

Over the Threshold

Soho is constantly fighting to maintain its unique character and identity. Like other areas of London it is under threat of being homogenised and swallowed up by big corporations. Surprisingly to outsiders, up to 5000 people live in Soho. Many are in social housing established by residents to maintain a diverse population, including those on low incomes and the elderly. Most people who visit or work in Soho, see it as a playground and rarely look up to notice the flats above the bars or the small Parish School on Archer Street.

The artist duo FrenchMottershead were keen to go beyond street level, to step over the threshold and meet residents in their homes. Finding a range of people to speak with took time. Initial callouts through The Photographers' Gallery found those with an interest in photography. Making contact with local figureheads was another strategy; as was securing editorial in the *West End Extra* and posting flyers through every letterbox in Soho. To go deeper and find a broader range of people to speak with, FrenchMottershead hand wrote postcards to the inhabitants of Kemp House simply saying 'Invite us round for a chat – you make the tea, we'll bring the biscuits'. From these beginnings, a series of long recorded conversations were held with residents across Soho. Recurrent themes started to crop up that linked groups of residents, some known to each other, some yet to meet. One common ground was a sense of being invisible, feeling unseen and unnoticed. Could this art project in some way address this?

FrenchMottershead decided to create group portraits by assembling residents to perform for the camera. A number of common themes were drawn up and people were invited to choose subjects they identified with and therefore which photograph they would be a part of. The idea was for them to do what they do individually in their own homes but transfer it collectively into someone else's. The themes are based on neighbourhood life and drawn from the original interviews. They include the battles to defend residents' rights through to the more evocative early-morning experience of hearing the hooves of the Household Cavalry being exercised through Soho's streets. Some are universal, others particular to Soho, but all explore the challenges and pleasures of living in the very centre of London.

The artists met each resident ahead of the shoot to discuss the idea and its practicalities. In this way the subjects of the portraits are self-defining, it is those who were generous with their time that are featured in the work. Perhaps there is a type of person by default that we see in these shots, the ones who form communities through their willingness to engage. They were asked to choose clothing and bring objects that, for them, relate to the theme of the shoot. The photo shoots were events in themselves, allowing participants to meet and see others' homes, often for the first time. A truly collaborative dialogue was created between them and the artists. Working digitally meant that everyone could examine the shots in progress and feed in ideas and suggestions for the performances.

In this way the final eleven photographs are recording one step in an ongoing process. The work is published in this limited edition print run with each participant involved receiving a copy as a memento. The work will also be shown over a long weekend in Berwick Street in the heart of Soho. Residents and others can come together and experience the work, making residents visible to Soho visitors. The project will also have a wider legacy and reach through The Photographers' Gallery website, and in public sites including a poster at Oxford Circus underground station and on the hoardings around The Photographers' Gallery's building currently under development on Ramillies Street.

The photographs and their dissemination are the public platform for the events, the meetings and connections between the subjects and the artists. They are a way of ensuring the residents are visible and seen, but also a chance for them to see themselves. The groups become identified, and in some cases galvanised, into recognising themselves as a community, in a new way. Usually a portrait is seen as a way to learn about ourselves, it can act as a narcissistic window into our inner lives. However these performed group portraits seem less introspective and more akin to visual story telling, with a message we have to decipher. We know on one level from the titles and the performances what links these people: they look out for each other; keep things growing; put their children to bed. By sharing their stories and re-enacting their lives in these tableaux, the residents offer us a unique insight into the private world of Soho, allowing us to see it afresh.

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