Lawrence Stephen Lowry

After Lowry

Landscape photographer John Davies takes a series of pictures in the northwest of England inspired by the work of LS Lowry

Read next

JUNE 14, 2013 Michael Howard and John Davies

2 comments

Lowry and the city

By Michael Howard

The spectacle of urbanisation is relatively new in human history and Manchester, developing at the turn of the 19th century, has been characterised as the first modern industrial city. “From this foul drain,” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1835, “the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilise the whole world. … Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilisation works its miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage.”

These contradictory attitudes are a constant theme in the modern imagination, and are at the root of L.S. Lowry’s paintings. Born in 1887, and coming to maturity as a painter in the 1920s, he is far from being an outsider. His imaging of the industrial landscape of northwest England makes him a significant figure in the challenge to paint modern life – an ambition he shared both with the Impressionists and with other significant artists of the 20th century.

As Constable and Turner in their different ways painted the beginnings of the industrial revolution, so Lowry painted its slow decline and John Davies, the renowned contemporary landscape photographer, has pictured its survival into the post-industrial period. Davies’s photographs allow us to appreciate the hidden structures that hold Lowry’s pictures together. Davies is servant to the spectacle before him, whereas Lowry had no such restrictions, working not from sight but from memory, aided by quick sketches made on the spot.

Lowry lived in the Manchester area for most of his life. His professional activities as a rent-collector gave him a privileged access both to people’s lives and to the fabric of Manchester’s urban spaces. He painted in the evenings and at weekends, translating the experiences of the day into his paintings. Most of his work was the result of a series of improvisations and he developed his canvases over months, sometimes years, until he felt them finished. There is little topographical exactitude in his work, rather a bringing together of buildings and structures culled from the memory of his day-to-day wanderings in Manchester, Salford and Stockport.

“Most of my land- and townscape is composite, you know,” Lowry told the artist and critic Mervyn Levy. “Made up; part real and part imaginary … bits and pieces of my home locality.

I don’t even know I’m putting them in. They just crop up on their own, like things do in dreams …” On another occasion, in conversation with two close friends, he said, “I wanted to paint myself into what absorbed me. Natural figures would have broken the spell of it, so I made my figures half

unreal.

I did not care for them the way a social reformer does; they are part of a private beauty that haunted me. I loved them and the houses in the same way: as part of a vision."

The juxtaposition of his paintings with the photographs of Davies reveals how neither medium can capture time; they can only point to the impossibility of reclaiming an irretrievable past. Therein lies both their poignancy and their power. They remind us how little we can ever know the world, and of our continuing struggle to translate our knowledge and feelings, memories and activities into material form.

Lowry's paintings and drawings reveal a constant attempt to pin down his own fascination with the city. His art is so familiar in its generic form that it is rarely properly looked at – for these are no simple paintings, but problematic images of a dystopian place. They remind us that though an unmediated response to reality is unachievable, such works as these remain the "necessary fictions" (in the poet Wallace Stevens's phrase) that help us negotiate the territory that is modern life.

Michael Howard is senior lecturer in the School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the author of 'L.S. Lowry, A Visionary Artist' (The Lowry Press, 2000)

Lowry in a lens

By John Davies

When I lived in Manchester and Stockport in the 1980s I was increasingly impressed by the grandeur of the many mills and warehouses in the area – cathedrals of the cotton industry. In 1985 I persuaded Rochdale Art Gallery to commission a photographic survey across Greater Manchester and Lancashire of this rapidly declining industry. Spectacular cotton spinning mills, weaving sheds, dyeing and finishing buildings made to last for centuries were being demolished almost as quickly as I could photograph them. But when Lowry was growing up in the early 20th century he would have seen first-hand the workings of what was then the world's biggest single industrial complex, with Manchester – Cottonopolis – its dominant commercial hub.

This single industry had an enormous impact on the rapid growth and shape not only of Manchester but of the neighbouring towns of Oldham, Salford and Stockport. Manchester invested its wealth in its own infrastructure and encouraged chemical and mechanical engineering research at the city's university. Today, that research has diversified and developed way beyond cotton textile manufacturing.

Despite the massive clearances of the 1980s and 1990s, many mills and warehouses remain, now mostly renovated for a variety of uses. The Brunswick Mill in Ancoats, once one of Britain's largest, has been kept intact. The land opposite has been cleared, in readiness for the next phase of buildings for the New Islington housing development. The clearance has opened up a new view and I took the opportunity to photograph this spread of characteristic red-brick mill buildings that runs along the Ashton Canal.

Lowry's viaducts were often based on the Stockport Railway Viaduct, one of the biggest brick structures in Europe, whose 27 arches span the Mersey valley. In the 19th century it towered over the smoking chimney stacks of numerous mills. And it was this view, observed from a train passing over the viaduct, that Engels described so graphically in 1845 in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*: "Stockport is renowned throughout the entire district as one of the duskiest,

smokiest holes, and looks, indeed, especially when viewed from the viaduct, excessively repellent. But far more repulsive are the cottages and cellar dwellings of the working class, which stretch in long rows through all parts of the town from the valley bottom to the crest of the hill." Now only one mill remains with its chimney intact: a hat museum celebrating the industrial past.

When I was working on another project, focused on the remnants of a coal-mining landscape in the south Wales valleys, I was attracted to the mountain-sized slag heap in Bargoed. The view I chose (which I used for the cover of my 1986 book of industrial landscapes, *A Green and Pleasant Land*) was dominated by a railway viaduct. Some time later I discovered that Lowry had painted the exact same scene in one of his more accurate works, "Bargoed", 20 years earlier.

'Lowry and the Painting of Modern Life', Tate Britain, June 26 to October 20, www.tate.org.uk

John Davies, 'France England' at the Rencontres d'Arles, July 1 to September 22, www.rencontres-arles.com

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved. You may share using our article tools. Please don't copy articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

Print this page Send this article