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# **THE CEREMONY OF LIFE**

## **EARLY WORKS BY MARTIN PARR**



IRELAND. County Leitrim. Manorhamilton. Sheep Fair. 1980 © Martin Parr / Courtesy Rocket Gallery

Also opening: Roger Mayne and Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2017

Exhibition continues until 23 April 2017  
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# THE CEREMONY OF LIFE: Early Works by Martin Parr

3 March–23 April 2017



GB. England. West Yorkshire. Todmorden. Mayor of Todmorden's inaugural banquet. 1977 © Martin Parr / Courtesy Rocket Gallery

Martin Parr (born 1952) is probably best known for his boldly-coloured satirical portraits of contemporary Britain. These early works reflect the roots of his observational prowess but also reveal a gentler, less punishing eye: a photographer passionate about capturing the unsung rituals of everyday life through a lens.

Throughout the 1970s, Parr's focus was on capturing the social landscapes of Britain through the familiar aspects of daily life across Yorkshire, Ireland, Sussex and the North of England. From services at non-conformist chapels, seaside leisure activities and teatime community gatherings, these monochromatic works faithfully and tenderly chronicle the characteristics and pleasures of the vernacular and document an aesthetic realised before he finally abandoned Black and White photography in 1986.

40 years after his first London solo show at The Photographers' Gallery, *Hebden Bridge and Beauty Spot* (15 Dec 1977 – 10 Jan 1978), this exhibition presents a timely reminder of Martin Parr's identifiable and quietly humorous ability to preserve "the ceremony of life".

## **Biography**

Martin Parr was born in Epsom, Surrey, UK, in 1952. When he was a boy, his budding interest in the medium of photography was encouraged by his grandfather George Parr, himself a keen amateur photographer.

Martin Parr studied photography at Manchester Polytechnic, from 1970 to 1973.

Since that time, Martin Parr has worked on numerous photographic projects. He has developed an international reputation for his innovative imagery, his oblique approach to social documentary, and his input to photographic culture within the UK and abroad.

In 1994 he became a full member of Magnum Photographic Corporation.

Martin developed an interest in filmmaking, and has started to use his photography within different conventions, such as fashion and advertising.

In 2002 the Barbican Art Gallery and the National Media Museum initiated a large retrospective of Martin Parr's work. This show toured Europe for the next 5 years.

Martin Parr was Professor of Photography at The University of Wales Newport campus from 2004 to 2012.

Martin Parr was Guest Artistic Director for Rencontres D'Arles in 2004.

In 2006 Martin Parr was awarded the Erich Salomon Prize and the resulting Assorted Cocktail show opens at Photokina.

In 2008 Martin Parr was guest curator at New York Photo Festival, curating the New Typologies exhibition.

Parrworld opened at Haus de Kunst, Mucich, in 2008. The show exhibited Parr's own collection of objects, postcards, his personal photography collection of both British and International artists, photo books and finally his own photographs. The exhibition toured Europe for the following 2 years.

At PhotoEspana, 2008, Martin Parr wins the Baume et Mercier award in recognition of his professional career and contributions to contemporary photography.

Martin Parr curated the Brighton Photo Biennial that took place in October 2010.

In 2013, Martin was appointed visiting Professor of Photography at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland.

More recently Martin has been working on a 4-year project documenting the Black Country, an area of the English West Midlands, in conjunction with Multistory. Phaidon publishes the third volume of the highly influential History of the Photobook in Spring 2014 and Martin is also working on a book about the History of Chinese Photobooks to be published by Aperture in late 2014.

Martin Parr has published over 80 books of his own work and edited another 30.

# Press

Time Magazine  
21 October 2013

LIGHTBOX OUT THERE

## The Non-Conformists: Martin Parr's Early Work in Black-and-White

Eugene Reznik | Oct. 21, 2013



LightBox presents photographs from Martin Parr's earliest major body of work from the 70s featured in his latest Aperture monograph — an affectionate, humorous look at a picturesque English mill town and the quirky, independent spirit of its inhabitants.



Martin Parr—Magnum

"In the 70s, in Britain, if you were going to do serious photography, you were obliged to work in black-and-white," master photographer Martin Parr tells TIME. "Color was the palette of commercial photography and snapshot photography."

"It's only late in the decade that we began to see color photographers being shown in museums — like Eggleston and Stephen Shore," he adds. "I took note of that and got excited."

