

Seriously Funny

Magnum shooter and master street photographer Martin Parr talks about how he puts humor in the picture.

Photos by Martin Parr; text by Meg Ryan



ENGAGINGLY ORDINARY
Facing page, clockwise from top left: Dudley Zoo, Midlands, England, 2013; Cheese tent at a summer fair, Somerset, UK, from *Think of England*, 2000; Breakfast, Benidorm, Spain, 2014; Nice, France, 2015; Kentucky Derby, 2015; Nice, France, 2015.

PARTY WITH THE PEOPLE
This page: A party in Wolverhampton, England, from *Black Country*, 2011. The locale is so called for the black soot from the ironworking foundries and forges in the 19th century. Today it's a working- and middle-class international melting pot.

more than 400,000 prints ("Most of them are bad," he says) at his London studio. He's published 83 books and catalogs (lately he averages about four per year) and has had hundreds of exhibitions in his almost 40-year career.

But don't assume that his whimsical interest in practically everything means he isn't serious. Parr is very serious; people just find him funny.

"Although I am creating entertainment, I am also trying to document things," he says.

"Inevitably there's some ambiguity and contradictions that surface. My initial target is to create an entertaining picture, which may or may not have some kind of subtlety and some kind of message. If you look at what's going on in the world, the best way is to probably not take it too seriously."

While signposts of humor—ironic devices like juxtaposition, repetition, and understatement—are abundant in his work, Parr ultimately aims to create anti-propaganda. He says his images come from a place of sincerity and affection, and he avoids manipulating shots to affect an ironic pose. For instance, he

ON THIS afternoon in late December, Martin Parr is about to take off for holiday in India, but his mind is already on Cleveland.

The affable British photographer is going there and to Philadelphia for the Republican and Democratic national conventions, respectively, come July. A conversation about humor and irony in his work is on our agenda, but Parr wants to talk politics. Same difference.

"The Republicans, I think, are more photogenic, especially if you have crazy Trump as the candidate," he says. A twinkle in his eye hints he would look for-

ward to that particular spectacle. He asks after Bernie Sanders with similar delight.

Meanwhile, Parr scans his field of vision (my apartment, via Skype) for points of interest. "Who's that in the photograph behind you?" My parents. "Is that your cat? What's his name?" *Thelonious*. "Oh so you're a jazz fan, are you?" *Quite*.

Parr's cordial demeanor belies an inner perpetual motion machine, constantly seeing, continually traveling, noticing the mundane as if for the first time, and taking enough pictures along the way to amass an archive of



PATE AND PARADE
Far left: From the stands at the Melplash agricultural show, Dorset, England, 1996. Much of Parr's work documents the everyday lives of his fellow Brits.

WARM AND FUZZY
A woolly hat, Eastbourne, UK, from *Think of England*, 2000.

explains that his signature early saturated look, achieved with macro lens and ring flash, is simply an aesthetic preference, not part of the message. "It's just a question of spotting what is real and sticking with it," he says.

Such scrupulous sincerity yields its own kind of humor. Like watching a stand-up comedian, we laugh because what we see is so identifiably, messily human. Making mischief around human absurdities being a singularly English trait (see Monty Python's *Flying Circus*, *The Trip*, Stewart Lee), Parr simply applies it to his work as well.

"I like people," Parr says. "I am not just out there to set people up. If you just look around you will see absurd and wonderful behavior. I show the vulnerability in society without being entirely damning or cruel and then put it together and make some kind of statement."

In his many travels Parr is keen to document the activities of tourists, who spend a lot of their

vacation time taking pictures. "If you go to a tourist location these days it's the main activity," he says. "You have to prove you have been there to all the friends back home. There are more photos of people taking photos now than there were 20 years ago because a lot of people are doing it."

Most recently, they are doing it with selfie sticks—extendable monopods that clamp to a smartphone to enable snapping shots from distances beyond arm's reach. "They are photogenic. People can't get enough of them either," Parr says.

The selfie stick solves photographic problems for him, too. In a blog post from May of last year he wrote: "Interestingly, you can get the whole scene in front of the camera and the backdrop all in one photo. Previously I had to make do with photos of people from behind as they looked at the view."

The spine of this world traveler's work—where his sense of humor, fondness for people, and



TOURISM AS SPECTACLE
Selfies at the Imperial War Museum, London, 2015. The selfie stick solves problems for tourist and photographer alike. "You can get the whole scene in front of the camera and the backdrop all in one photo," Parr says.

incisive eye converge—lies in his home country. In 2006, Multistory, a nonprofit that commissions artists to create art with, about, and for the town of Sandwell, brought the Surrey native to the Black Country—traditionally an iron forging area near Birmingham—for a four-year project that led to *Black Country Magazine*; a book, *Black Country Stories* (2014); and an exhibition.

In his ongoing project *Think of England*, Parr has documented

aspects of British culture, including the working class, the middle class, and consumerism, since the 1980s. His next chapter will cover the entire UK and deal with the Establishment—government offices, public institutions, and the like. These settings provide ideal frameworks for unmasking human foibles and celebrating human... humanness.

"The world is both serious and ridiculous at the same time—yin-yang, you know," Parr says. "It's not just one thing or the other." When you show reality as it stands, both tend to show up side by side. "So I am trying to be honest in myself on how I find and see things," he says.

Before he resumes his photographic saga through Britain, Parr has a plane to catch. What about India? "India is a wonderful, crazy country, so it's always good photographically," he says. It will be a working holiday—"which is often the case these days." Good thing. With so much to see and so many places to photograph, he says, "I could slip behind." ❁

Don't Say Cheese

PARR'S AUTOPORTRAITS SERIES POKES FUN AT OUR LOVE OF NOSTALGIA

WORLD TRAVELER. Street photographer. Cheeky Brit. Put them together and you've got Martin Parr, ultimate tourist. For more than 25 years he has commemorated his adventures by having his portrait taken at the popular amusement attraction, at a local portrait studio, or even in photo booths. The resulting series he calls *Autoportraits*, collected in a recently updated book (Dewi Lewis, 2015), feature Parr at the Wisconsin State Fair, Parr training in martial arts with Vladimir Putin, Parr with Jesus, Parr looking pensive in a high school portrait pose, Parr trapped in a small bottle... You get the idea.

The *Autoportraits* project is an exercise in absurdity, pointing out how seriously we sometimes take ourselves. (The often disastrous attempts at touch-ups serve as a cautionary tale about the perils of overcorrecting your images.)

Now 63, he's grayer, but the thing that never changes is his face's deadpan expression.

"I try to keep that consistent," he says. "Everyone smiles in photos. If I were smiling it wouldn't work as well. So the deadpan adds to the absurdity and humor."

