

# Carousel in Snow

Alistair Robinson



Carousel in Snow 2007

The English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan famously wrote that “I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see [the play] *Look Back in Anger*”. I, similarly, doubt I could befriend anyone who could not start to recognise the overwhelming poignancy condensed into this single still image. For one, even to those who know little of Russia – those who, like me, know only a little of its immensity, its extraordinary place in global history, its extremes of climate and geography, and its inestimable gifts to the world – well, even we can see that here is a picture that somehow speaks about these, however obliquely. This, surely, is the basis of the entirety of modern art – that a haystack, a wheatfield, a group of apples or a sunflower can move us enormously, and speak to us with extraordinary immediacy and intensity because of what the artist invests them with.

Still, this motif, and the place of its making are hardly insignificant. Could this scene be anywhere other than Russia? I suspect even a child could place it immediately. If where it is cannot be in doubt, 'when it is' is a more slippery problem. This scene could have been shot at any point in the last century. More immediately apparent, though, *Carousel in Snow* is more beautiful than any mere photograph deserves to be. To which a sceptic might reply: what kind of beauty is this? Why is this work important to us, in the twenty-first century? To which we might answer: this beauty exists through a very particular idea of time, one that stands at a remove from the Enlightenment idea of an arrow flying through darkness, illuminating only the moment.

Askew's art is (usually) created in photographs. Photography is, of course, only ever photons of light captured on a sheet of film or by a CCD at one particular moment of time. Or, to reverse the equation, it is a particular slice of time from the past rendered visible in light, our present. In this sense photography is, at its best, a medium that is as simple as it is profound. And yet an artist of time, which I think we should describe Askew as being, can conjure new ways of imagining our place in time. Or again, to reverse that, the artist can help us imagine time's place within us.

The most startling thing about Askew's work, and the most difficult to articulate is how they seem to occupy multiple timeframes at once. It would be wrong to say that they are almost 'timeless' – though they often appear that initially – because the reverse is true. One well-known artist commented of Askew's work that it was impossible to tell when his pictures were shot, impossible to know which decade they were from. This was intended as the highest form of compliment: his pictures transcend the circumstances of their origin to attain the status of art in this way.

Each of Askew's works should be seen as being *saturated* with time, rather than 'about' time. His working method is not that of an analytic philosopher, taking 'time' as a concept to be unpicked. Instead, we are offered a novelist's thick description of people and place such that time itself becomes *palpable* – is felt as manifest, as being the medium of life itself. This work was shot in 2007 and printed in 2019. The gap between the two is important. The picture is of a recent past, rather than only of the immediate past. It occupies another, different time to us. It bears the character

of a memory made vivid, as if projected from the deepest recesses of our minds onto photographic paper. At its finest, the play of time in Askew's images is near-magical in its intricacy and intensity. Put another way, when encountering Askew's work, we can begin to dwell *in* a state of play.

This work, in particular, allows his subject matter and his entire ethos to sit in perfect harmony, to align. The sense of time here is as thick and deep as the snow. Indeed one reason this picture exemplifies what his project does is that the snow might be thought to provide an apt metaphor for the way in which Askew is an artist of time. Each and every moment that his camera captured is sharply individuated – the types of light across the seasons carefully observed. Each situation retains its uniqueness, each aspect of the Russian landscape is portrayed, in the fullest sense of that word. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Askew, across his body of work, has taken as many pains as Monet to capture the many moods of Perm, in its long white-out winters and across the brilliant blue skies of its summers. The key here is that, seen cumulatively, his work envelops us into a vast temporal scheme. Details do not remain discrete incidents, but are part of a whole, just as each scene in the great Russian novels amplifies rather than merely succeeds its predecessors.

