

UNSEENSANDWELL

The Jubilee Arts Archive 1974-94

Sandwell in Black & White

Introduction to the exhibition by Jeremy Seabrook, 1991

The idea for this exhibition arose from an article in the Sunday Times Colour Supplement in 1984, a piece of work that claimed to offer a photo-journalistic view of life in Sandwell. The journalist described his experience of Sandwell as ‘probably the most depressing story I have ever worked on in my career.’

Nearly all the images of where people live come to them from the outside: when people see their community in the media, they see pictures of poverty and helplessness, or they see official brochures, which are just as false. These show ideal people in an unrecognisable glossy setting, designed to attract industry: happy shoppers in perpetual sunshine, cosy old folk knitting in serene and leafy old people’s homes, smiling workers in a factory without smell or pollution. The result is that images of Sandwell (or Walsall or Leeds or Glasgow) make it look either like Calcutta or California; a distorted view that has nothing to do with the people who actually live there.

‘Sandwell in Black & White’ asked people who live in the borough to photograph their own home-place, to make their own images. From January 1990 to January 1991 a 35mm black and white camera was given to a cross-section of individuals and groups, and they were asked to picture whatever they chose, as reflecting their neighbourhood, their lives, their daily concerns. It was no scientific sample, but a range reflecting the ethnic mix, age and occupational diversity in the community. Among them were a hairdresser, a fireman, a women’s group, members of the Yemeni community, a video store owner, young people, pensioners, unemployed women and men.

The result couldn’t be more different from the images that come from outsiders. It reflects an everyday reality, the people we know and love, family, friends, neighbours, work. It is about the affections and the attachment to what is familiar, a warm and easy relationship with daily life which people who do not live here cannot begin to grasp.

One of the most interesting results of this exercise is that it has changed people’s perception of the place; and not only those who see the exhibition. Many who took part also came to have their view of their home town altered. They too had, perhaps, been influenced by the outside images, had said, ‘Oh, there’s nothing there.’ ‘What is there to show about Sandwell?’ ‘Who cares?’ The exhibition

shows how much people do care, although not about the things that excite the media.

Those who took part helped to choose the final exhibits out of over 2000 photographs. Some comments show how their view changed. They saw for the first time the richness and diversity of the different groups in Sandwell, families and strangers meeting together, black and white, young and old. One woman said taking the pictures 'got me out of the house, and made me think more about the area I live in.' Another said that there was nothing happening in Sandwell than she had ever realised. 'Looking at the pictures has made me happy.'

'Sandwell in Black & White' also shows how much creativity there is in people who have never had the opportunity to use a camera so freely before. Normally, family pictures are of holidays and Christmas, rituals of special occasions. Here, there was no restriction - people didn't have to worry about the cost of taking pictures, whether they could afford to have them developed. They could turn their eye onto the landscape of Sandwell - and it must be said, it is not one of the most beautiful environments in the world. And they show it with humour, wit, fondness, and occasionally, anger, at the conditions in which some people live. They have managed to distinguish between glossy official images and the horror-stories of journalists who show arty images of black people living in ghettos and slums. What we see here are the spirit and endurance of the people, the rootedness and the daily relationships that make life good.

There are bad conditions in Sandwell. The statistics are not wrong. There is a high proportion of elderly, of single parents, of unemployment. 10% of the properties are unfit, twice the national average. One fifth of the residents rely upon Income Support, and 40% are considered to be in poverty. But these are one dimensional ways of measuring people's lives. 'Sandwell in Black & White' is not glamorous, sophisticated or dramatic: the picture of a Ford Escort, a Trustees Savings Bank cashpoint, a church fete, a picnic, or of a daily routine - preparing meals, chapel preacher, ambulance strike, supermarket checkout, an office, a football stadium, a Sikh temple, a crochet circle, a petrol pump. There are very few pictures without people. Quite spontaneously, people pictured what matters to them, and that is each other.

In fact, each other is all we have, might be the message of this exhibition if there is one. When you consider the decay of the heavy industry in the West Midlands of England, what else is there? After all, Sandwell was once the place that produced all the glass for the Crystal Palace; in the early industrial era, Cradley Heath produced chains, Oldbury chemicals, West Bromwich nuts and bolts and screws, Tipton and Wednesbury iron and steel, Smethwick engines and boilers and gas equipment. No longer the same centre of industrial production, it is more introspective now, less sure of itself, although at the same time, it is enriched by the experience of people from all over the world. As people reflect

their concerns in these exhilarating, funny, sometimes sad, sometimes angry, pictures, it is difficult not to feel that the people of Sandwell deserve a better environment than they have, something more worthy of the energy and creativity that have gone into producing these photographs.

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