

Martin Parr

Parrworld

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Martin Parr's photographs assume the aesthetic of reality; they are vivid, detailed, and descriptive. He uses the same tools as forensic and medical photographers – a macro lens coupled with a ring-flash – and photographs his subjects methodically. While, of course, interpretations of his images will always be as diverse as his worldwide audiences, his work is not the sort of photography that will leave viewers in any doubt as to what the subject that they are looking at is. However, Parr's success as a documentary photographer is largely due to his ability to present images, without manipulating his subject, that defy the viewer's sense of what is real and what is possible. He defines his practice on Magnum's website by saying, "I like to create fiction out of reality."

Parr's latest series, *Luxury*, introduces us to the reality of the super rich. He has made a grand tour of the Millionaire Fairs, the polo matches and exclusive art fairs that are open only to those who are rich enough to get in. With this series, Parr has completed his collection of economic class demographics, a subject that clearly motivates him and has been the source of most of the negative attention that his work has drawn over the years. In the late 1980s Parr was criticised for his series *The Last Resort*, which examined the British working class holidaying in New Brighton. The middle classes who complained at the voyeuristic nature of that work later found themselves under Parr's scrutiny in his series *The Cost of Living*. In *Luxury*, Parr has employed his close-up, almost didactic visual approach that has become his trademark over the past decade. Some of the images date back to as early as 1995, and are perhaps even cast-offs from his seminal work of the same decade, *Think of England*. In the hyper-"bling" world of *Luxury*, the iridescent, bejewelled subjects complement Parr's technique well. Although there are some witty moments throughout the series, there are quite a few cheap laughs; catching

people unflatteringly in mid-expression rather than ruthlessly scrutinising and exposing the situation.

In the 1980s, one of Parr's responses to the criticism he received – particularly that his work exploring the middle-classes was derogatory – was that he was middle-class himself, and that the work was merely an attempt to understand his own heritage. Although it is unlikely that *Luxury* will provoke its subjects to the same extent, Parr's point of view has not actually altered: A victim of his own success as a photographer, his wealth now puts him amongst the world's elite.

Luxury is being installed at the Haus der Kunst, Munich as part of the exhibition *Parrworld*, which presents the contents of the photographer's cupboards, draws and cabinets; the fruits of years of trawling through car boot sales and eBay to add to his collections of junk and ephemera. Parr has also included a sample of his postcard collection and some items from his personal print collection, rumoured to be the most extensive private collection in Britain.

Parr has already established a reputation for himself as a professional collector, with the publication of his postcards of motorway infrastructure and civic amenities in *Boring Postcards* and, more recently, photographs of his collection of Saddam Hussein watches (the real things can be seen in the exhibition) and *The Photobook – A History* (the book-dummies of which can also be seen here), which presents some of his favourite photography books from his personal collection.

We could be forgiven for mistaking this public display of an artist's personal effects as something more reverential than an exhibition of contemporary photography, perhaps even a posthumous biography. It is certainly quite phenomenal that a photographer can become synonymous with a type of object (the cheap, the tasteless, the disposable) – and vice versa for that matter – and it is extraordinary that people will visit this exhibition to ogle at his items on display. There is something quite perverse about exhibiting a decorative souvenir food tray in the context of an art gallery. However, these collections go beyond functioning as quirky cabinets of curiosities: Not least, objects have been arranged thematically and mostly relate to a particular event or historical epoch. In addition, all of Parr's collections have a common denominator, which is that they include a photographic image of some description. They demonstrate how an image is applied across various contexts

to become embedded within a national consciousness. Everyday objects do not concern Parr, unless they evoke the past. If ever an illustration was required of Bathes' assertion of the nostalgic "*that-has-been*" quality of the photographic image, then peering into one of Parr's cabinets would serve this purpose well.

Parr has often become locked within his own work, demonstrated literally in his *Autoportrait* series (featured in this exhibition), which shows him posing with a dead-pan expression in novelty portrait setups from high street photographers' studios to theme parks across the world. This work continues to amuse audiences, perhaps as it is so rare for a documentary photographer to make work that contains his or her own image repeatedly, which has made Parr's face recognisable throughout photography – a medium whose canons usually remain figuratively anonymous. The most likable aspect of this work is that Parr is prepared to place himself in the thick of this tastelessness, although his expression – like that of a grumpy child who would rather be doing anything but have their photograph taken – suggests that he is not getting completely into the swing of things. The same could be said of the *Luxury* series: Although Parr would probably rather browse categories on eBay than rub shoulders with billionaires at polo matches, he is a wealthy individual, and some of the subjects in these photographs are the sort of clients that patronise his work. Perhaps this project is as much a chance for him to come to terms with this reality as it is a chance for us to gawp at the spectacle of opulence.