A paradox: photographs work by dividing up time into discrete segments, and preserving them forever. But works of art *unify* time. Or they feel to *defy* time, at least in the conventionalised sense the idea has accrued. If it is a twenty-first century work, Askew's picture speaks about the length of time that this world took to make, not the moment it was shot. It speaks of a timescale stretching over several generations. Indeed, it was made through an extraordinary process of working over three decades of visiting Russia, when the artist has stayed with a multi-generational family – great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and children all together. Askew's work is not a chronicle of a single, linear course of change. For one thing, his pictures are not shown in chronological order, and the usual ways in which we can date photographs to within a few years – the styling of commodities, of clothes, cars, and haircuts – seem simply not to apply here. Without these signs to shape the flow of time, we start to experience time cumulatively, rather than sequentially. Each

work is a single thread in an entire tapestry, in which a highly particular type of affect is woven.

If such observations can seem abstract at one remove, they are palpable encountering Askew's prints in a gallery setting. There, their artistry becomes plain. This is to say that his exquisite compositions appear effortless, even where their formal perfection is hard won. After all, this is merely one of over 20,000 negatives shot over Askew's quarter-century journey into the heartland of Russia. In the classical tradition, the truest art always conceals its own artistry, and Askew's works are blessed with the lightest of touches. *Carousel in Snow* possesses the sense of poise of his very best works. It has a characteristic sense of grace which arises not from the motif itself, but from the artist's treatment of it.

This sense of grace is tied to what we might call the 'timelessness' of Askew's works: that is, that they refuse to be seen as merely informational, as documents. History, in Askew's work, is seen from what historians call the 'bottom up'. This reflects Askew's ethos, in which each and every thing in the frame is given its due, people most of all. History does not happen to the people in his photographs – it is lived out, and its evidence is everywhere. It is manifest most of all in his celebration of habits, routines, shared rituals of daily life.

Put rather better, Askew's work almost embodies the historian Fernand Braudel's concept of the *longue durée* that we share with our peers and predecessors. History here is found, above all, in relationships. Askew lives out EM Forster's doctrine to "only connect", placing prime emphasis on an ethic of respect for others, and respect for the world that we collectively inhabit. This whole body of work originated through the artist's admirable gift for friendship. When in his thirties, he was given the opportunity to visit Perm for the first time, where he forged a life-long connection with a family that he has visited year on year since the 1990s. The fact that the family were at the far opposite end of the same continent, and spoke a different language, was readily overcome.

Friendship, we might say, is an imaginative gift to others. It rests on the desire to connect, and to occupy a shared imaginative space with others. Askew's work

partakes of this ethos. It offers us an imaginative space where we may ourselves become immersed in another world. *Carousel in Snow* is an invitation not only to reverie, though it certainly offers that, but to think about the life-span of this object, of the lives it has shared across generations.

Can we imagine the children's long, long wait through the seemingly endless winters to return to their beloved plaything? Can we imagine their spontaneous joy when spring returns, and they can run out onto the carousel, for one more summer? And can we imagine their parents' wistful, bittersweet knowledge that this coming summer could be the very last that their child wants only to play, play and play again, and to leap onto the carousel – before they plunge into the maelstrom of adolescence and the transition to adulthood? *Carousel in Winter* offers us pleasures of memory and of anticipation alike. It invites us to share in the children's sense of longing for the near-future of spring, of running outside into the crisp air. And it asks us to remember how fleeting, how beautiful, and how intense that state of childhood play is. That state of play is, for Askew, a true ideal. In his world, childhood innocence is akin to the state that the great European Romantics saw in it: the ideal human state that adults can only aspire to. In his work, play is our defining activity as a species. We are *homo ludens* at our best. Play is the activity when we are most fully ourselves, and how we befriend each other. Modern life pushes us into becoming *homo economicus*, Gradgrindian bean-counters who know the value of nothing and the price of everything. We must resist that fate, and art can show us how. It can remind us that in play we are joyful, and in joy we are our most human, our most *humane*. Askew's work reminds us that we live to play, not only to work.

Without play we lose the best part of our selves. We only ever recapture it for moments, obliquely, or when we can recollect our childhoods with unexpected force and clarity. Just occasionally, though, in our encounters with art, we can experience a kind of epiphany where we become aware of our best selves, of what human life lived to its fullest can be. Sadly, such epiphanies cannot be scheduled or made to order. If they are to be found at all, it is in unexpected places, where they can take us by surprise.

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