



INTERVIEW

Seascape
All pictures © Sheila Rock

A TIME TO BE ENGLISH

For anyone not born and bred in Britain, our seaside resorts, combined with our climate, must seem a strange phenomena indeed. But for **Sheila Rock** they were the beginning of a powerful series of images. Elizabeth Roberts reports >



Southend boys



Sheila Rock was born in the USA and educated at Boston University and the London Film School. She has lived in London since 1970.

She has worked across many genres, photographing for the entertainment and music industry, advertising, editorial and fashion with work appearing in numerous magazines including *Elle*, *Glamour* and the *Sunday Times*. She has exhibited widely and her portrait work is held in the permanent collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London. Her book, *Sera: The Way of the Tibetan Monk* was published in 2004.

Having met Sheila Rock on several occasions, I was delighted by the idea of interviewing her at her home in London. As I walk up the street of terraced houses I spot hers from a distance, all tumbling foliage and flowers, small and pretty, like its owner. But, I'm in for a surprise because, when I enter the house, I discover that this is only a façade – the interior has been transformed so that the ground floor reaches right up into the roof, giving the house a remarkably spacious, barn-like feel. It's a warm day and the French doors, leading into a walled garden heavy with giant foliage and ferns, are open and we drift outside into the shady space. Sheila tells me that she's a 'new' gardener but it's hard to believe – I feel as if I'm in Kew Gardens, the plants beautifully cared for and the planting delightful. Like many photographers, her perfectionism clearly spills into other areas of her life.

We sit at a table beneath a vast black & white image of a Tibetan monk, from her series *The Way of the Tibetan Monk* published in 2004, which adds to the atmosphere of tranquillity the house and garden exude. She is softly spoken

with just a trace of an American accent.

I am here to talk to her about her seaside project called *Tough and Tender*. 'I started out doing seascapes,' she explains. 'I was really just playing around with the idea of landscape because I don't get commissioned to do it. I began on the Suffolk coast and enjoyed it.' She then goes on to explain how she took the images to a magazine in Berlin called *La Mer*, which only deals with the sea. 'The editor was very complimentary but she looked at me and said, "I know you, you're a portrait photographer, why are you doing these?"' It set Sheila thinking and when she found herself in Staithes in Yorkshire on a day in June that was only a little less cold than normal, her idea for the project began to form. 'There were lots of school children, coach loads of them, and families. They were from Yorkshire and obviously didn't feel the cold so much!' she says. Her bafflement – and fascination – regarding the English comes from the fact that she is not English herself. 'My family come from Hawaii where everyone sits close to the edge of the sea so they can go in and out of the water to keep cool, but here everyone huddles against the beach wall and very few people swim,' >



she says. 'I showed the pictures to an American girlfriend and she said, "Why do they all have their clothes on if it's summer?" I explained that it was cold and she said, "But why do they go to the beach if it's cold? I just don't get it!"'

Fortunately, Sheila did 'get the English' and started to work her way round our seaside resorts, entranced by their quirky eccentricities. Bleak, windswept and often deserted, they each have their own identity from Kent and East Sussex, up through Suffolk and Norfolk, Whitby, Blackpool and Weston-super-Mare. 'The work became more about the people than the landscape,' she explains. Fitting it in between jobs, she continued, like others before her, to find the English by the sea a source of inspiration.

But, unlike others who have worked in a similar vein, there is an essence to her work that gives it a uniqueness. I struggle to find the words to describe to her what I feel when I look at the pictures. 'It's a sort of tenderness, a melancholy,' I say. 'I find them quite moving – and I've even tested myself by looking at them at 9am on a Monday morning, and still I feel the same!' She seems pleased by this and acknowledges that she intentionally introduced a sense of melancholy into the work. 'It was at the forefront of what I was trying to find. I think English seaside resorts are lonely places particularly when they're not full of people – and they often aren't, because in England the weather is so dreadful.'

Working sometimes alone and sometimes with an assistant, Sheila spent many hours discovering carouselles and Punch & Judy, fish & chips and postcards. And all the time looking for the right face to photograph. 'Sometimes I would just catch a moment in time and sometimes I would approach someone and ask to take their picture,' she explains. 'I was reprimanded by a school teacher when I was photographing some children without asking permission, and she got very heavy with me. So after that I asked the parents and then I asked the children.'

Some days she would get some great pictures while other days produced nothing. If the weather was particularly terrible, she would shoot landscapes or, on one trip to Blackpool and Morecombe in August, she shot people wearing macs in the rain.

Some of the pictures from *Tough and Tender* could be viewed as humorous. A brother and sister stand up to their thighs in the sea, wearing goggles. They are overweight and do not conform to our ideas of beauty. Another photographer might have exploited this, making them objects of fun or derision but Sheila's vision doesn't entertain these things. Through her eyes we see the children in their innocence, open and candid >



Clockwise from top left
Sharkey, Girl in the sea in Weymouth,
Fat boy and Southend slim girl

'I think English seaside resorts are lonely places particularly when they're not full of people – and they often aren't, because in England the weather is so dreadful.'



Top right Fifties couple Right Hastings girl



< Beach bums



Renzie



Canvey girls



Bathing beauty

◀ before her camera, captured with tenderness. It's a kind of unjudgmental acceptance of who they are. They seem to step out of a post-war Britain untouched by Facebook or computer games.

'I took a picture of a young man in Essex. It was really cold and he was swimming,' she says. 'When he came out I stopped and asked him, can I photograph you? He said OK, and just stood there, and when I'd taken it he just walked away – it wasn't like, what are you going to give me or can I have a picture or anything...'

Perhaps that is what Sheila is seeing for the first time at these seaside resorts, the English following a tradition that began in Victorian times of entertainment on the beach, regardless of

weather. You can almost hear the seagulls. 'I think these pictures resonate with you because you are English and you spent your childhood holidays at the coast,' she tells me and I have to agree. 'For others they are interesting because they are so English. With the Olympics, the Royal Wedding and football there's enormous interest in the English. I think the country is proud of its heritage.'

For a self-deprecating English person, such as myself, this is a bit hard to take but the more I look at the pictures, the more I see them as quintessentially English in a way that defies the modern age. Sheila's viewpoint is from the outside looking in, she sees the unfavourable climate, the absurdity, but retrieves it from a

cruelty that could accompany it – the fat child in the bikini, the kissing teenagers in their cheap clothes, the young man with a paunch wading out of the sea still wearing his glasses. At the heart of the work is the fact that Sheila is a portrait photographer, and that comes with its own world view. The pictures reveal not only their subject but the photographer's way of seeing.

▶ sheilarock.com

TOUGH & TENDER EXHIBITION

▶ An exhibition of the work will be shown at Whitstable in 2012 – we will keep you posted