

Workers of the world unite: Carlos Saladén-Vargas 'Smokes Free'

As Britain recovers from its worst financial crisis since the depression of the 1930s and the economy flirts far too long with recession, it seems that no lessons have been learned (or perhaps they've been avoided) and nothing has changed. The closest thing to a revolution we've experienced is an upsurge in popularity for the Liberal Democrat party – and that's probably only because both Labour and Conservative parties haven't actually presented the electorate with any policies in the run up to the election.

The banks, whose relentless greed and pursuit of profit caused this crisis, having been bailed out by the taxpayer are back on track again; bonuses two or three times your salary are returning and the swagger of the City is evident once more. Perhaps worst of all, as Will Hutton has argued, the opportunity to remind our banks that they serve the economy, rather than the other way around, has been lost. In short, Capital has won.

In George Orwell's 1984 the novel's protagonist, Winston Smith, struggles to endure a regime that controls almost every aspect of his life as Big Brother's reach consumes politics, economics and society. Winston, where possible, retaliates quietly, enjoying the small pleasures of his troubled existence; a walk in the park, hearing bird song, or feeling the sun's rays on his face. So oppressive is Big Brother's regime that the last refuge of Winston's freedom becomes his memory of these simple pleasures. And of course, while Britain in 2010 is very different to Orwell's dystopian vision 1984, there are similarities; the might of power, whether economic or political, is felt by workers across the nation.

Carlos Saladén-Vargas' portraits of workers enjoying the simple pleasure of a cigarette break obscure and mask the misery of power that bears down on them. They may look 'cool' and might appear to be performing for the camera but this is not the case as these portraits are collaborative; the photographer gives no direction but also refuses to take photographs when the subject performs the way they feel a smoker should. The smoker self-represents, the photographer merely edits and interprets. If photography is a sin then is it sins of omission or commission that Carlos commits here?

Like Winston Smith, these smokers take pleasure in the small and simple; smoking is a reason to live again, a few minutes of escape from the mundane. The psychological pressure of work is lifted, frustrations are released, the alienation dissipates, the body relaxes and, if only for a short while, the smoker is reminded they are human after all... until they have to wind themselves up again and take up their role in society once again.

Like Diane Arbus, who pre-empted the 1970s, a decade that was consistently out of sorts with itself politically, socially and economically, or Cindy Sherman, whose work came to personify the fluidity of identity that was characteristic of the postmodern a few years later, Carlos Saladén-Vargas' work is also of its time. It references Arbus and Sherman politically, the action of smoking photographed here symbolises the pressure of capital on the workforce, but also aesthetically, the film stock is old and is in black and white, so there's no doubt that you're looking at anything but a photograph.

And it's because of this that we shouldn't see individual portraits, we should see these images collectively, Saladen-Vargas' vision of the debilitating nature of work under the renewed dominance of Capital. As Orwell himself wrote "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever."

- Alex Drago, *London, Spring 2010*