

ARTnews

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John Riddy

LAWRENCE MARKEY

This intriguing and intelligent exhibition of English photographer John Riddy's works consists of some of the photographs he took relating to the 28 chapters of art critic John Ruskin's autobiography, *Praeterita*. The project was commissioned by the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts at Oxford.

Riddy read the autobiography as a travelogue through Ruskin's life—giving landscape and monuments as important a place as people. He placed his camera in the spaces Ruskin described, photographing what he believed was the essence of the experience of each chapter. The fine black-and-white silver-gelatin prints, which Riddy printed himself, purport to capture what Ruskin saw, if not what he experienced. Looking at *London (Thames)*, 1999, we see an old steamer docked in the foreground, but across the Thames, in profile, the Millennium Wheel is being raised amid the modern urban sprawl of the embankment. The subtle gradation of the print is contradicted by the glaring urban artifacts, making us question how much of Ruskin's pertinence has been erased from our landscape also.

In places we might believe would never change, such as the ruins of the Forum, depicted in *Rome (Forum)*, 1999, construction cranes loom behind the silhouette of the columns majestically rising above the plastic tarp of excavations. But then the Roman Forum has been the subject of archeological digs and restoration since the Renaissance. Only the photo *Abbeville*, 2000, showing the facade of the monastic church of St. Riquier, remains timeless, and the row of wooden bathing cabins lining the beach in *Calais*, 2000 stands intact as in the days of Ruskin. But we know these are either carefully preserved places or ones that by pure chance have escaped the obliteration of time—even though it has touched everything else beyond the picture's frame.

—Charles Russ



John Riddy, *London (Thames)*, 1999, 1999, silver gelatin print, 15" x 19".
Lawrence Markey.