



## Photography

### 'This is sacrilege'

From the despoliation of the Pacific north-west to the brutal murder of Smiths songs, the Deutsche Börse photography prize has something to outrage everyone, says Adrian Searle

[Gallery: see works by the shortlisted artists](#)

## Adrian Searle

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The gangling teenager on the screen is murdering the Smiths. To make things worse, it is one of my favourite tracks. A pair of infectious happy girls have just done a nice karaoke of *There Is a Light That Never Goes Out*, and earlier on there was a slightly camp rendition of *Boy With the Thorn in His Side* that wasn't bad either, with swoop-armed early-Morrissey turns and dives from a kid with a house key safety-pinned to his jumper. This one, though, doesn't make me smile. I don't think his voice has properly broken - he warbles between octaves. He's short-sighted, too, reading the lyrics off a crumpled sheet of paper. At one point, he even falls off the screen. This is sacrilege. But, I'll

off a crumpled sheet of paper. At one point, he even falls off the screen. This is sacrilege. But, I'll admit, alone in the space with the video and the backing track, I find it impossible not to do my own appalling singalong to songs that, 20 years or so ago, sound tracked a sticky patch in my own life. Heaven knows I was miserable then. But what does all this have to do with photography?

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Phil Collins is one of the four shortlisted artists in this year's Deutsche Börse Photography prize, which opens at the Photographers' Gallery in London on Friday. Now in its 10th year (for eight of these, it was sponsored by Citibank), the prize has become one of the world's most prestigious. This is only the second occasion that video work has been included: I'm not sure it's entirely a good idea. Do I really want the Smiths' jangly pop filling my head while I'm trying to think about Robert Adams's retracing of Lewis and Clark's 19th-century exploration of America's Pacific northwest? As I'm following Alec Soth's journeys down the Mississippi from Minnesota to New Orleans? Or when I'm trying to concentrate on Moroccan-born Yto Barrada's images, which, the show's catalogue tells me, explore "states of liminality through a critically engaged political poetic"? A media studies student somewhere is probably writing something similar about Morrissey and his chums.

Collins's work is too intrusive. But he is, after all, an aggressive artist. Although not included in the show, he was also nominated for an ongoing series of portrait photographs, taken the moment after he had slapped his subjects round the face. He's a happy slapping snapper. Perhaps this is a metaphor for photography itself, or for relationships within the art world, which his smarting, startled subjects all belong to.

His karaoke video here, *dünya dinlemiyor*, was shot in Istanbul, with Turks so young many of them weren't even born when the Smiths hit the charts. The singers all stand before wall-sized photo posters of mountain landscapes, lakes, woods and blossom, running through the songs on a Smiths compilation album. Collins previously did something very similar in Bogotá. The video seems to be about affection, confrontation, embarrassment, and the relationship between cultures - in this case, Britain and Turkey. Collins asks, in an interview with Jeremy Millar, "Who says anyone should be nice? Who said anything about an artwork not being an imposition?" I'll go along with that, but these young Turks are, after all, part of the MTV generation, and media savvy. In the end, where's

the confrontation, where's the bite?

Yto Barrada's photos are intended to carry more weight than they actually do. Born in Tangier, living in Paris, she makes images that address the proximity and distance between Morocco and Europe. Looking at an image of a boy trying to crawl through a hole in a fence, one might think of Moroccans trying to storm the fences surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco - but he's just crawling under the chain-link of a football pitch. Two suited men embrace: the fact that they are standing on Tangier's Rue de la Liberté may or may not be significant. A girl in a red patterned dress, her back to us, plays jacks against a wall of Moorish tiles. What does this mean?

Images mean something, they mean nothing, they mean many things. The tension between the specific and ambiguity is an essential part of their power, and why they are compelling. One of Barrada's images, a composition of blue spattery blobs against a black void, appears entirely abstract - until one reads the descriptive title, which tells us that this is a view of rust holes in the top of a shipping container. It is a view, then, of the sky, seen from the inside of a steel box. One's mind inevitably turns to the hidden human traffic crossing the few kilometres to Andalucia.

One must take Barrada's images as a group, as much as they are singular images. Photographers use the cumulative effects of dissonance, contrast, difference, repetition and juxtaposition in the place of a narrative. Discussing narrative in photography, Alec Soth says it is rarely successful, and instead compares photography to poetry. I almost agree: a photograph can be like a line from a poem. You don't need the whole story or even a whole verse, because there's too much of the writer's voice in there, and as viewers we want some space left for our own. A photo as compact and vulnerable as a single line will do.

Travelling the Mississippi with a large-format camera, Soth has photographed people, places, rooms. Here's a backwater with a drowned mattress, and a bedstead standing on the swampy river's edge. Herman's bedroom - hung like a Christmas grotto with baubles and cheap decorations - could be a kid's room but is more likely the room of a man whose needs are both libidinous and childish. There's a geeky preacher called Patrick whose suit is too big, carrying a Bible and a leaf on Palm Sunday in Baton Rouge, and another image of a scary man in a boiler suit and balaclava, a model airplane in either hand. In a hobo jungle of abandoned chairs and empty booze bottles, the American flag dangles from a bush.

Soth's best images are filled with emptiness. A chair peeks around the doorway of a vacant room in New Orleans, a light bulb dangling in the room beyond it, burning in daylight. This is a photograph filled with the echo of dead air. There's a portrait on the wall of the empty room. We've been to such places before, but Soth really has an eye for hopelessness. The colour and richness of his photographs sharpens the way you look at them and, like William Eggleston's work, somehow makes his images all the more forlorn.

Something similar, although in an entirely different register, happens in Robert Adams's small, elegiac black-and-white silver gelatin prints, taken as he made his own journey through America, following the Columbia river upstream into what were once the majestic virgin forests of the Pacific north-west in Oregon. These are scenes of devastation, decapitated ancient trees, grubbed-up

roots, a litter of shredded bark and splinters spreading to the distant, shorn mountains. Each twig and stem and splintered bole quivers close and countable in these high-resolution images. The delicacy of the prints makes the scenes he depicts even worse. They make you angry.

His images of a magnificent spruce, or of the corner of an orchard or a country road on a summer day, make the devastation elsewhere even more poignant. At one point he stood among the weeds and stumps in Clatsop County, Oregon, and took a photo, looking towards the distant mountains. He turned a little to the right and took a second image. Here, these adjacent photos say, and here as well. You can tell he's furious, however quiet the photographs. The anger is in the images and sometimes in their titles, too. As well as recording where he took the photo, Adams sometimes goes on, as here: "Among the consequences of clearcutting is its effect on the human spirit. How conducive the practice is to a general attitude of contempt."

After this, I don't want to look any more. I don't want to hear the Smiths, I don't want anything. How can America have done such things to itself? A banal question. It began not long after Lewis and Clark reported back after their epic journey in 1806. Adams' photographs have a dismal beauty, as metaphor and fact. They have a finality about them. They ought to win the prize.

• The Deutsche Börse photography prize is at the Photographers' Gallery, London WC2, from Friday until April 23. Details: 020-7831 1772 or [photonet.org.uk](http://photonet.org.uk)