

Time Off

The cultural fortnight ahead

Brief respite

Laundry dries in misty Darjeeling



Photograph by Martin Parr. See Page 52.

Parr excellence



Larger than life Celebrity cutouts on a beach in Chennai (left) and British seabathers chowing down

Jane Mikkelsen meets the photographer who turned the parvenu into a personal speciality.

Warning: British photographer Martin Parr's three-part exhibition at Photoink is a treat, but viewers might find it results in a decreased appetite—at least for junk food. "The Last Resort" (1986) and "British Food" (1995) are two of the series that helped establish Parr as one of the most influential and controversial photographers of his time. The toothsome twosome, up at Photoink this fortnight, expose a host of issues plaguing Britain of the '80s and '90s, from the litter strewn across public spaces to the effects of fast food overindulgence to the perils of excessive sunbathing.

The photographs in "The Last Resort" were taken at a popular seaside destination in New Brighton during the Thatcher era. They depict largely blue-collar sunbathers sporting various shades of pink and red sunburns criss-crossed by striking tan lines. One photograph captures the unpalatable sight of a horde of hungry bathers with distinctly eighties haircuts squirting ketchup onto hotdogs (see Pic). "They captured domestic acts and shabby sur-

roundings," Parr said in an interview. "The series is politically critical, and it was controversial when it showed in London at first. People thought it was this middle-class photographer exploiting the working class. At that time, if you were a 'serious' photographer, you shot in black-and-white. 'The Last Resort' was my first foray into colour, which was also controversial."

Large servings of colour saturation also prevail in "British Food". Parr said he used a type of camera

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lens that is used in medical photography, with the result that these photographs have a glossy, would-be advertisement lustre to them. But the up-close and cynical, even clinical, angle from which Parr looks at British junk food makes for an unappetising product endorsement.

The third part of the exhibition at Photoink is titled "Martin Parr in India: 1984-2009", and is at once a departure from and an homage to

his previous work. "My approach was two-pronged," Parr said. "It was an indulgence in nostalgia about the Raj and an interest in the new, emerging middle class." Most of the photographs are in black-and-white, and this evokes a more sombre mood, particularly in the photographs taken at Darjeeling. "I'm fascinated by this former land of the Raj," Parr said. "When I started coming here twenty years ago, it was much more present. Now, the government is trying to erase English names, etc. In Darjeeling, everything is run-down; some places are limping along, but that whole era of Anglo-Indian culture is over. There's one English guy left in Darjeeling. But some elements remain—the Tea Planter's Club, the Gymkhana." Looking at the photographs of these almost eerily preserved interiors, one has the sense of looking into a world preserved with Miss Havisham-like tenacity: everything is slightly dilapidated, but more or less every detail stays frozen in place. As Parr said, "Some things here are more English than in England."

In sharp contrast with these shots of old-world elegance are the photographs taken of the new Indian middle class. How much "class" the people in the frames have is, again, what Parr affection-

ately undermines (take for example the shot of a man at a full-force Indian wedding lighting two cigarettes simultaneously). There is an extraordinary photograph of life-sized poster-board celebrity cutouts stuck like stakes into the sand on a Chennai beach, allowing bathers to have their photos taken next to them (see Pic)—a hat-tip to "The Last Resort". On a wall all to themselves are closeup shots of Indian cakes, whose coloured icings and cream fillings scream synthetic food dye, another nod to Parr's earlier work.

In addition to the exhibition, Photoink has just released a book (*Martin Parr in India: 1984-2009*) containing many of the photographs currently on display. Parr was very particular about having it printed in India with Indian graphic design and production values. The busy borders and pixellated images give the book the convincing effect of local vernacular publishing (the accompanying text is also in Hindi and Urdu).

Although one of the themes that runs—or breathlessly jogs—throughout this exhibition is perhaps a cautionary tale about gluttony and excess, this correspondent found she couldn't get a big enough eyeful of Parr's photographs. See *Photography in Listings*.