A few years later, in 1982, Parr made the switch from monochrome and never went back. To the many fans who have come to know his work over the last three decades in color, it may come as a surprise encountering Parr's first major project in black-and-white. The Non-Conformists finally finds closure over 35 years after it was started with the publication this month of his latest monograph from Aperture.

It was 1975, and two years out of art school, Parr moved from the gritty, bustling city of Manchester to a picturesque mill town in the English countryside called Hebden Bridge. There, he found a traditional way of life in decline. Factories were closing, industry was leaving and the town was gentrifying. A new community was emerging made up of "incomers — youthful artistic refugees... in search of alternative life-styles and cheap housing," Parr's wife Susie writes in her introduction to the book.

With four other artists, he opened up a storefront workshop and darkroom in the middle of town. Equipped with a Leica and a single lens, he took to the streets and began one of his earliest extended photographic studies.

"Places change all the time and the type of people who live there change. I was not so much looking at the new incomers," of which he was a part, "but at the traditional lifestyle there."

He would wander around, attend events listed in the local paper, and on Sundays, go to services at the Non-Conformist churches which were all over town. In these chapels, which had historically distanced themselves from the rules of the Church of England, he and his wife, who had been working on an accompanying text for his pictures, found the focus for the body of work.

"There's a certain independent spirit these Non-Conformists have, which not only gave the chapels their names," — like the Mount Zion Strict and Particular Baptist Chapel — "but was also very emblematic of the fading attitude of the whole place," he says.

Parr's photographs in which he aimed to capture that attitude reveal a greatly skilled young documentary photographer with a keen eye for British quirk, anticipating the tremendously poignant sense of humor for which he has become known. There is great wit in these images, but it's more subtle and less sardonic than his later saturated color work; it seems above all, affectionate.

"Black-and-white is certainly more nostalgic, by nature," he says. "My black-and-white work is more of a celebration and the color work became more of a critique of society."

Parr and his wife, whom he had married in Hebden Bridge, became very active in the community during their documentation, if at first only to gain trust and access. Some church members mistook their interest as one in keeping the chapel life going in the future. The documentation came to an end, however, and the Parrs moved on. By the late 90s, most of the chapels had closed and the communities disappeared. Hebden Bridge today, "sandblasted and quaint," his wife writes, "is a lesbian stronghold and a lively commuter town to professionals working in Leeds, Bradford and Manchester."

"We did this photographic documentation and that's all that's left," Parr says. "Virtually everyone in the photographs is dead now. It was just another era. But that's the great thing about photographs; they're there forever."

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## Martin Parr: 'If I knew how to take a great photo, I'd stop'

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Close up: Martin Parr at his home in Bristol CREDIT: JENNY LEWIS

**Martin Parr has turned his unerring eye for the quirks of British life on a new subject. He tells Alastair Sooke what drives him.**

"I'm a nosy person," says Martin Parr, examining his deadpan portrait of a Yorkshire farmhand clutching a bundle of rhubarb. "There's no better way of finding out about something than going to photograph it. And the Rhubarb Triangle has always fascinated me."

Sitting downstairs in the tall Georgian terraced house in Bristol where he has lived since 1987, Parr, 63, the sardonic chronicler of contemporary life and arguably Britain's greatest living photographer, is discussing his latest commission, a series of colour pictures documenting the nine square miles of countryside in West Yorkshire known as the Rhubarb Triangle.

Here, in the frostbitten fields on the edge of the Pennines, between Wakefield, Morley and Rothwell, the conditions are peculiarly conducive to the cultivation of this edible Siberian plant. As a result, during the 19th century, a vigorous rhubarb industry emerged.

In its heyday, in the Thirties, there were hundreds of growers in the Triangle, which once encompassed 30 sq miles. Now, though, there are only a dozen left – and Parr spent much of last winter documenting them.

There they all are in his pictures. A stocky man in a flat cap, holding a special L-shaped thermometer that measures the "cold units" of the soil in the fields; a jug-eared lad wielding a pitchfork loaded with tubers; three grubby, wizened workers, Dickensian in their muck-spattered aprons.



Martin Bramley. The Rhubarb Triangle. 2015. CREDIT: MARTIN PARR

Early next month Parr's rhubarb series will be shown at the Hepworth Wakefield gallery, as part of the first British survey of his career since a retrospective at the Barbican in 2002. "We still have an issue with photography in Britain," he says in the commanding baritone voice with which he marshals his clipped, decisive sentences. "I sell a lot more prints abroad in, say, Paris than in London. It's unusual for me to have a big show here."

