

Paul Reas  
*"Day Dreaming About The Good Times?"*



Exhibition Guide

# Paul Reas

## *“Day Dreaming About The Good Times?”*

Paul Reas is part of the influential movement, now known as the ‘New British Colour Documentarists’ that changed people’s attitude to colour photography. His work is both subjective and opinionated, his social and cultural background defining the themes within his photographs.

Paul Reas was born in 1955 in the Yorkshire town of Bradford. He grew up in Bafferton Abor, on the Buttershaw Estate, a large 1950s council estate. His mother worked at Thorn Electrics and his father was a door-to-door salesman, rarely at home.

*“For a family that didn’t have much our house was always full of products. These would be shirts, shoes, blankets and anything else my Dad could lay his hands on to sell from the back of his van.”*

*“Day Dreaming About The Good Times?”* is not a complete chronological account on the photographic career of Paul Reas. Instead, this exhibition touches on representations of working class, investigations of consumption, alienation in the work place and mythologies of regeneration.

Reas consistently looks at everyday life and places that previously had not been considered worthy as a subject matter for photography.

*“Being a photographer is a privilege and the camera is a passport into other people’s lives.”*



Bradford circa 1972

### *Bradford circa 1972*

*“I was 28 before I went to college. I spent most of my adult life up to that point working as a bricklayer. I discovered photography for myself at the Bradford Central Library.”*

Throughout the 1970s Paul Reas, driven by his curiosity to record people going about everyday activities, would carry his camera around the streets of Bradford. By his own admission these pre-college photographs are raw, taken at a time when he had yet to find his visual ‘voice’.

## Student projects

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In 1982, at the age of 28, Paul Reas enrolled as a student on the prestigious social documentary course at Newport College, Wales taught by notable photographers including David Hurn and Martin Parr.

*"I was studying documentary photography...the kind of things you were encouraged to photograph were photo stories of people living on the margin. A lot of people I studied with were seeking those kind of situations; not because they cared about the plight of the people they were photographing ... they did it in a sort of mindless way because it's what one did as a documentary photographer."*

As a student Reas began to make pictures where he consciously set out to work in opposition to the (then) prevalent documentation and clichés of 'poverty and pity' that stigmatised the working class. Both *Working Men* 1982 and *Penrhys Free Studio* 1984 are his response to and reaction against this particular view and representation.

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From the series *Working Men* 1982

### *Working Men* 1982

*Working Men* was one of his earliest student projects depicting portraits of ordinary working men in their ordinary working lives and various aspects of skilled manual labour.

*"I can remember seeing August Sander's work for the first time and a particular picture – the hod carrier. Bear in mind I'd worked in Germany just before I came to study and so these were the characters that reminded me of people who I worked with...what really struck me about Sander's pictures was that for the first time I was seeing the portrayal of working people that gave them some kind of grace and dignity...I really responded to that. What I wanted to do was portray a working class experience to the one I recognised"*

## Student projects

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From the series *Penrhys Free Studio* 1983

### *Penrhys Free Studio* 1983

These six photographs are a small selection of a much larger project of portraits of the people who lived on the Penrhys Estate in the Rhondda Valley, South Wales. This place had many similarities to the housing estate Paul Reas grew up in. Like Buttershaw, it was used to house 'problem families' and he identified with the people he photographed. It was these similarities that led him to set up a simple photographic studio in the shopping centre.

*"I wanted to make pictures that dealt with these people's circumstances, the lack of social access, issues around healthcare and education. And they were all things that rang quite a loud bell for me...I tried to make pictures that dealt with their situation...I was unashamedly photographing my own culture. The white backdrop was a deliberate ploy to isolate the subjects from their surrounding environment, in order to free them from a categorisation of type and allowing them to be seen as individuals"*



From the series *Desmond's Mine* 1983

### *Desmond's Mine* 1983

This project grew out of an early piece of advice Paul Reas learnt at college; 'photograph what you know'. At this point in time what Reas knew was his experiences of working on building sites, since the age of fifteen. He felt familiar and comfortable within an industrial male dominated environment.

