusion?

He eventually left the group (which finally did not have the funds to publish his work), photographed for picture magazines, and after the Second World War, designed textiles and taught at the Royal College of Art. From our vantage point, sixty years removed from the making of these pictures, it is perhaps too easy to say that, exploited or not, the people he photographed have left a record of warmth, strength, and resiliency that is profound.

To me, the work that these photographs most resembles is The Americans. I say this with some hesitation, because the collection does not have the shifting class sweeps of Robert Frank's book, the inspired sequence or the perfect pitch. (Some of the images make their points a bit too easily through the inclusion of photographed words, and in the few pictures of Spender's wealthy friends, the ambience seems

jarringly personal, particularly given the underclass context of the rest.) Yet still, a recognition of the muscular poetry of urban life, the beauty of human gesture and the human face, and an innate though troubled trust in the ability of a camera to quickly capture a public truth in all its gritty glory, are talents that both photographers wrestled with and enjoyed. These are, on the whole, photographs of quite self-contained people, eating, drinking, loafing, working, scrabbling out an existence on slag heaps, on the job, and in the streets.

Spender's photographs capture an era. A sweet irony is that in 1998 one emerges from this book feeling excited, proud to be related to these people (and to Spender) through a common humanity - rather than filled with pity. In those faces, carriages, and even surroundings, one recognizes a community that is bonded with dignity and strength. Clichés involving the human spirit even come to mind, hyperbolic phrases, but truths nonetheless, that careful photographs such as these define as clear, present and irrefutable.