

Oxford: The Dark Interior

The colleges of Oxford are repeatedly photographed as a backdrop to the swathes of tourists that visit each year. A simple walk down Broad Street for example, can become a complicated dance as you duck and weave your way to avoid disturbing the countless scenarios where people stand momentarily to be pictured in relation to one of the oldest academic institutions in Europe. This visual connection with place that people make through snapshots is often a marker of a personal journey, but it is also a journey through the tourist imagination of Englishness embodied in the stone facades, quadrangles and passages echoed in countless postcards of the City. Such rituals and images are linked to the fast, uncomplicated consumption of Oxford as a particular kind of myth that tells us little about the inner life of its colleges.

In Joanna Vestey's series 'Custodians', we encounter photography that is slower, meditative, photography that invites the viewer to think about tradition and the weight of history and, those who entrusted with or caught up in its preservation and values. Here we have a set of pictures that are both celebratory and on occasion, wry depictions of the world of work and belonging. Recently, Vestey has concentrated on more intimate forms of portraiture looking at young children on the brink of adolescence in Oxford's Dragon School; they are tightly cropped, psychologically intense encounters between photographer and subject (Fig 1). Between both projects there is an interest in time, in the beauty, vulnerability and powerful presence of youth, and the passing of time where as individuals become more institutionalized and part of the furniture. The portraits of young children show them as appearing in their own space, in control of their performance for the camera. In contrast the 'Custodians' appear as extensions of their professional world in which they sit, stand and gaze into the surrounding space as passive agents of the bigger machinery in which they serve.

In 'Custodians', the individuality of the sitter is hard to see, they often recede into the middle ground, stand or sit obliquely to the camera revealing little. In short, these are portraits where individuals are quietly absorbed into the fabric of the buildings like the portraits and paneling that adorn the walls. The presence of 'Custodians' is deliberately small, overshadowed by the institution that they serve, they know their place, and Vestey exaggerates this in terms of perspective and scale but also in the quality of light she has found in these spaces. In certain pictures we see painted portraits, engravings, classical statuary, busts, a phrenological head and what appears to be a death mask hung on the wooden panels of St John's College Dons Room. Faces, expressions and gazes from the past that actively shape the present. Indeed, these other forms of portraiture appear more

dominant, clearer in some instances, than the faces of those who care for them again highlighting the importance of history in the contemporary life of the college.

The mythology of Oxford as timeless is seemingly reinforced in these pictures but there is space to consider the more human dimensions such as the mortality of the sitters. In the picture showing Emeritus Professor of the School of Anatomy we see the Emeritus Professor of the School of Anatomy whose pose echoes that of the skeletons he is surrounded by, and the blue covers that shroud the work benches surely conceal cadavers, the dark materials of teaching and research. He is surrounded by death but it is a biological truism in this room, nothing more, and the air of cool detachment, like the ice white and blue colour scheme of the room itself, reinforces the matter of fact purpose of what is undertaken here.

The colleges of Oxford have had a long relationship with photography since it was publically announced in January 1839. Here two different types of photographic process, one French, one English, competed to become the practical foundations of modern photography. It was the latter process devised by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-77) that was turned on the facades, quadrangles and doorways of Oxford colleges in the early 1840s in an attempt to distill the characteristics and possibilities of photography. Fascinated by the structural designs and texture of the stonework, some blackened by the by-products of industrial pollution, Talbot's decision to focus on ancient architecture of learning in England can also be seen as a conspicuous act associating his invention with scholarly pursuit; an association that would lend gravitas to a process that was to be seen by many as mechanical, a product of industry rather than the mind. This was not the case, Talbot used the exterior of Oxford colleges to speculate on many things producing not only some of the more memorable photographic images of buildings from this period but also a philosophical reflection on how photography changes perceptions of time and space. In one of his photographs of Queens College (Fig 2) published in the first commercially book to be illustrated with actual photographs *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46), he invites the reader to take up a magnifying glass to pour over the extraordinary detail captured in this fleeting image, drawing attention to a clock tower in the distance upon which the temporal moment of its recording can be seen. Photography then showed more than could be comprehended through natural vision, an excess of details, offering a document of the world but also pointing to that which is unseen, revealing its potential for unsettling what was thought to be known about the 'real' world.