Parr is a tall, imposing figure with the faintly awkward bearing of a retired military officer. When I ask him to explain the appeal of the Rhubarb Triangle as a photographic subject, he seems instantly irked. "That's why I take photographs," he replies. "Remember: that's how I express myself. Why should I do it in words when I'm a photographer?"

This is not what I was expecting. If anything, Parr is known for his impish humour. Ever since he showed his great photographic series of the Eighties, which anatomised the subtly odd, and sometimes ludicrous social conventions of the British working and middle classes, he has enjoyed a reputation as a playful satirist, skewering the nation's eccentricities.

His eye is often drawn to those details that are surprisingly eloquent about status and taste: chintzy toilet roll covers, dark-brown tea in china cups, greasy fry-ups. In short, Parr loves to record the mundane absurdities that make Britain both charming and bizarre. "Part of what I've done is to make the everyday look more interesting," he says. He even devoted his first photo-book, *Bad Weather*, to our national obsession.

*People are funny. There's no question about that. How can you not laugh?*

Martin Parr

So he enjoys poking fun at people? "Well, people are funny, there's no question about that," he replies. "How can you not laugh at what's going on in the world? If you don't have mischief, it turns into PR and propaganda."

Parr was born in 1952 in Epsom, Surrey, and grew up in "a posh bungalow" in suburbia. After studying photography at Manchester Polytechnic, he moved in 1975 to Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire, where he produced a body of work in black and white chronicling the disappearing customs in the North of England which has become a classic of documentary photography.

Irony, then, is his prime modus operandi as an artist. Yet, when I look into his eyes, I do not see a sparkle. Does he consider himself a satirist? "I understand that there is a background in the UK of satire, and I feel part of that," he says.

"But it is as much mischief as anything else."

There followed a short stint in Ireland, with his wife, Susie, who is now a writer (they have a 29-year-old daughter, Ellen, who is a chef). They returned to England in 1982 and moved to Wallasey, a town on the mouth of the River Mersey.

Around this time, Parr became inspired by “the serious colour photography coming from America”, by the likes of William Eggleston and Joel Sternfeld. He also started to collect “brightly coloured” postcards. Today he collects photo-books (indeed, his promotion of them has helped to spark serious interest in the genre), as well as strange ephemera, including watches decorated with the face of Saddam Hussein, and Margaret Thatcher memorabilia.

“Clutter?” he says, with self-conscious irony, when he shows me his boxes of bric-a-brac in the basement. “Maybe to you. For me, this is my life and soul.”

Looking at postcards convinced Parr that he should try working in colour himself. “Much of the language I have adopted has come from the commercial photography world,” he says.

“It’s bright, it’s colourful. It’s entertainment. Having changed, I never went back.”



West Yorkshire. Calderdale. Halifax. Steep Lane Baptist Chapel buffet lunch. 1976. CREDIT: MARTIN PARR/  
MAGNUM PHOTOS

His first substantial series of colour photographs, *The Last Resort*, made his name. (Ten pictures from the series will be included in Parr’s Hepworth Wakefield retrospective.) These photographs, which depict working-class holidaymakers relaxing in the shabby seaside resort of New Brighton, a few miles along the coast from Wallasey, remain as startling today as ever.

A naked boy scampers in front of a patch of sea clogged with garbage. A sunbather lies alarmingly close to the caterpillar tracks of a digger on a concrete ramp. Pasty holidaymakers jostle for hotdogs. A baby under a pink sunshade wails unheeded by its mother.

Here, it seems, is a vision of dereliction and despair – an indictment, presumably, of Britain under Thatcher.

The photographs did not attract much attention when they were initially exhibited in Liverpool. But when they were shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1986, they were, says Parr, “quite controversial”.

What did people say? “You know, that they were exploitative, blah, blah, blah. Taking the p--- out of the working classes.” Did he feel misunderstood? “To a certain extent, yes. But it did me no harm, because it made people look at the work. I don’t care what people write or say. I’m pretty laid back.”

Although the reaction to *The Last Resort* didn’t hinder him, the charge of exploitation has lingered. The picture editor Colin Jacobson once called Parr “a gratuitously cruel social critic who has made a large amount of money by sneering at the foibles and pretensions of other people”.

