Pictures from Robert’s

Val Williams

In 2010 I bought a set of one hundred black and white photographs from Robert’s Rummage, a secondhand shop in Hastings on the south coast of England. These photographs joined multiple collections of anonymous and authored photographs which I have been collecting and including in exhibitions since the early 1970s. The collections come from locations, which include the UK, USA, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Greece, Sri Lanka, Bolivia, the Netherlands, Austria and New Zealand. They range from colour transparencies to black and white prints, and include many postcards. They range in date from the late 19th century to the 1990s. Some were bought in shops, some were found in empty houses and on the street.

The majority are portraits but there are also many featuring landscape, architecture, birds, animals and flowers. These are random collections, not dependent on authorship or subject matter. Often they are collected abroad; when travelling we search out elusive identities- sometimes-anonymous photographs give us more clues about where we have arrived than the most informative travel guide. These photographs seem to be traces, of forgotten pasts and unremarkable people, characters whose histories we will never get to know.

Random collecting is a strange pursuit, but a satisfying one. Satisfying because out of its randomness comes order and a symmetry. Clothes, backgrounds and artifacts begin to suggest places, times and histories. Every photograph has an author- whether a 1930s studio photographer in Prague or a family photographer from the East End of London.

When assembled in an archive, these photographs become a curatorial resource. A set of commercially produced ‘snapshots’ of Butlins Holiday Camp were shown in the exhibition ‘How We Are’, which Susan Bright and I curated for Tate Britain in 2007. Enlargements made from a set of Polaroid photographs found in Bethnal Green in the East End of London appeared in one of the series of ‘Archive’ exhibitions at the Hasselblad Centre in the late 1990s.

This set of photographs, which now go under the title ‘Pictures from Robert’s’ were given to me by Robert Mucci, whose shop, Robert’s Rummage is a place you go to when you want to find something. I have bought saucepans, glass fish, glasses, plates puppets, carpets, costume dolls, knives, hammers, amateur paintings, amateur ceramics and, of course, photographs, from Robert’s since 2008. The shop is a constantly shifting archive and Robert Mucci is a distinguished antiquarian.

These photographs, taken from the original one hundred images, are miniscule stories; each has a central character, a girl with her skating instructor, or in fancy dress, and a boy in sports kit. Stephen with the peanut man, Heather ‘ready to go to Sunday School’. Many are dated, either by the anonymous photographer, or by a mechanical process. Some are simply numbered. There is an embrace; a couple dressed for cocktails, a woman hiding behind a broom. One was taken in Texas. They appear to be part of one American family’s collection, from the 1950s and 60s. How they made their journey from the USA to a shop on the south coast of England remains a mystery.

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