

19 October – 23 November 2012

CHRIS STEELE-PERKINS Fading Light
A Portrait of British Centenarians

The award winning Magnum photographer Chris Steele-Perkins became intrigued when he read the astonishing figure released by the Office of National Statistics relating to life expectancy.

In 2010 there were 12,640 people in the UK aged 100 and over, compared with 2,500 in 1980. The O.N.S. predicts that 5% of people alive today in the UK will live to be over 100. That is 3 million.



However, this exhibition goes way beyond statistics. It is more akin to Paul Bailey's great novel 'At the Jerusalem' which was set in an old people's home of that name. As the synopsis of that book claimed, Bailey's study of 'the physical frailty of humanity and the blackly bizarre nature of human disintegration are significant symbols of what it means to be human'. So it is with Chris Steele-Perkins' portrait of this new generation of centenarians. In his photographs of 32 people of differing backgrounds, each with a personal story, it is all there. In the care homes there are antiseptic details; the plastic jugs, the rows of pills, the nylon coats of the care workers, their air of well-intentioned encouragement notwithstanding. In their own homes there are familiar knick-knacks, family pictures and portraits of the Queen.

As for the centenarians themselves, they often appear to be out of time, lost in a world of memories. This is confirmed by the interviews in which the responses are by turns cantankerous, confused, unguardedly frank or humorous – though often with a gallows humour. Among the many positive features of this study, however, are the exceptional characters who still have a lively engagement with life and the selfless care given by their children (usually daughters). Indeed some of the most beguiling images are ones of sheer delight such as the undiluted happiness of Betty Stobbart (born 14 October 1910) to a group of little girls singing, "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when ..."



Monday to Thursday 10am – 5pm
Friday and Saturday 10am – 4pm
Closed Sundays and Bank Holidays / Admission Free

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Images Fauja Singh, Born 1 April 1911

Betty Stobbart, Born 14 October 1910 (based in Newcastle upon Tyne) © Chris Steele-Perkins