



Anxious Landscape

Photographs by

Max Reeves

GORST

Anxious Landscape
2019-2022

Max Reeves

Foreword by
Chris Broughton

In Memory of

Niall McDevitt
1967 - 2022

Beloved Friend and Collaborator

“Was it material, was it ghostly, or was it... some being that lay on the borderline between the two?”

E.F. Benson, ‘And No Bird Sings’

Many of Max Reeves’ photographs focus on people, often in groups and frequently engaged in furious activity - protests, acts of trespass, folk dances, rituals and events where the boundaries of these pursuits become blurred. Equally blurred are the settings for the gatherings: Reeves seems drawn to urban landscapes but is also captivated by locations on the borders of the built environment, boggy edges and crooked hedges, peripheral areas in which nature has started to reassert itself, where brambles and barbed wire entwine.

These forsaken spaces are the focus for much of this collection, the ‘Anxious Landscapes’ referenced in its subtitle. What is the source of that anxiety? Perhaps, in part, it’s that the people who fascinate Reeves in much of his work are almost entirely absent. The sites visited in Gorst are mostly depopulated. In one image, visitors to the Tower of London are concealed by shadow and dwarfed both by the tower itself and by eerily silhouetted plane trees and the daunting shape of a foregrounded raven, jealously clutching a lump of carrion.

On the next page, a lone dog trails its lead on the Hackney Marshes, as if its owner has sunk into the waterlogged turf, and later another pair of dogs can be spotted boxing like hares while, above them, the real thing hangs lifeless from a branch. Otherwise, the book is largely devoid of sentient life. The animals that do appear are mostly carved, stuffed or in various states of decomposition.

All the same, Gorst seems to teem with glimpsed figures and faces. Thanks to the very human phenomenon of pareidolia (our tendency to create meaningful shapes in ambiguous patterns) uncanny characters emerge from every other page. We encounter shells as skulls, one sporting a seaweed wig, a screaming nub of broken flint, countenances both chiselled and imagined - on crumbling walls, in caves and tunnels and on the sides of chalk pits. Tattered remains of plastic bags - colloquially known as witches' knickers - cavort through East London bushes, mandrake-like roots stroll along an earth bank and an ivy-clad giant consoles its neighbour in a churchyard. Heads, limbs and torsos are conjured from fabric, ice and even bird shit.

Elsewhere, human life is suggested by deliberate effigies. There are sculptures woven from branches, ditched dummies, corn dollies and misshapen scarecrows defending neglected allotments. Some pages are haunted by more mysterious simulacra - intangible figures glimpsed through foliage and smeared windows, inviting nervous scrutiny. Are those moss-faced forms in a Kent cemetery being swallowed by the graves beneath, and did they start out as gravestones, sculptures, or something else?

What has happened to the real people? Most of these images were created while the UK was under various stages of lockdown, and contact with members of other households was discouraged. In some pictures, it's possible that individuals lurk just beyond the frame, perhaps going out of their way to avoid contact with others, including our roving photographer. Nevertheless, it's easy to imagine that Gorst documents a post-societal wasteland. Weather has rubbed away the details of painted pub signs, vehicles are reduced to rust and architecture to ruin, industrial sites are abandoned to the elements and fruiting fungi looms large.

On the cover of this collection, Warwickshire's ancient King Stone, a monument that seems to have wandered across the road from its limestone soldiers, towers over the viewer, shot through a blurred scattering of wildflowers and Drizzle that appear to lend it eyes. Is the fence intended to protect the monolith from its visitors, or vice versa? These stones once came to life in an episode of Doctor Who, killing the sect that worshipped them, and the same series populated the desolate headland of Dungeness with tentacular aliens. In the Dungeness of Gorst, the coast is clear of otherworldly terrors, but Reeves' camera still captures sea monsters patrolling mudbanks beneath clotted grey skies, while outlandish entities of uncertain origin lurk in spinneys and woodland.

These manifestations may not represent Max Reeves' own childhood terrors - the environments here aren't those he grew up around. Arriving in the UK from his native New Zealand in 1990, Reeves still retains an exploratory, outsider's eye, offering fresh perspectives on the rain-bespittled fabric of our benighted isle.

These images highlight anomalies and idiosyncrasies that natives have learned to unsee, making provocative juxtapositions of ancient and modern, spire and pylon echoed by London's empty edifices. Peppered with standing stones, barrows and megaliths, Gorst uncovers ritual symbols and traces of idolatry that escaped the whitewashing of the reformation, and draws our attention to latter-day votive offerings - evidence of occult and pagan practices that persevere, reassuring new practitioners in our unsettled present. The England presented in these pages is never pretty, but its wondrous strange revelations invite us to look beyond the familiar to see the supernatural beyond, with startling new apparitions materialising each time we do.

Chris Broughton
2023

“One of my favourite Hookland dialect words is diedurl
- it best translates as hidden door between two things or
two worlds that you cannot see, but instinct tells you is
there.”

C. L. Nolan
Hookland









