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Writing on Sian Davey's 'River': <http://www.siandavey.com/river>

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THE RIVER

Rivers have long featured in the make up of our communities, drawing people to their shores. Thought to imbue healing powers, their waters have been revered since the earliest times, often seen to represent vitality and life. Popular even today through leisure and tourism, sentiments of improving health and rejuvenation through visitation to the country continue to make the British countryside appealing.

It is this embodiment of the countryside that frames Sian Davey's body of work. *River* documents her own small community drawn to its waters in search of relief from the heat of the sun. With subjects seemingly acting out romanticised rituals of childhood and summer holidays, Davey's vantage point is both independent of, yet familiar to, those whom she is photographing. You'll notice that most of the subjects in this body of work are wearing every day clothes perhaps rolled up to the knee or with a soggy hemline. Save the formal portraits that permeate the series, all those photographed here are apparently done so without being overly invasive in their activities. However, I sense a subtle conflict within these images. The presence of Davey and her camera in this community is tolerated as much as her participation with in this community is accepted. The people who she photographs appear to be very much like you and I. But are they? Her independence as a photographer, drawn to the groups around the waters edge allows her to observe with gritty criticalness that strips the romanticism out of these picturesque scenes. Far removed from the hustle and bustle of our 21st century cities and offices, this river appears as an oasis free from the trappings and social pressures imposed by our everyday lives. Viewing Davey's work in the context they are removed from however imposes the cultural eye they escape.

Personally, Davey's work transports me back to my own age of innocence growing up in rural Oxfordshire; gathering berries from hedgerows as a little girl to make 'potions'; trudging through trees softly wafting of wild garlic; punting on the Cherwell; being 17, skipping classes to drink beer and swim in the river at Henley with boys. All of these are instances where the point at which an individual may relax and escape themselves with those that matter most to them, also appear to be when they are at their most vulnerable, at the most literal point away from where they ought to be. Childish innocence.

Perhaps that is what both pleasures and troubles me the most about Davey's images. A community collectively defines how it wants to be seen or presented to the world around them, and indeed who and what are included (or excluded) from them. In that sense, it frames their members' private lives like snapshots. It does not hint or elaborate on the lurking darker controversy voyeuristically seen by those outside that intimate circle. Thus Davey's photos flirt coquettishly with the sunshine and romance of an ideal summers day, whilst bearing silent witness to social currents lurking underneath.

In *River*, Davey records rights of passage for mothers, fathers, siblings and friends. They are united through the playing of games, the intimacy of their touch and the likenesses in their clothing. However, each person remains subject to scrutiny, amplified in the presence of a camera. Two women for example, conversing. Hovering between action and inaction on the banks of the river. They look not at each other but towards something happening out of frame. Children in the water, maybe? Boisterous games getting out of hand? Their arrest by Davey is significant; these women are separate from their group, yet are presented united in

front of Davey's audience. Snatching snippets of conversation, they are bonded at the very least through friendship, and at the most complex level motherhood, brought together through their community's use of the river. Yet these women exude a nervous tension and a sense of confinement. Sheltered under the boughs of a leaky oak tree, they are secluded in the shade from the implied scrutiny of their community further up the riverbank. Privacy in public spaces implies secrecy, their confidence in each other at odds with the veneer of light-heartedness associated with summer days.

In Davey's *River*, we also see members of community on the periphery, for example younger children teetering on the edge of the riverbank desperate to join in with older siblings' games. What is apparent in Davey's depiction is the awkwardness of their involvement. Perhaps the older group consists of teenagers peacocking in the water, showing off to impress the object of their affections. The riverbank for these youngsters can be seen as metaphorical of their acceptance and inclusion of their role in their community. Perhaps it is also metaphorical of their abilities and knowledge of their wider world around them.

Explored through a numerable array of devices, the reproduction of activity and portrayal is as marked in *River* as the feeling of rehearsal, particularly when focused upon the younger members of this small community. We see this in the juxtaposition of two portraits particularly; one of a woman in a polka dot swimsuit and that of a young girl under the boughs of a tree. We cannot help but scrutinise the woman's physicality by the framing of her body, in the same way we cannot help but scrutinise the young girl in a bikini. This woman wearing a polka dot swimsuit in the style of a 1940's pin up girl defines a body image that the young girl is aware of, albeit not necessarily subject to. Wearing a mismatched bikini set this girl's modesty is imposed upon her, the covering up of her body an expectation of development and implied fertility though this is not yet physically apparent. Both individuals are sexualised without being sexual through the regulation of their appearance. What distinguishes one from the other however is the subject's regard of the camera, and the passing of time. There is an air of curiosity in the young woman's photograph as she is half turned away from, but gazing expectantly at the camera. The woman with her trim appearance, greying hair and drawn expression in contrast shows reluctance, even resistance to engage with Davey's gaze. (In conversation, Davey recalls this woman's unease at being photographed). The protective gesturing of her hands in front of her torso demonstrates an awareness of her situation, a resolve to be photographed mixed with a self-consciousness of being scrutinised by others.

Also in Davey's body of work, two particular little boys at play, one wearing a facemask to see underwater, another brandishing fishing net. Snorkelling. Paddling. Hunting through the shallows catching unsuspecting creatures not fast enough to get away. What they are in fact doing is playing a most primal game, exercising their desire to catch but not their instinct to kill.

These are the two points that *River* keeps coming back to; swathed in strong shadows, light and dark, twilight and failing light, the riverbank in this community skirts the edge of innocence and knowledge. Davey's subjects appear here at their most relaxed, at their most genuine and unguarded albeit uncomfortable at their scrutiny. Reproducing nostalgic scenes from previous summers long since passed, I expect the members of this community will be visitors here for years to come, with future generations rehearsing their behaviour longer still. I cannot help but wonder though what else will be taken down stream with the waters from this small community. From tears to laughter, to playmates and heartbreaks, the only true measures of their passing shall be time, on this occasion at least, captured on camera and immortalised on film.