



'London Nights', Museum of London, 11 May–11 November 2018

Reviewed by

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The contrast between London's diurnal and nocturnal identities is thrown into sharp relief in the 'London Nights' exhibition at the Museum of London, in which night-time London, and the challenges of capturing it, are placed centre stage. Featuring an eclectic range of over two hundred works by sixty photographers, the exhibition takes us from the late nineteenth century to the present day, and from the bright lights of central London to its far-flung suburbs. 'Nightwalking' in London has long been a favourite theme of writers: Charles Dickens's night-time peregrinations, described in his celebrated essay 'Night Walks' (1860), exposed London's dark underside; for Virginia Woolf, stepping out into the winter gloaming in Bloomsbury, we are 'no longer quite ourselves' at night.¹ In this sense, the exhibition speaks to Matthew Beaumont's *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London* (2015). Joining the attempt to document and reclaim the neglected, only half-familiar cityscape, the photographers here present images that capture London in all its nightly forms.

The first part of the exhibition, 'London Illuminated', focuses on the use of limited and artificial light to photograph the nocturnal city space. Taking photographs at night posed a technical challenge to early photographers, because photography depends, of course, on the availability of light. One of the earliest pioneers of night photography, Paul Martin, used long exposure times (between ten and forty-five minutes) on a wooden Facile magazine plate camera to create his *London by Gaslight* series (1896).² His image *Embankment at Night* depicts a still, snowy scene softly illuminated by gas lamps. Later, with the advent of electric lights, the night-time city was even more brightly lit. The inky photogravures of Harold Burdekin capture the

light thrown on silent, empty streets; other photographers focus on the ubiquitous lights and advertisements of Piccadilly Circus. Counter to this fascination with artificial light is Thierry Cohen's striking image *London 51° 30' 17" N 2015-02-17 LST 10:39* (2015), a digital composite photograph of London's financial district taken from the south bank of the Thames, combined with the bright, starry night sky above Kazakhstan. Imagining what London would look like were it not for light and atmospheric pollution, Cohen's photograph transports us to an alternate, highly desirable reality.

The second part, 'Dark Matters', presents more sinister aspects of the city in the guise of both real and imagined threats. There are photographs of the Blitz by Bill Brandt and Herbert Mason that show the destruction of buildings, shot in blackout conditions with moonlight as the only source of light, as well as photographs of people taking refuge in the underground shelter of the tube. The photography of Lewis Bush, by contrast, shows the unremitting construction of corporate high rises and luxury flats in central London, the high-contrast double exposures creating a disorienting, vertiginous effect that reflects the way many native Londoners feel when confronted with this ever-changing, and increasingly unfamiliar, landscape. Eerie, empty streets and seemingly abandoned city spaces also abound here, as do disconcerting and equivocal images of, among many things, unidentifiable, red-tinged liquid trickling down a street, and rats in a sleeping woman's bedroom. There is also a distinctly gendered aspect to this part of the exhibition: the safety of women alone at night is addressed by Brandt's *Footsteps Coming Nearer* (c. 1933-6) and Bert Hardy's photograph from his series *Life in the Elephant* (1948), both of which show women standing alone on the street, objects of a voyeuristic and predatory gaze. Alexis Hunter's *Dialogue with a Rapist* (1978) is a powerful series of ten black and white photographs, each accompanied by dialogue that narrates an attempted attack, based on Hunter's real-life encounter with a man on the streets of Bermondsey.

The last section, 'Switch On Switch Off', shows the disparate activities that Londoners engage in after dark. Nick Turpin's photographs are beautiful portraits of commuters travelling in the winter evening on the night bus, while passing through Elephant and Castle. Capturing his subjects through the top deck window using a telephoto lens and slow shutter speeds, Turpin's photographs are like paintings, both in their use of colour, and as a result of the condensation on the windows, which creates a hazy, dreamlike effect.³ Many of the other photographs in this section are focussed on London's nightlife, capturing the West End and Soho, but also documenting subcultures such as teddy boys, mods, and the grime scene. Meanwhile, Damien Frost's series of portraits from *Night Flowers* (2016) show the wonderfully elaborate and often surreal costumes of 'drag queens and kings, club kids, alternative queer, transgender and gender-queer people, goths, artists, and cabaret, burlesque and fetish performers'.⁴ There are also a number of photographs from John Goto's series *Lovers' Rock*, taken in 1977 but only published in 2013, which portray young black British dancers at Lewisham Youth Centre, where Goto taught photography. Taken in the year that the Battle of Lewisham took place as a result of the far-right National Front march against multicultural Britain, these photographs should be seen in the context of this political and cultural unrest. They capture, as Paul Gilroy has argued, a 'pivotal generation as it proceeds cautiously towards an unambiguous

articulation of the dissenting position that was mirrored fleetingly in one political slogan of the time: "here to stay, here to fight".⁵

'London Nights' occasionally feels a little disjointed, but it successfully captures the myriad identities of London as it metamorphoses under cover of darkness. Invigorating, alluring, and at times disquieting, the city reveals hidden depths, but ultimately remains an enigma.

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', *Collected Essays*, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), IV, pp. 155–166 (p. 155).
2. Roy Flukinger, Larry Schaaf, and Standish Meacham, *Paul Martin: Victorian Photographer* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978), p. 54.
3. Nick Turpin, *On the Night Bus* (London: Hoxton Mini Press, 2016), n.p.
4. Damien Frost, *Night Flowers: From Avant-Drag to Extreme Haute Couture* (London: Merrell Publishing, 2016), p. 7.
5. Paul Gilroy, 'There is Love in the City', in John Goto, *Lover's Rock* (London: Autograph, 2013), pp. 15–19 (p. 15).

Works Cited

- Flukinger, Roy, Larry Schaaf, and Standish Meacham, *Paul Martin: Victorian Photographer* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978).
- Frost, Damien, *Night Flowers: From Avant-Drag to Extreme Haute Couture* (London: Merrell Publishing, 2016).
- Gilroy, Paul, 'There is Love in the City', in John Goto, *Lover's Rock* (London: Autograph, 2013), pp. 15–19.
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