*"Being in South Wales and making photographs around the mining industry was, for me, a logical thing to do. Little did I realise that within two years everything I had photographed would be consigned to the past as the pit closure programme, that resulted in the miners' strike of 1984, gathered pace"*



From the series *The Valleys Project* 1985

## *The Valleys Project* 1985

Established in 1984 by Ffotogallery, Cardiff *The Valleys Project* was a commissioning programme set up to document *“one of the most captivating, yet industrialised landscapes of Northern Europe...and to create a contemporary visual record and social commentary encompassing a broad geographical spread of the South Wales Valleys”*.

Paul Reas was the recipient of one of the first commissions, choosing to record and interpret the people, places and issues involved in a time of change.

The year long miners' strike was about to end, spelling a major victory for Thatcherism and a defining moment in British industrial history. Traditional heavy industries, with their largely male workforce were in terminal decline, being replaced with new technology factories and a largely female workforce. These new technology industries created a new working environment as more and more jobs became automated.

Reas was interested in the 'high tech' industries and their subsequent effects on their communities. *The Valleys Project* has two distinct, yet interlocking parts. The first looks at the evolution of this changing landscape of South Wales, as areas that had been coal mines were being flattened to make way for the building of new factories.

The second part looks at the work process and the nature of the 'new technology' with its piece working environment. For Reas, these photographs are personal, portraying an experience he recognised.

*“It was a biographical response because my Mum worked in the same industry in Yorkshire and I was aware of the kinds of pressures that were on women working in that industry...I remember her having to make components at home in the evenings in order to hit her weekly targets...The photographs are about alienation. It's about the idea of objectification and the emphasis on the number. The numbers are a recurring motif, a visual metaphor about entrapment... I used the frame to make these women become anonymous”*

*The Valleys Project* is also significant as it marks the last time Reas worked in black and white.



From the series *I Can Help* 1985 - 1988

## *I Can Help* 1985 - 1988

The 1980s was a time for huge social, political and economic change in Britain; the country had been transformed from a manufacturing nation to one of service industries. This, coupled with availability of cheap credit, resulted in the creation of a consumer boom.

*I Can Help* was a self-initiated project and marked Paul Reas' move into colour photography. The 1980s was an interesting time for British photography as it saw the emergence of a group of photographers using colour within a documentary context. Reas looked at contemporary life that surrounded him, and in this case the language and mechanisms of consumption. As a chronicler of Thatcher's 80s, this work documented the rise of a new middle class.

*I Can Help* is a body of work that looks at this consumer boom with its American style out-of-town shopping malls and new housing estates on the edge of the green belt. In Reas' own words:

***"Instant credit and the new economy fascinated me... it was always part of my ambition to look at how this stuff was working, rather than looking at the people who were subjected to it"***

*I Can Help* was Paul Reas' first book, published by Cornerhouse in 1988. The selection in the exhibition includes pictures from this publication and also some previously unseen photographs from the same project.



From the series *Flogging a Dead Horse* 1989 - 1993

## *Flogging a Dead Horse* 1989 - 1993

The title of this work takes its name from a colloquial term which literally means a pointless exercise, and in this context also *“implies the wholesale marketing of a dead, redundant and often moribund past.”*

This self-initiated project grew out of Paul Reas' personal interest to document the way places that had previously been working industrial sites were being closed down and transformed into museums and theme parks. It is his response to the 'heritage industry' that in his opinion presented a cynical re-writing of the past, with history oversimplified and heavily sanitised. These photographs represent:

*“heritage as a branch of the leisure industry... a bitter and ironic rebuke to those who are appropriating working class history... with all its hardships... and making it into entertainment.”*

*Flogging a Dead Horse*, Reas' second book was published by Cornerhouse in 1993. A selection of these photographs were first exhibited in the group exhibition *Heritage, Image + History* at Impressions Gallery, 1990.



Magazine advertisement for *Mr Mash*, 1990s.

