

Article

Martin Steininger of The Photographers' Gallery, London, interviews Craig Atkinson of Café Royal Books for Gasoline Magazine May 2017

Atkinson, Craig

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Martin Steininger: What intrigues me personally about Café Royal Books is the mixture of publisher and archive, which I think gives your venture a strong dynamism.

I would like to start off with referring to the possibility of a British archive - In our Bookshop we don't normally distinguish territorially but the changing political landscape in recent months – potentially culminating (for now) in next week's triggering of article 50 by the British government - have led me to looking more into the representation of this small island. What does British actually mean? We have been trying to put on more or less relevant Bookshop displays on this topic recently to maybe find an answer (at least from the photographers...).

So - Is Café Royal Books the ultimate place to go to find out about Britishness?

Craig Atkinson: Ha, not sure I'd be so arrogant to say yes, but perhaps the books collectively say something. I think it's easy to find things on the eccentricities, or the history, or the former industry etc etc...I don't focus on any of those in particular but hope the books are a window in, to many of those sections of society, history, politics etc.

MS: How do you actually select what you publish?– you had mentioned before you get a lot of submissions ...(understandably – you might be an easy target for people to say oh I have this quirky project - lets do a CRB...)

CA: I get a couple of submissions each day. Many are addressed to 'hey guys', and signed, 'thanks mate'. Usually these are unsuitable, not because of the language used but because they're sent to multiple publishers in one batch email, with no consideration to what each publish.

Some submissions are replicas of what has already been published by Café Royal Books. Some are excellent. It's all very subjective, but I have always had a rule that I'll never publish work that I don't like. The books are about the pictures.

So, short answer is, some subs and others I find / chase / hound...Chris Killip, for example, has been on my 'hit list' for many years, and things have always been 'in the future'. We spoke the other week and are working on a book for later in the year. It's always exciting to get work from people I've never heard of too though, and work that's never been seen.

MS: Chris Killip is kind of the ultimate CRB artist – I am sure it will be a classic!!!

On that note - I do somehow feel the programme shows a tendency towards white male middle aged artists – can I say this?

Do you think there is a specific CRB community?

Having said that – anecdotally and interestingly I am selling a lot of CRB titles books to younger ladies...

CA: Yes, do say it, it's true. Over 99% of submissions are from men. I don't like 'positive discrimination', so will never put a call out for women photographers, but when I do make a call for submissions I always make a point of stating exactly this, and still very few. I don't know what the answer is but it certainly isn't intentional.

I don't think there is a specific Café Royal Books community. I sell mostly through the website and there are a wide variety of names / genders seemingly. I don't get personal

details or ages so can't comment too much, but there's certainly a mix of male and female names on the orders! Likewise, at the fairs I take part in, custom is totally mixed in terms of gender and age, and reasons for buying. Nostalgia, place, gift, the photographer, a collector...I like, and encourage the mix.

MS: Yes – I feel the same what I observe in the shop, it is a good customer mix, in that respect CRB is entirely in line with TPG's mission, ha!

I personally find the strongest Café Royal Books publications are the ones dealing with the built environment, postwar architecture, housing issues, gentrification – the modernist references go well together with the design system and the materiality of the books.

Most of those I think are photographed by yourself – I remember a particular one including an essay by Owen Hatherley, it was on a symposium in Preston I believe, the first CRB I had ever seen.

The postwar architecture/environment is your true passion?

CA: I do like post war architecture generally. What I like more is when the building / place is used and accessible to wander through, so you kind of become a tourist in that environment. So the books I've made on the subject are about the architecture and the mass of it but about the space and the walk too.

There was a book with parts of a conversation with Hatherley. It was made as part of the Revisiting Utopia Symposium by In Certain Places. That was indeed one of the first Café Royal Books of this type.

Madness in London right now? Shooting / stabbing / cars ploughing on the bridge - look at the news...

MS: Yeah shots outside the parliament I hear from my colleague... - starting off the conversation with the image of Britain, this is now a way to end it I guess...

To really end on a positive note – we love your work, and I also can tell you this: we will be getting out a spinner for CRB books so we have a even better dedicated space for the books, and: looking forward to the Killip book, maybe he will be available for a signing...

CA: Ha, the spinner's finally coming! Ace!

Yes, Killip is on, the book is at proof now. Definitely happening. Maybe more than one...He sent me an amazing book the other day, I think there must only be a handful of copies. Self published, made for his friend, Sting.

MS: Haha talking about middle aged men!

CA: ha, yes