In Vestey's picture of the interior of the Pitt Rivers Museum, we see its Director sat among the distinctive glass cabinets while seemingly lost in quiet contemplation. But, it is hard to ignore the

totem pole and clock, markers of different temporal realms between past and present, the 'here and now' and the 'there and then', markers between cultures collected and displayed. Photography, like the modern museum and disciplines of anthropology and ethnography in the 19th century, dramatically changed ideas of human origins and endeavor, creating a world picture rooted in Empire. Such histories have been pulled apart and examined, both in academic circles but also in the temporary exhibition programme of the Pitt Rivers Museum. This is unashamedly a museum of a museum, retaining its 19th century classification, making clear its perspective on other cultures, preserving a museological moment that shows us a fascinating and politically complex relationship to the past. Similarly, this portrait preserves and questions what this collection and display might mean, its cultural histories and potential place in the present that the pensive expression of the 'Custodian' suggests. Again, in the Rhodes House picture, we are offered another visual historical connection with colonialism and a solitary painting of its patron, Cecil John Rhodes – the mining magnate, and founding member of De Beers, hangs on the wall while the 'Custodian' quietly looks on.

In these images of college interiors and their affiliated buildings, those who work on their behalf might be seen as institutional 'types', collected, preserved. However, to be a 'Custodian' can involve a healthy questioning of tradition rather than its simple, passive preservation and some of the poses adopted suggest a more reflective distance between the sitter and their institutional setting. In the following pages we discover the names and occupation of each 'Custodian' along with the setting. These include Bursars, Gallery Invigilators, Professors, Directors, Librarians, Curators and Stewards to more corporate roles suggesting a wider remit to the duty of care that reaches out towards the economic as well as intellectual prosperity of college life. It is widely known that the endowments of Oxford colleges reinforce their privileged status requiring the diligent attention of other forms of custodianship and patronage that sadly define much of the contemporary landscape of higher education in Britain.

The faces of 'Custodians' are not always fathomable in these pictures and Vestey deliberately positions her subjects at such a distance that is hard to see them, the figures are often marginal, few are central, none return our gaze, they ignore the camera, becoming absorbed in the interiors of the rooms they are or stood in, and more apparently in their own speculative wanderings as they look outwards, through windows, doorways, thresholds to an inner and outer world. What they are thinking we will never know but the implication here is that it is bound up with their institutional roles, beholden to tradition and history. But there is something in certain poses that suggests a disconnection from these spaces where the values of tradition and history might be taken less

seriously, a detachment or boredom present in the duty of care perhaps. In short, the self-conscious poses and willingness to participate in a performance to reinforce their roles has on occasion a comic feel to it. After all tradition and a certain approach to history, with its constraints, needs to be poked and troubled from time to time.

Turning to Alan Bennett's 'The History Boys' with its marvellous demolition of teaching methods and school ambition for pupils entering Oxbridge, the character Rudge shows a healthy disregard for the system while also working within it. Vestey's project arguably venerates Oxford myths by continuing the air of the past that some might find stifling, but there is a room in these pictures, like Rudge, to not take it too seriously and to think about how such institutions are brought into being and how they continue to exercise their historical power in the present.

[At a mock interview for entrance to an Oxford college]

Mrs. Lintott: Now. How do you define history Mr. Rudge?

Rudge: Can I speak freely, Miss? Without being hit?

Mrs.Lintott: I will protect you.

Rudge: How do I define history? It's just one fuckin' thing after another.

[raucous laughter from the other students, but the interview board is appalled]

Mrs. Lintott: I see. And why do you want to come to Christ Church?

Rudge: It's the one I thought I might get into.

Alan Bennett, *The History Boys*, London, Faber, 2004

Russell Roberts, 2016