

René Burri

Retrospective

Reviewed at Manchester Art Gallery

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Although René Burri may not be Magnum's most well known photographer and his name may not conjure up many images, most self-respecting student house should have been decorated with his iconic image of Che Guevara. Admittedly, not the one of him in the beret looking rhetorically into the distance which has been bootlegged and copied into a multitude of ephemera around the world, but the *other* one of Che sitting resplendent with a cigar stubbornly jammed in his mouth taken in Havana in 1963. While this is certainly Burri's most famous image (and it has of course been used to brand this retrospective of his work), the breadth of the material in this show, in terms of places, people and events that Burri has witnessed, says much more about his skill and his legacy as a documentary photographer.

Thankfully, this is not the first image to greet the viewer, but instead a giant enlargement of the first photograph Burri took (although contrary to the exhibition literature I am a little skeptical) which is an image of Winston Churchill riding in a limousine, speeding past a crowd of onlookers in Burri's hometown, Zürich: Churchill's profile is looking ahead confidently, and it is as if Burri has translated this confidence into his career as a photographer. The point is reiterated with the juxtaposition of the tiny, yellowed vintage print with perforated edges next to the contemporary enlargement.

Throughout the exhibition vintage prints are displayed next to the original contexts of the images, that is the magazines which commissioned and published Burri's photo-essays. Burri has also selected images from the series that did not make the publications, giving otherwise discarded images a chance to be seen. Also exhibited are a few original contact sheets, which sometimes curators display for no other reason than their novelty value but in this case – especially the contact sheet of the Che roll of film – are more appropriate. As the exhibition curator,

Hans-Michael Koetzle pointed out; in the contact sheet, one can literally see how the conversation developed, how Che's behavior changed, and the point when Burri made the famous exposure. This provides the viewer with a greater intimacy with an image that has been so widely circulated, therefore highlighting the photograph's historical significance as well as its iconic status.

There also seems to be a relationship between Burri's contact sheets and his images of artists such as Yves Klein and Picasso at work: The contact sheets reveal Burri's work in progress just as the pictures of the artists show their works in progress. Burri's images of his contemporaries and friends are perhaps his most affectionate pictures and reveal his most passionate subjects. However, these individuals do not dominate and hijack this exhibition, as photographs of such strong characters often do.

The installation of these images in general is rather creative. In particular, one small wall is filled with twenty-seven oblong frames (which resemble those panoramic-shaped frames from Ikea that come with a window mount, pre-cut to accommodate a few prints, but as I was politely informed are actually made by the finest framers in France) which contain between three and five vintage work-prints, removed from their original series and re-arranged, without any titles, to create a completely new narrative. One reason for this is to encourage the viewers to deduce for themselves, where the images were taken, but primarily this is designed to strip the images of their cultural and political context and reduce them to a montage of pure, humanistic elements. They do however, have a depressing side effect: One realizes how little seems to change in terms of conflict, from decade to decade.

Burri's visual style, and precisely what distinguishes him from his contemporaries is difficult to define. Like photographers such as Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa, he singles out the individuals who are effected by the greater political situation, with an optimistic vision without glorification celebrating human flaws and contradictions. Visually, his combination of formal and abstract compositions, which at times can even seem arbitrary, is quite unique and very different to a Cartier-Bresson style decisive moment.

I think that both Burri and Koetzle would agree that the real site for this retrospective is within the overwhelming 450 printed pages of the monograph that

accompanies this touring exhibition. With the exception of the panoramic montages as discussed earlier, and the inclusion of the triptychs and contact sheets, seeing some of these familiar images in a gallery installation doesn't necessarily provide a new reading of Burri's photographs, however, it offers a comprehensive and moving impression of his work, his career and his contribution to the medium.