

Much of your work is highly manipulated as you add and remove subjects to craft improbable and fantastical scenarios. Often you use yourself to challenge notions of time and the archive, seen in your *Retouching History* series. There is also a strong political bent to your images, however, that seems very grounded in the reality of the moment.

I started working with digital image manipulation in 1998; this was also the start of my interest in photography. Photography in its documentary form, as a straightforward document of a place and time, had never interested me – but I was fascinated by the possibilities of rearranging and mixing up photographs taken in different places or at different times. In ‘Retouching History’ I used my parent’s family album as my source material and combined these snapshots with new staged photographs of myself, in effect displacing and condensing my family history.

Could you discuss your practice to date, as it responds to current political and social tensions in the UK, and as it straddles both private and communal spheres of experience?

In some instances my work has responded to political and social situations and events directly. For example, in *Big Ben, February 2003* an elongated, erect version of the Houses of Parliament is revealed, representing the British government’s hubris at the onset of the war against Iraq. The protest placards by anti-war campaigner Brian Haw, who has been demonstrating on Parliament Square since 2001, can be seen in the foreground. In another work, *European Palaces*, the official palaces of the seven monarchies in Europe have been retouched so that the palaces no longer have any windows or doors, perhaps reminding us of mausoleums. The series can be seen in the light of European history: the integration of our royal courts in view of current European integration. The project also reflects the architectural history of palaces – how castles progressed from being windowless defence points into modern palaces full of windows expressing

confidence, wealth and sophistication. However, the projects retain a certain degree of ambiguity. In *Big Ben, February 2003* the protest is not necessarily identifiable and the placards do not face the viewer. The clue to what issue is being protested against is in the title of the work.

*The Royal Estate*, which you set forth as 'an architectural proposal', seems particularly pertinent: 1.5 million people in England on the waiting list for council housing as yet to be built; the expropriation of previously designated council flats, resold as newly refurbished private residences - I refer here to the recent expulsion of tenants from Sheffield's Park Hill estate.

To make *The Royal Estate*, I travelled around Great Britain, visiting all of the British Queen's official royal residences: Windsor Castle, Sandringham, Buckingham Palace, St James's Palace, Kensington Palace, Balmoral and Holyrood House. I photographed the facades of each palace and the shape of each palace was then remodelled on the computer into a high-rise. All seven of these palatial towerblocks were then placed into the same picture, forming one 'royal estate'. The title refers to the property/real estate owned by the Queen, as well as to the term council housing estate. It is indeed an architectural proposal and a response to the depleted stock of council housing in Britain today. Council housing is increasingly rare in Britain. In 1980 council tenants were given the right to buy their homes. What is good for the tenants individually is of course less good for Britain's long-term housing provision. The modernist utopian dream of low-cost rented housing for all, 'palaces for the people', is compromised. In contrast, the British queen's wealth is only increasing, receiving both government funding and income from land, property and commercial ventures. In "The Royal Estate" a strange and unfamiliar new kind of estate has appeared in the landscape. Yet it is an open-ended fantasy: created as much to engage with the aesthetics and ideals of modernism as to provoke thoughts

around the issue of social housing or and the increasing gap between rich and poor.

Do you view *The Royal Estate* as an extension of your *Retouching History* series, i.e. pure fantasy, or instead, a proposal for a more serious reflection of the urban landscape and a possible call for future change? How might digital photography, in your mind, propel and empower such change?

It is pure fantasy as well as a serious proposal for the future. When an image is digitally altered, usually the symbolic and representational aspects of the image become emphasised and the link to what we might call “the real” is broken. This is the way in which many artists have initially used digital image manipulation – to be able to present different versions of the real or the imaginary. This is a tradition that started long before digital photography however – the surrealists used photography to “disrupt reality from within”, collapsing distinctions between imagination and reality. Often I am less interested in creating real representations of fantasy worlds (*The Royal Estate* doesn’t pretend to look real, it draws on the unreal aesthetic of architectural proposals) but to draw attention to the constructed nature and flatness of all photography by leaving my alterations visible. Digital image making celebrates the impossibility of photographic truth.