Iain McKell’s Beautiful Britain

From Then until Now: Iain McKell’s meditative, austere portrait of ‘Beautiful Britain’ takes us from the Dorset seaside in the 70s to the emerging style tribes of the 1980s and into a remarkable bricolage of contemporary life, mirroring alternative cultures, teenage life, the near-abandoned cityscapes of a declining nation.

McKell began as a photographer in the seaside resort of Weymouth in the 1970s. His vision was of a monochrome and joyless world, of dingy caravan interiors, ugly clothes, decaying shops, of characters so entrenched in their own ordinariness that they become distillations of the utterly banal. During these years, other emerging photographers had been attracted to the spectre of the failing British seaside, but for photographers such as Martin Parr, Daniel Meadows and Homer Sykes, the intention was to create a wry and ironic look at the British at play, very much in the style of the UK photojournalist Tony Ray Jones. Like Ray-Jones, the new British photographers looked for gesture, irony and ambivalence.

In McKell’s seaside photographs, the gaze is narrower, fiercer, altogether more unforgiving. McKell’s early black and white photographs express both desire and despair- the sense of ‘unbelonging’ is visceral. But, ironically, he did belong to this faded place. McKell grew up in a Weymouth hotel, in a landscape of arrivals and departures, of transient relationships founded on elusive notions of pleasure and escape. Unlike Ray-Jones and the new British documentarists of the early 1970s, McKell was not a visitor from another, and undoubtedly more privileged Britain; he was an inmate.

Throughout three decades spent photographing Britain, McKell has maintained a successful career as a photographer of fashion, and it is perhaps the symbiosis of highly honed fashion work and self-directed documentary, that gives his work an emphatic and particular identity. Though the Weymouth photographs and later work (in the 1980s) around clubbing and festivals have a recognizable raw edge of independent documentary, his later work revels in the ironies of the many possible juxtapositions of the sublime and the ordinary. In learning to make everything beautiful, as McKell did as his fashion practice gathered pace, the combination of counterculture and urban decay, to which he was inevitably drawn, began to assume a startling glamour. Though he had escaped the dreary world of the failing English seaside, with its dingy and broken architecture, the badly formed shelters of caravans and seasonal shops, his later work becomes a fusion of the melancholic and the aspirational, recounting a narrative in which an idiosyncratic beauty dwells on the margins of dereliction and despair.

Iain McKell’s intense curiosity about life at the edge (whether geographically or socially) informs the whole of “Beautiful Britain’. Interviewed by William Oliver for the introductory essay, McKell is insistent that his work mirrors not only the world around him, but also the inner world of his imagination. To him, photography is an ‘adventure’ in which he is an active participant: ‘My work is, in a way, social documentary, but it is always from a personal point of view and with a personal connection… I became interested in the romantic notion of photography as a series of self-exploratory portraits that take me to places both physically and metaphorically. Whether it is from the fetish scene or a gangster’s lingerie party, it’s about sharing that experience. I’m not a couch potato, I wanted to go out there and have my own adventures. ‘

Some of the most spectacular of McKell’s photographs are of melees- a crowd of people scuffling in the mud at the Reading Festival in 1977 is like a dispatch from the war zone, while a blurred mass of skinheads running in Southend from 1980 is urgent, panic driven. The photographer is at the heart of things here, having his own adventures, taking up that singularly photographic opportunity to be involved and yet remain ‘outside’.

When McKell’s black and white world of the 1970s and 80s became suffused with colour from the end of the 1990s, and he discovered a new and entrancing landscape. His continuing documentation of new age traveller culture, explored comprehensively in his recent publication *The New Gypsies* is richly coloured and celebratory; less familiar photographs of countercultural interiors – the spotted pink walls of the Invisible Expanding Collective squat in Hampstead (2001), the gaudy ‘playroom’ of the Future Sound of London’s studio in Hackney (2002)- are equally so. The implicit menace of McKell’s earlier black and white documentary was replaced by colour work which explores the extraordinariness of the cultural entrepreneurship and creativity, which became so much a part of the early 2000s.

Ian McKell has been watching the world for over thirty years. More recently, he has turned his gaze onto familiar things- his family, his daughter, his friends. But these are no casual family snaps- McKell’s photography is so honed and meticulous that every scene is as carefully visioned as a fashion shoot. . ‘Alice’s Wedding’, photographed in 2009, has all the components of an ironic fashion photo shoot- the bride stands in front of a suburban bungalow, the creeping tendrils of Russian vine fighting to encroach on this tidy scene. Alice, dressed in white, holds a vivid blue wig. It is as if the prop master is near at hand, accessories ranged, retro references carefully assembled.

In another photograph, of McKell’s daughter Jasmine and a group of friends, we are transported to the world of prosperous London youth, as far removed as could possibly be from the febrile teenage activity of 70s Weymouth, the uncertain camaraderie of 1980s skinheads, or the austere self -sufficiency of new age travellers. When Iain McKell photographs Jasmine and her friends, his vision is of a circle of enchanted creatures. Illuminated by the light of late summer dusk, they inhabit a private, magical and confident universe. They are residents, not inmates, and are worlds away from the uncertain gesturing of Weymouth youth in the 1970s, or the severe style codes of 1980s clubbers. It is as if among the austere modern world that McKell so much likes to photograph- the gaudiness of Southend, the dereliction of Dungeness, the extended fantasies of urban dressing-up, he has found a tantalizing and exclusive innocence, close to home, something to cling to.