Then there was the hoo-ha when Parr applied to become a member of the leading photographic cooperative Magnum, of which he is now president. Welsh photojournalist Philip Jones Griffiths wrote a letter to the members of Magnum in which, Parr recalls, “he said I was a ‘fascist’ photographer. I was somewhat amused, but obviously felt let down.” The target of Parr’s “mischief” is not always clear. One typical picture shows a light switch surrounded by ornamental plastic like a fancy picture frame. It appears to invite mockery of whoever was pretentious enough to decorate their house in such a kitsch fashion.

Yet, says Parr, “if there is snobbery to be found there, it must be in the viewer, and all I’ve done is echo that. Are you saying everything should be anaesthetised?”

Alternatively, consider Parr’s close-up pictures of food, which he shoots using a macro lens and a ring flash, presenting the subject in a bright, even unflattering light, like a medical specimen. At first glance, the cheap junk food in his images appears disgusting.

*Most photographs we digest are a lie. My job is to question that.*

Martin Parr



New Brighton. From ‘The Last Resort’. 1983-85. CREDIT: MARTIN PARR/MAGNUM PHOTOS

“That’s what you say,” he says quickly, before adopting the exasperated tone of a teacher explaining something for the umpteenth time. “Food is a big lie. If you look at a package in a supermarket and then you look inside at the food you are buying, the two have very little relationship, right? It’s a fundamental lie. So my pictures are of real food, as we find it, and they are not all disgusting. You must understand that when I explain it to you, yes?”

Parr’s riposte to the “fundamental lie” of food photography is at the core of his identity as an artist. “Most of the photographs we digest are telling us a lie. My job is to question that.”

He does this, he says, by enacting his primary role as a “documentary” photographer: to record the world as he encounters it, with intelligence, openness, and honesty. “You show things as you find them.”

Does he prefer to photograph any social group in particular? “I find them all interesting,” he says with surprising aggression, as though sensing a trap. “So, no is the answer to that.”

What about the wit and irony of his pictures: how important are these elements to him?

“Documentary is subjective and I try to make it as engaging as possible. I’m in the entertainment business.” He pauses. “There are serious undertones to what I do – my pictures are ambiguous, as I think good photography should be – but it isn’t my job to tell people what they are.”



St Moritz polo world cup on snow. From 'Luxury'. 2011. CREDIT: MARTIN PARR

He has been taking pictures for more than 40 years. Does he plan to retire? "I don't think so," he says. "I do other things that complement my work as a photographer: I edit, I am the president of Magnum, I curate."

As well as running the Martin Parr Foundation, which advances education in the art of photography, he is curating *Strange and Familiar: Britain as Revealed by International Photographers*, an exhibition that will open at the Barbican in March. By now, I suggest, he must have finessed the formula for taking a quintessential "Parr" photograph. "You are after iconic moments," he concedes, "but they are very difficult to produce. Most of the pictures I take are not very good. For the rhubarb commission, I took three or four thousand – and ended up with 40. If I knew how to take a great photo, I would stop."

"My job is to record things with integrity, and I can always do that," he says. "Whether I take a 'great' photo is down to luck."

by Alastair Sooke

# Press

## World Photography Organisation 16 January 2017



### Martin Parr receives 2017 Outstanding Contribution to Photography

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We are pleased to announce legendary British documentary photographer Martin Parr as the recipient of the Outstanding Contribution to Photography title. Parr will collect his title at the 2017 Sony World Photography Awards ceremony held in London on Thursday 20 April.

To coincide with the award, a special exhibition will present a unique selection of images, books and film from Parr's career, part of the Sony World Photography Awards & Martin Parr - 2017 Exhibition at Somerset House, London, 21st April - 7th May.

In a career spanning more than 40 years and often focuses on themes of leisure, consumption and communication, Martin Parr's unique and ambiguous vision of the world has led audiences worldwide to find drama in the every day. By recording in minute detail the world as he sees it in, Parr's frank reflection of national characteristics and international phenomena has pioneered a new tone in documentary photography.

It is this dedication to the medium and pushing of boundaries that made Parr's selection for the award easy for the World Photography Organisation, despite the photographer's recent assertion that "If I knew how to take a great photo, I would stop."

Previous recipients of the Outstanding Contribution to Photography title include Mary Ellen Mark, Eve Arnold, Bruce Davidson and Elliott Erwitt.

Born in 1952 in Epsom, Surrey, Martin Parr was inspired to take up photography as a teenager by his grandfather. Black and white photography characterised his early work, and his move to the strong use of colour photography in the 1980's, for which he has become synonymous, was prompted by photographers such as Stephan Shore, William Eggleston, Peter Fraser and Joel Meyerowitz.

