‘Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land’: Darren Andrews’ *Pleasureland* (2010)

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This collection of photographs of seaside resorts in England shares its name with the seafront fairground which opened a century ago in Southport, Merseyside. In one sense the collection’s title is gently ironic, insofar as these photographs emphasize the distance between the utopian promise of sunny, liberated bliss implicit in the name ‘Pleasureland’, and a material reality of cold weather and grey skies, empty promenades and beaches, ugly graffiti, discarded syringes and abandoned vehicles. However, more subtly and significantly, it also describes the sense, which is captured strongly in these images, of the seaside as a separate realm, out of phase with everyday normality and the routines of work, and disconnected from history. When we visit this place, the conventions and proprieties of dress and behaviour that we follow for the rest of the year are briefly suspended. We are repeatedly drawn to the seaside with the hope that we can step out of our habitual roles...slow down...and stop. Indeed, many of us go to the beach on sunny days in order to sleep. ‘Dreamland’, the name of Margate’s now defunct amusement park, is a particularly appropriate encapsulation of the appeal of the seaside. The seaside is a place (comprising many places) with a tenuous relationship to reality.

Darren Andrews’ photographs frame the seaside as a theatrical, carnivalesque, and sometimes darkly sinister zone in which locals and holiday-makers rub shoulders with costumed, bewigged, tattooed performers – punks, drag acts, freakshow artists, clairvoyants, magicians, jugglers, dancers. Viewed from this perspective, it is a world of masks, surfaces and signs in which identities become fluid and hard to read. In one respect these images highlight the way that old traditions of popular entertainment that have been erased and over-written elsewhere linger on in the marginal spaces of seaside resorts. The seaside bears the traces of history in a different way from other parts of the country. Just as geological history can be read in the fossil record represented by the rock strata of a corraded sea cliff, so we can read social and cultural history through the different periods of architecture stacked up alongside one another in the buildings lining the seafront. Victorian Moorish, Edwardian neo-mannerism, art deco, post-war minimalism and concrete brutalism are sandwiched tightly together to form a three-dimensional timeline. However, it is also as if time moves more slowly at the edges of the island and the attractions that would have drawn Victorian millworkers to the seaside on their annual wakes week holiday – deck chairs, donkey rides, piers, Lidos, fortune tellers, portrait photographers, fairgrounds, variety theatres – are still (if only just) present.

The images collected here also dramatize the way in which we are all called upon to perform when we move through any social spaces. More so than most other sorts of public space, however, the seaside resort is a stage. Promenades or esplanades were designed as places to be seen, to be on display, to become exaggerated versions of ourselves and the dancers, musicians and performers in excessive make-up embody the demotic theatrical spectacle of the seaside.

Some of these photographs are also characterized by a certain surrealism. They depict the seaside as a strange, crepuscular, oneiric place dotted with incongruous objects. There are images of a crushed car half buried in the sand, a ballet dancer in tutu and *pointe* shoes stretching on the promenade, a ghostly three-masted sailing ship emerging from the sea fog, an iron man waist-deep in the water facing a wall of wind turbines. Andrews’ untitled and undated photographs are not simple social documents, stylistically banal ethnographic records of particular events, but reframe reality as ritualistic and poetic. Rather than reinforcing familiar, comic and condescending stereotypes of working-class culture and leisure activities to generate a parodic image of ‘British people in hot weather’ (to cite the title of a song by Manchester band, The Fall), they present us with an image of ‘weird’ Englishness. This is a theme that is explored further in his most recent series of photographs, *Dark Corners of the Land* (2012). Shot with home-made pinhole cameras (a format that demonstrates Andrews’ commitment to the creative labour and physical materiality of traditional photography), this series of black-and-white landscape photographs depicts points on the possible route from Pendle to Lancaster along which the ‘Pendle witches’ were transported four hundred years earlier to be hanged. These photographs, marked by visual distortion, lens flare, unusual angles and varying sharpness of focus, were exhibited with a sound installation derived from field recordings made in the same locations (which was created by ‘Victor Noir’, a shadowy Lancaster-based multi-media art collective), and they present the familiar and bleak geography of Lancashire as a troubled landscape haunted by violence and death, and also as a space marked by a visionary mysticism. This concept of certain locations as symbolically and historically loaded, spaces in which the past continually threatens to irrupt into the present, is a continuity that runs through Andrews’ work. At certain points *Pleasureland* shows us an apocalyptic landscape in which wintry seas threaten to engulf the land and it is a landscape which is barely illuminated by the sun. Some of the images have the same unsettling, non-naturalistic quality as film scenes shot with a ‘day for night’ effect and recall also the ‘moon-blanched land’ referred to in Matthew Arnold’s poem, ‘Dover Beach’.

The final photograph in the accompanying book, *Pleasureland*, is of a single streetlight on a seafront esplanade in this half-light. Painted on the tarmac cyclepath in front of the streetlamp is the word ‘END’. This melancholic image epitomizes a sense of the seaside as both symbolic and geographical limit or extremity. It constitutes the end of the road, the edge of the world or, to borrow the title of a short story by JG Ballard, the British writer whose work is preoccupied with the hallucinatory, disorienting environments of beaches and holiday resorts, the terminal beach.

Some of the most well-known contemporary photographs of the British seaside are those of Magnum photographer, Martin Parr. Parr’s flash-lit, harshly coloured photographs depict the British seaside as a crowded hellish space littered with junk food, rubbish, unsupervised children, and grotesque bodies sporting gaudy and ill-fitting clothing. Collectively titled ‘The Last Resort’ (1985), his images of the New Brighton resort on the Wirral peninsula display a quite different sensibility from Andrews’ photographs. Martin Parr’s satirical photographs, which draw on the caricaturing aesthetic of seaside postcards, emphasize the tastelessness, abjection and false consciousness of working-class culture and cast a contemptuous eye over the spaces and people in front of the lens. They prompt us to ask how any of the figures captured in the frame could possibly imagine that they are enjoying themselves, how they could possibly imagine that they are in a ‘Pleasureland’.

Andrews’ photographs, by contrast, are far less cynical or patronizing. Rather than the ugliness and absurdity recorded by Parr’s work, Andrews’ images find a poetic beauty and an unsettling particularity in the bodies, faces and spaces on display. In this regard one of the British photographers whom Darren Andrews has most affinity with is Bill Brandt (1904-1983). The German-born Brandt wrote in 1948 that ‘the photographer must have and keep in him something of the receptiveness of the child who looks at the world for the first time or of the traveller who enters a strange country’. Brandt’s atmospheric landscapes, portraits and photojournalism portray Britain as an unfamiliar, enigmatic almost alien environment. In a similar way, Andrews’ eye is drawn to the oddness, eccentricities and mythical potential of the English seaside, and this collection of images invites us to view this strange land from the same perspective.