## *Editorial and Advertising* 1990s

Throughout the 1990s, and in parallel to his own personal projects Paul Reas worked as an editorial photographer for many leading colour supplements magazines, such as *The Sunday Times*.

Around this time he was approached by an advertising agency and, although he never imagined he would work in that context, his interest in the consumer boom led him to *“push the documentary aesthetic into that commercial world.”* His photography campaigns played a major role in the re-shaping of British advertising. His award-winning campaigns, for clients such as Volkswagen, Nissan Cars, British Telecom and many more, led the way to incorporating documentary images into a commercial context, by moving emphasis away from 'high gloss product-led' campaigns to a more naturalistic reportage approach.



From the series *From a Distance* 2012

## *From a Distance* 2012

*From a Distance* is a result of an invitation from London College of Communication (LCC) to respond to the regeneration of the Elephant and Castle. It is part of *The Elephant Vanishes*, a long-term project documenting changes facing this traditionally working class and culturally diverse neighbourhood in South East London. Made over a period of two years this commission came, by his own admission, at a perfect time for Paul Reas.

***“I was having a crisis. I used to be a photographer and now I was a gun for hire...doing stuff for other people’s agendas” [a reference to his editorial and advertising work] and here was the opportunity to return to my personal, socially committed documentary work.”***

For Reas it was important to get back onto the streets, where he had started all those years ago in Bradford, and make pictures of what it meant to live in change and decay. The large photographs are interspersed with small images of incense pots, bought from the open market in the Elephant, acting as indications of the of social pressures that people in this area are subjected to.

***“Their contents [of the incense pots] are burned to provide help in particular situations: ‘break up’, ‘court case’, ‘money drawing’. The idea that such problems can be sorted out with a can of incense from a Rastafarian bloke on the market is powerfully indicative of the hidden desperation of so many lives, lives that are too often hidden from view”***

Yet again, there is an (auto) biographical resonance, a mirroring of his own situation. This body of work was made at a time when Reas’ family home had been compulsory purchased so that the area estate could be redeveloped.

***“The house on Brafferton Arbor, on the Buttershaw Estate where I was born and where my mother had raised her five children, was demolished to make way for a private housing estate. The uncertainty and anxiety felt at this time influenced the way I photographed the people of the Elephant and Castle as they also contemplated their uncertain future...This project articulates how people feel about their futures, as I felt myself about roots, history and a sense of belonging.”***

*From a Distance* was first published in *Fieldstudy* 16 by The Photography and the Archive Research Centre (PARC) and exhibited at the London College of Communication (LCC) in Elephant and Castle, London in October 2012.



Film still from *Meet the Artist*

## Find out more

Please **browse the reading table** in the gallery with a selection of books related to the exhibition and the work of Paul Reas.

You can also **watch the specially made film** *Meet the Artist* featuring an interview with Paul Reas, on view in the foyer opposite the Welcome Desk.



'Dickens' Country, Rochester, Kent 1993 from the series *Flogging a Dead Horse*

## Own an original Paul Reas print

As part of his fundraising strategy to support his new book published by GOST, Paul is offering a signed special edition print of a photograph from the seminal series *Flogging a Dead Horse* 1989 - 1993.

This is an original pigment print, printed on Fotospeed Platinum Baryta paper in an open edition. The print size is 210mm by 297mm. It is signed on the reverse by Paul and includes an inkstamp which is unique to his retrospective's first showing at Impressions Gallery.

The print is offered in return for a minimum donation of £20.

This is an amazing opportunity to own one of Paul Reas' photographs, whose limited edition prints sell on average for £1500.

With your support, Paul hopes to launch the new publication at the opening of "*Day Dreaming About The Good Times?*" on 21 March 2014, when the exhibition tours to Ffotogallery, Cardiff.



Each print is signed by Paul Reas and stamped on the reverse with an inkstamp made specially for the exhibition.

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An Impressions Gallery touring exhibition curated by Anne McNeill in partnership with Ffotogallery. Part of Impressions' ongoing commitment to showcasing new presentations of work by mid-career photographers.