

## **'The Condition of England.'**

**Exhibition dates:** 29 April – 25 June 2005

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

### **The Caravan Gallery (Jan Williams and Chris Teasdale)**

"England is the paradise of individuality, eccentricity, heresy, anomalies, hobbies, and humour." George Santayana, 'Soliloquies on England'

Jan Williams and Chris Teasdale's photographs re-work the "rose-tinted tones of tourist information brochures" to create an alternative picture of national life. Williams and Teasdale's bittersweet records of their tours of the length and breadth of the country can make them appear more like a modern-day Daniel Defoe or Mass Observation than an advocate for travel, however. Their investigative appetite for observing our built environment, customs and rituals has generated an archive of several hundred images. Seen in series, their body of work constitutes a psychological profile of a nation entering a new century – or as they put it, "a highly subjective survey-cum-tour-guide to the 'real' England." The artists are drawn to both behavioural anomalies, and curious juxtapositions in our environment. Many of the locations which the artists record are marginal rather than metropolitan – areas which corporate capital and civic 'regeneration' have either not touched or are just in the process of transforming.

Williams and Teasdale's individual images are threads of a larger canvas in which a story of our collective life is told, as if from the bottom up. As the artists note, "the very familiarity of our subject matter" can belie the complexity of their wider project. Whilst focussing on particular motifs in their repertoire can obscure, rather than illuminate the scope of their ambition, the artists are compulsively attracted to certain subjects. For example, Williams and Teasdale have a fascination with the ramshackle modifications and low-tech improvisations that we subject our dwellings and possessions to. They reveal not so much an alternative 'empire of signs' – although obscure, obscene and unkempt signage is a special interest – but an alternative view of how the world is layered. The places and objects in their world are frequently either amended or altered, improvised and makeshift, or otherwise being hastily rebranded and repackaged. Although such concerns draw to mind both Richard Wentworth's series 'Making Do and Getting By' and Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's 'folk archive', these facets of their practice are merely components of a bigger enterprise. As the artists note, their oeuvre is not only about "the celebration of overlooked details, where unexpected delights are to be found in the most unpromising situations". It is also about the fact that, as they point out, "the reverse is true."

The Victorian writer THS Scott, mapping the state of the nation roughly 125 years ago, opined that "the love of respectability and land are inveterate in our race." The title of his ambitious survey, 'England: Her People, Polity and Pursuits', could easily also describe Williams and Teasdale's project. Unsurprisingly, compared to Scott, they are more interested in places which are unloved or underused; and in situations where the straight-laced stance of offering "approval of what is approved of", as John Betjeman put it, falls by the wayside. Many of their images are emblematic of peculiarly English inclinations towards irreverence and self-deprecation, and ribald, scatological humour. Profane humour, as the novelist Howard Jacobson, is not only our most powerful intoxicant, but "gives us access to our other selves". In revealing the unbridgeable gap between our aspirations and achievements, we see our ourselves, and our collective body politic afresh.

The artists also reflect the fact that humour is an inescapable part of English life. But it is, generally, a means to an end: they deploy it as a tool to engage our curiosity whilst offering harder questions about who we are becoming. As social anthropologist Kate Fox has noted, self-deprecation and irony are the defining characteristics of English conversation: "Humour suffuses the English consciousness. In other cultures, there is 'a time and a place' for humour; it is a special, separate kind of discourse. In England, there is always an undercurrent of humour. Humour is our 'default mode' – we cannot switch it off. Irony is endemic, a constant, a given, and is the dominant ingredient in English humour." Which kind of businessman, we wonder, runs the business cheerfully named 'Cupid Marital Aids

Boutique'? ('Boutique', used as a suffix or prefix, has become a journalistic cliché to describe middle-class 'lifestyle choices', and so has an especially cruel appropriateness and inappropriateness here.) And what kind of clientele do they attract? And which of us would willingly retire to the 'new lifestyle' of a disused suburban petrol station?

As well as undertaking a photographic survey of the state of the nation, Williams and Teasdale also conduct questionnaires which consult the 'general public' about lifestyle trends and tastes. Characteristically, their choice of questions paraphrases and parodies academic anthropologists' and pollsters' lines of enquiry. One such survey undertaken in Portsmouth resulted in such dubious statistical findings as : '99% of people would rather die than arrange a pre-paid funeral'; '17% of people have won meat in a raffle'; '30% of people have seen their parents naked'; '18% of people avoid their neighbours when out shopping'; '57% of people manage to kill houseplants without even trying' and 'Alan Titchmarsh is loved and loathed in equal measure.' Each aspect of the artists' activities intertwines the topical and the absurd, the serious and the frivolous.

Despite many of their images beginning as comedies-of-errors, Williams and Teasdale's vision encompasses quotidian subject matter from the playful to the immiserating, the grave to the uproarious. The common denominator between their diverse focal points is that they are all, for different reasons, excluded from how we are shown to live, whether in media representations or in advertising. Our first response to a street of terraces in Leeds, for example, might be to recall the dramatisation of northern working-class life in films from *Billy Liar* to *Billy Elliott*. But a second glance reveals that this is an infinitely more complex, and densely coded picture of how the ties of co-operation and community are changed by and yet have survived through both dilapidation and gentrification. In major cities, both telegraph wires as much as washing lines are a sight from the past. At the same time, the geometric composition of intersecting vectors is one which Cartier-Bresson might be proud of. And street level, contrasting signals abound. Satellite dishes mingle with SUVs and estate agents' signs, as though the street were a stockbroker belt. The effects of 'enchanted wealth', in Carlyle's words, could scarcely be seen more vividly.