

Jem Southam: The Red River

24 October – 22 November 2025



The Stream at Menadarva, 1982-1994

Jem Southam

Huxley-Parlour are pleased to present *The Red River* by British photographer Jem Southam, the artist's third solo exhibition with the gallery. With poetic reflections on the English countryside and its history, *The Red River* explores rural, post-industrial north-west Cornwall, portraying the intertwining of a manufactured landscape and human industry with nature. First exhibited in 1987 and published in 1989, the series is a seminal project within British photography.

The Red River was innovative within contemporary paradigms of photographic technique. It was the photographer's first resolved work in colour, a practice uncommon in the 1980s. At times, Southam also subverts conventional compositional techniques with radical angles and close distances to the subject matter. Amid these technical transgressions, Southam punctuates the series with traditional landscape imagery which evokes English Romanticism.

Made in the 1980s and revisited in the 1990s, Southam's project followed the path of the Red River from its source near Troon, along its heavily industrialised valley, and through to the sea. Tin mining gave the slender stream its distinctive red hue. Declining and almost entirely disappeared when Southam was creating *The Red River*, the industrial identity of the valley was steadily transforming from a reality into an historical fact. He began to photograph the scattered, decaying relics of this industrial past as they slowly merged with the flora, leaving their scars on the land.

While these remnants portray recent history, Southam saw the landscape as a confluence of its inhabitants and the valley's primordial formation and ancient mythologies. The Carboniferous granite, Bronze Age adits, and medieval tales of travellers lost on a winter's night, stumbling upon a solitary illuminated window exist in harmony within these photographs. The artist explores the concept of history itself in this series, which he sees concentrated within this river and its fern laden banks.

Southam drew heavily from the Book of Genesis for this project: a tempest over a dark sea, punctuated with white capped waves references God's creation of light and darkness out of a formless void. Primeval elements of the landscape, foliage and the rushing of the river's red water, reference the second day of creation. Bucolic idylls juxtapose representations of the despoliation of the Earth and its subsequent regeneration. Southam's relationship to the English landscape was profoundly influenced by poetry, in particular works by Beowulf, John Milton, and John Bunyan. Wandering throughout the valley and beside the stream, Southam recalled Milton's depictions of Paradise, lost and then regained; images like *Valley of the Barking Dogs*, *Brea Adit* draw from the apocalyptic imagery of *Paradise Lost*, while others are akin to the beatitude of *Paradise Regained*. The photographer saw an allegory in his journey along the Red River that went beyond local history, something universal wrought within all of the valley's shattered remains and 'poisonous tang', as he calls it, its beauties and redemptions.

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HUXLEY-PARLOUR

45 Maddox Street, London W1S 2PE

Opening Hours Monday to Friday, 11:00am - 5:30pm

Saturdays, 10:00am - 1:00pm

Entry is free

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