

Back when I was living in the smoke, I remember seeing road signs for 'The North', driving out of Kilburn, up past Cricklewood, before hitting the M1. It always reminded me of an undergraduate lecture I attended by Bill Robb, titled *Where is the North?* He wondered how far the unsuspecting driver had to go before the road signs stopped; that you were *actually* in the North. Of course, conventional wisdom has it that the North is anything past the Watford gap. As a teenager, I always thought Watford was far-too-far *darn sarf* to mark the beginnings of northernness. As it turned out, the Watford gap is actually a space marked by two hills, near the Northamptonshire village of Watford. These little known hills don't get a mention in the latest Open Eye show, *North: Identity, Photography, Fashion*, which is probably a good thing. Instead, curators Lou Stoppard and Adam Murray, explore the place we call the North through various cultural strands, with themes often portrayed in media and art re-wired and unfolded.

The opening space has a Salon feel, with photographic representations of the North filling the wall space. The selection spans everyday life – people out and about in northern cities – and the more staged fashion work. There are some nice little eddies of things: northern landscapes mixed-in with photos of Liverpoolian teenagers. Some of the photographers blur the lines; people captured in their homes with professional lighting rigs. It's the kind of thing you might see in a high-end fashion magazine, with ladles of irony. I'm never quite sure about this work – isn't it a bit patronizing? – although I can understand their inclusion from a critical point-of-view. Humphrey Jennings' 1939 film for the General Post Office Film Unit is on the left of the space and is certainly worth a watch. It's based on three towns and their industries – steel in Sheffield, cotton in Manchester, coal in Pontypridd – back when the North was an industrial powerhouse, before the northern powerhouse.

Gallery 2 begins with Jason Evans' street portraits in Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield. These images are done on-the-fly and have a certain charm. The people look shy and unaffected, particularly when compared to the more staged set-ups. This space also has a selection of fashion items, with clothes racks set up to display jackets and trainers. Of note, is Virgil Abloh's amusing 'tribute-knit' jumper to the Gallagher brothers, with the Burnage boys' pixellated image staring out nonchalantly, in

the same red and black as Freddy Krueger's own legendary pullover. Continuing the Manchester music vibe, there is a trace of Central Station Design's work, with 'Madchester' embroidered jeans and the Happy Monday's *Bummed* LP cover (the album being part of a Jeremy Deller work). Not all of it works – the FAC 51-Y3 Adidas trainers, in homage to the Hacienda, feel a bit forced – but it's an interesting array of stuff. A couple of old-time ravers were knocking around in the gallery, swapping stories and having a laugh; memories triggered by the artefacts presented.

Upstairs in Gallery 3, there are interviews with some of the key players from the various scenes. The curators have tried to do something with the room, setting up seating areas that broadly relate to northern life: grandma's living room; a bus seat; a teenager's bedroom. You could spend a good while listening to the recordings. I found it somewhat reassuring to learn that fashion designer Gareth Pugh is from Sunderland. I kept thinking about Roishin Murphy videos – for which Pugh provided the outfits – and toughened North-East blokes in hard hats. One contributor discusses her northern routes, suggesting her background offered a different perspective on arrival in London; that perhaps she appreciated it more than the culturally saturated natives. All the interviews are set with archive footage, with Google Streetview also used to explore the places being talked about, putting an emphasis on space and geography.

The show does more than map out a more easily defined Euclidean space, though. It's more the sense of place that is the North. The people in the photos don't have clear-cut boundaries. Things get tangled up, which is a point made in the gallery website blurb. Like my mate's older sister who moved to Japan after getting connected at Mancunian Acid House raves. There has to be looseness in thinking about something as vast as this region; an infinite configuration of thoughts and things, continually on-the-move. This show distills some rhythms and patterns, but there's an openness, moving forward. Not so much where is the North, more where is it at.

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