

'The Condition of England.'

Exhibition dates: 29 April – 25 June 2005

Preview: Thursday 28 April 6:00 – 8:00pm

Alice Anderson

"The English are a deeply nostalgic people and value customs and traditions above almost everything. It does not matter where traditions have come from, or why they have survived. Tradition, to the English, represents continuity, which must be preserved at all costs. It gives them a sense of permanency in an age of change. The English have a natural distrust of the unfamiliar and nowhere is this more clearly seen than in their attitude to the geography of their own country; to

outsiders, the English are a nation largely unmoved by developments in the world around them, who prefer to live in a land of costume dramas. Because their past was infinitely more glamorous than their present, the English cling to it tenaciously... When it comes to art appreciation, the nation shows a marked preference for large paintings of landscapes or of animals. If the picture tells a story, so much the better. Modern art leaves most people unmoved." Antony Miall

Alice Anderson's video 'See England First' examines the idea of the country encapsulated by C. Henry Warren's remark that "the best of England is a village", and which has been elucidated by figures as politically diverse as Stanley Baldwin and George Orwell. The bucolic, pre-urban vision of the country articulated by 'This England', Country Life and the Daily Mail has a long and often distinguished pedigree. It has perhaps been most powerfully elucidated by John Betjeman, for whom "England stands for... oil-lit churches, Women's Institutes, modest village inns, arguments about cow-parsley on the larder, local newspapers, local auctions, branch-line trains, light railways, leaning on gates and looking across fields." Even in the 'fifties when this was written, it was unapologetically, willfully anachronistic. It is precisely the gaps between our imaginative representations of national life and more concrete social realities which drives 'See England First'. The work echoes Jeremy Paxman's remark that there is a "chasm between the imaginative England and the real England".

Anderson's video adapts the filmic genre pioneered by figures such as Patrick Keiller, where static landscape imagery is accompanied by a monologue voiceover. The result is a crossbreed of literary fiction and narrative cinema. As in Keiller's films, the narrator is anonymous, middle-aged, male, and conveys a quiet gravitas. Our reflex action is to take the words of such a benign voice of authority in good faith, or at least to seek reassurance in its lugubrious tones. Ostensibly, the narrator's story is an account of walking tours, though as it unfolds, it encompasses personal reflections and provocations. The tone is intimate, yet not quite confessional. The texture and timbre of the narrator's voice – his lexicon, phrasing and perfectly judged cadences – are crucial to the work. Whilst the speaker's syntax seems loaded with archaisms, his sonorous, comforting voice is wholly disarming.

Over the course of eight minutes, the narrator's pronouncements slide between the melancholic and the comic, the ridiculous and the serious: accordingly we struggle to identify his ideas and identity. On another level, the disjuncture between Anderson's own subjectivity and that of the narrator prevents us knowing whose ideas are being voiced and why. The work's opening words hint at both the narrator's conservatism and his unreliability: "For years I have walked all over England. I did not become conscious of the loveliness of the English countryside until I began to walk through it, and what is more important until I began to walk through it alone. I am concerned only with walking as a joy, as one of the purest of human pleasures, as a kind of wild intoxication." If the latter turn of phrase is curiously legalistic, it is also unnerving. Anderson's narrator also punctuates his story with aphorisms with gloriously anachronistic cadences: "If it be true to say of a man that he can be judged by his work, it must also be true of a nation, for one is but a multiplication of the other; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the other is but a multiplication of the one." Such propositions echo familiar quotations – at a judiciously measured distance. In this instance we might recall Enoch Powell's remark that "the life of nations, no less than that of men, is lived largely in the

imagination.” Indeed this sentiment, directing us to the commonalities of our collective imagination, might be said to be the thrust of the entire work.

The visual elements of ‘See England First’ are disarmingly simple. We are presented with a sequence of dated, second-hand postcards onto which human and animal figures, often out of scale, have been overlaid. The effect is often realistic, but at other times absurd. The artist’s choice of postcards naturally contains archetypal touristic images of a ‘green and pleasant land’ alongside iconic views of the capital city and royal palaces. Anderson’s judicious selection of visual materials at first recalls the dominant tradition of landscape painting in English art, and Antony Miall’s description of the art the English allegedly love. Naturally, ‘See England First’ tells a story. When projected at wall size, such images rapidly transport us to a ‘timeless’ landscape of rural tranquility and agreeable weather also exemplified by the cinema of the immediate post-war years. As Jeremy Paxman has also noted, “seldom has the nature of England and English life been expressed so vividly as in the cinema of the 1940s.” Echoing the pastoral elegies of such films as ‘Listen to Britain’ is an extremely high-risk strategy. Yet Anderson avoids mere irony or satire; instead she offers a genuine lyricism, which is doubly disconcerting. At no point are we permitted to adopt a comfortable position of superiority or certainty. And though seeming to articulate a coherent worldview, Anderson’s narrator occasionally offers unarguable truisms that the most progressive of viewers would agree with. Whatever our views, we end up wrong-footed and have to re-negotiate how our own ideas might relate to those on offer. The narrator’s closing remarks exemplify all that is wrong with England, or everything that is best about it depending on our position: “The Englishman has many loves: his love for instituting new clubs, for starting periodicals and papers, but his greatest love of all is for his country. Englishmen who live in towns do so only because their work compels them to do so: their hearts are in the country, their dreams of country cottages where life is pursued in an ordered and tranquil way, where the rumble and roar of progress are seldom, if ever, heard.” In Anderson’s world all is at peace, or as her narrator remarks, “everything is just as it should be”.