

Homer Sykes: 'Photographers are lemmings'

Fed up with photojournalism, Homer Sykes decided to chase after Britain's inner essence in the 1970s. From awkward stripteases to soot-caked miners and picnics at the races, he caught a country seething with class conflict

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It's 1971, and two bashful-looking women are doing a striptease on stage at a village fair. A giant sliver of Humphrey Bogart's eye is visible too. Bogie's expression from Casablanca, so key to his legacy, seems prescient here: "Here's looking at you, kid." In just one photograph, Homer Sykes has made a perfect voyeuristic echo of a gawking audience, a true glimpse of the male gaze.

You can read a lot into every photograph taken by Sykes. His show My Britain 1970-1980, now on in Paris, traces daily life in the UK - and overflows with social commentary on the crossroads of the class system.

The picture Coal Miners, Snowdown Colliery, Kent (1976) is a case in point. He went to shoot miners voting about the unions, but what could have been a pedestrian look at policy turned into a sooty glance at men smoking, naked and weary, in their locker room. It summed up the plight of the trade forcefully. "I always try to go through the door that's closed, to see what's really going on," Sykes says.

He started out as a photojournalist in the 1970s, working for the Observer, the Telegraph, Newsweek and Time. But photojournalism was often an awkward fit for him. "If you get a pack of guys going off to shoot something ... they all do the same picture. Photographers are lemmings," he says. "I didn't want to be just a magazine photographer who delivered pictures to fit a brief."

Instead, he became a portraitist of his own country, probing the customs deemed typically British. In the early 1970s, he went to Lancashire to shoot the local Easter celebrations, which inspired a long-term project. In 1977, he published his first book, called Once a Year: Some Traditional British Customs, on old-fashioned fetes from Garland Day to Burning the Bartle. Forty years on, he's gone back to re-photograph the rituals, and the differences are palpable. "Everyone's aware of being photographed now," he says. Moreover, he explains, in the 1970s "it was relatively easy to distinguish an upper-class couple by the swagger of their dress." But today's "urban classless metrosexual man is impossible to pigeonhole".

Sykes likes to home in on details that hit a nerve. "I'm always trying to find something that sums up what's going on, what I'm feeling, what British society is feeling," he says. "I'm always looking for contrasts." The working class and the well-to-do are often juxtaposed in comic images that show their incongruities. One such example - A Day at

the Races, Derby Day Picnic Horse-Racing at Epsom Downs (1970) - pits the haves and have-nots in the same shot. In the car park at Epsom, a cheery picnic is propped up before a flashy car, whose prim owners have returned with their chauffeur to claim it.

In this exhibition, Sykes makes a mirror using two couples of different social strata. Margaret and Barry Kirkbride. Workington, Cumbria (1975) are photographed in the north of England: long hair, tartan trousers, hip and young and working class. "They looked so typical," Sykes says admiringly. Nearby hangs another young couple: he's in a Prince of Wales checked suit and loafers, bottle of Pimms in hand; she's in a Laura Ashleyesque floral dress and espadrilles. "How English can you get!" he says.

His shots may seem like lucky happenstance, but they're extremely precise. "I don't 'snatch' pictures," he says. "Everything is planned - it takes very little time to do it, but it's all thought about." He looks for cues from 20ft away; when a person looks promising, he approaches, assessing the appropriate background, until he's about eight feet away. Back when he was using a Leica camera, he would measure the exposure and pre-focus beforehand. "I normally bend my knees a little bit," he says, showing me with a little plié, "and go tch-tch-tch - three or four frames. I shoot quietly. No eye contact." He knows the right background by instinct. One day, he trailed a woman wearing a floral hat around the Chelsea Flower Show in London for some minutes. When she stood right before a wall of flowers, the flora on her head blended in perfectly. He knew it was the perfect shot.

Sykes is antsy for greater recognition of his life's work. He photographs less regularly these days, but he's still highly ambitious. "When I was younger, I thought I could be a Magnum photographer, and looked up to Cartier-Bresson, Winogrand, Friedlander," he says. "I arrogantly set about to do that. And I'm still trying."

● My Britain 1970-80 is at Les Douches Gallery, Paris, until 31 October.

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