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## Capturing Thatcher-Era “Capitalist Realism” in England

David Rosenberg

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*London by Night #22, London, 1986.*

As a teenager in England, Brian Griffin worked as a pipework engineering estimator. One day, the foreman asked him if he wanted to tag along to the local camera club. Griffin went, and, while he was “dreadful” at first, he has been hooked ever since. During his career he has covered editorial, commercial, and music photography. In his first New York City solo show, on display from Feb. 25 through April 9, Steven Kasher Gallery will be showing some of his portraits from 1979 through 1990.

The title of the show, “Brian Griffin: Capitalist Realism” is a reference to the portraiture Griffin did primarily during the Thatcher years, a nod to the Socialist Realism art

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movement that glorified Communist values. Griffin was inspired by the German and Russian painters from that era and created his own version of the paintings while making photographs of business leaders, politicians, and personalities. Although he's unsure who came up with the term *Capitalist Realism*, Griffin likes it.

"I like the pressure of not knowing what I'm going to do and the problems I might experience," he said. "I really enjoy that anxious, nervous, insecure feeling, all of those feeling you get inside, so I don't do any planning on my subjects. ... I want to make something really powerful and great, and I think inside I need to be on edge."



*George Cooper, Head of Thames TV, London, 1974.*

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*Rush Hour London Bridge, London, 1974.*

As evidenced by his early career as an engineer, Griffin has also never been intimidated by photography's rapid technological evolution.

"I enjoy the delicacy of digital photography," he said, noting that the wider range of possible exposures allows for greater tone in his work. "I always looked to painting and felt I couldn't get that kind of nuance in my work, but with digital cameras I can get far more delicate in my work. ... I can get closer to fine art than I could when I shot with film."

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*A Broken Frame, England, 1982.*

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*Construction Time Again, Switzerland, 1983.*

Even with the technological advancement, Griffin said he has enjoyed the preparations for the upcoming show. He welcomed the opportunity to give the gallery free reign when deciding what work of his they wanted to exhibit, saying he is always interested to see what other people are drawn to within his portfolio. Although he's quite critical of his work, Griffin said he has also been proud to see what he produced earlier in his career. "I'm quite shocked how good I was when I had a very limited ability compared to today. What I achieved, the naiveté, the purity of vision just coming out of college in 1972, I'm

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amazed really. I could never touch those magic moments again. You have to be raw in a way to capture that material, not as well-educated and experienced, so I really do like it; I don't find it embarrassing at all. I enjoy them, and I'm delighted that I took them."



*Carpenter, Broadgate, City of London, 1986.*

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*Office Dance, Stockley Park, London, 1986.*