

## Photographers' Gallery

Sacha Craddock

### Martin Parr

MARTIN Parr has chosen an unusual subject for his recent photographs. It is the middle class or, as he prefers to call it, the "comfortable" class of the south of England. His exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery, which is titled *The Cost Of Living*, covers a wide range of prosperity.

There are pictures of people who always assume their wealth and position at their usual activities — public school open days, horse trials and all manner of fund-raising — and



A photograph by Martin Parr . . . ordinary moments elevated

there are also those made prosperous by Thatcher's decade. They too shop and shop, visit Heritage monuments and hold barbecues.

His large colour works are not intended as records or mass observation. They are more. Parr must use a mighty flash, both indoors and out, to hold the ordinary moment and elevate it to the slightly unreal. The colour glows. Just how much the subjects are aware of him is not clear. He balances moments with monumentality and complicity with indiffer-

ence. But he is from this area and not a tourist.

Why is it then that, apart from being amused, we feel slightly awkward? Is it too close to what some of us do, just those things; eating, drinking and buying furniture? Or is there an element of voyeurism here which creates a strange sense of recognition, if only by sight? So while understanding that nothing is gained by showing a stereotypical upper-class braying and laughing, Parr brings the real split-second close without mockery.

There are some photographs, though, of places without people. A pretend-beam new house sits blandly behind a pile of plastic-wrapped brick. A table is made ready for a dinner party. These works are less interesting because they verge upon comment. Recent surveys say that many more consider themselves as middle class these days. So Parr could be making a statement of sorts about frantic consumerism exercised by the well-off on a trip to get more.

The best ones are moments. The conversation at a real dinner party (Parr must have been invited) falters for a moment as more wine is poured. A mother has her arm around her son as she rushes him to school and a couple have a silly moment in a car showroom. You can imagine what is about to be said at these moments, or does it take one to know one?

● *On until February 24.*

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