A significant exhibit of "Contemporary British Photographers" is on view at MIT's Creative Photography gallery now through March 19. Sponsored by MIT's Council for the Arts and the British Council for the Arts, the exhibit offers the work of ten important photographers. As curator Linda Benedict-Jones points out in her notes, the attention focused on the masters of 19th century British photography has resulted in neglect of 20th century endeavour. Similarly, in the mid 1970s, English photographers were preoccupied with the work of American artists but by the end of the decade the reaction had begun and there was growing confidence in the British tradition. That tradition, asserts Benedict-Jones, is largely documentary, making British photographers "ever-cognizant of the communicative power of photography." Running through all the works exhibited is the commitment to commentary — all the photographs are concerned with communicating something, and the content ranges from highly personal, as in the photos of Brian Griffin, to Paul Trevor's highly social work.

Almost all the pictures are framed by some societal context — there is an elusive "Britishness" to every picture, be it in a Wordsworthian reverence for the countryside or a biting social consciousness. After meditating on a 'site' for several "irrealistic" hours, John Biskermore opens his eyes to shoot woodland scenes, glows where puffy grass glows softly, stands of blurred trees and ferns. "When you first open your eyes, the light has a tremendous power and tenderness," a quality which he translates to his prints.

About his pictures, Brian Griffin will only say "My photography displays my interest in light" — his photos are quirky, cheery things. Loopy, suited businessmen, actors, and artists make frozen portraits in the best English tradition. Also documentary, the works of Sirkka-Liisa Kontinen are more human portraiture, "a gentle celebration of the working class" on "English Beaches"; in one joyous photo, two girls dressed in the best splash knee-deep in the tide, full of abandon.

Paul Trevor's work is also superb. His is the most documentary of all — urban, British life — and as in the high-voltage rockabilly gang pose, or the shot of a cheeky boy peeking fun at the Bobbies, both the squalor and the energy are recorded. "Walking the Dog" is a funny series by Keith Arnatt. His idea was to do portraits of dogs on equal terms with their masters. The old adage that dogs and masters look alike is hilariously borne out, despite Arnatt's clever denial.

Unfortunately, the collaboration between Jo Spence and Terry Dennett ("pre-visualized, large format work," as they have it) seems quite pretentious next to these. The concept of photograph's history paralleling or reflecting capitalism's is intriguing (the photos here mimic photographic tradition and conventions and their decay) is interesting but over-done. Their contemporary, Paul Hill, whose landscapes are shown cautions interpretation of photography, while Fay Godwin, also a photographer of the English countryside, denies the distinction between documentary and creative photography.

This is a unique opportunity to view the works of photographers seldom seen or discussed in the US. But perhaps word will spread; this exhibit will travel to Amherst and North Carolina later this year. Gallery hours are 9 to 10 Monday through Friday, 10 to 6 on Saturday, and noon to 8 on Sunday.

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