

Simon English couldn't have a more appropriate surname. Just bind together a sheaf of his exquisite drawings and you'd have an encyclopaedia of everything that is quintessentially so: football players, pubs, country houses, earthy farmers, ponies. Though known as a painter, English has recently returned to the roots of his craft and mainly works with ink and crayon on paper, though tiny, contained oil paintings also appear on the individual sheets, like snapshots pinned on a cork board. The artist draws while listening to the radio and the show's title, *OPEN COUNTRY* followed by *HOME TRUTHS*, refers to two BBC Radio 4 programmes - the former discusses 'the people and wildlife that make the countryside a vibrant place' while the latter takes calls from listeners who wish to share their personal stories. It is from these programmes that several of the characters which populate English's works originate - a cast further peppered with fairytale creatures, animals and other references from the artist's childhood. Sheets are quickly filled with a flurry of images: some drawings are self-contained, a single image filling the picture plane (such as *Otis Ferry's Critic* (all works 2005), which depicts a seated man with a broken arm and refers to Britain's fox-hunting ban controversy); many others are crammed with numerous smaller drawings of seemingly disconnected things, linked by scrawled texts and headings that imply narrative.

This compendium is far from being an innocent, Beatrix Potter-like, rural Utopia. British perversity is also on view: *Home Coming*, for instance, depicts a cross-dressing man in

fishnet tights being 'seen to' by a buxom nurse. The accompanying text reads: 'It's very nice to go travelling to New York, Paris and Rome; but it's oh so much nicer to come home.' English unmasks the falseness of his nation's mythical propriety; his gentlemen display plenty of stiffness, but not in their upper lips. In *Edward and Gaviston*, England's thirteenth-century king is seen kneeling over his gay lover; both men are graphically depicted satisfying each other.

Nor is the appearance of children's characters in English's work entirely uncomplicated. The Enid Blyton characters in *Tennysons Lane*, Noddy and Big Ears, were once accused by a television critic of being homosexuals because they shared a bed; in the same drawing a Dalek, from the cult British TV sci-fi series *Doctor Who*, glides by while two men on a picnic blanket seem about to embark on their own adventure: one clothed in traditional hunting pinks, the other naked save for a red bandanna around his stout neck, penis in hand. And, though there are certainly more of them, it's not all about the boys misbehaving: buxom nurses abound, Lady Chatterley-type women wait to get their bodices ripped off and a girl sitting on Pinocchio begs, 'Please lie to me.'

Whilst such descriptions of English's work risk conveying a purposefully sensationalist approach, in practice, however, solid draughtsmanship and frequent classical academic references successfully elevate the art and expose only a deeply talented artist who dares to mine, and playfully undermine, England's stolid façade. AC

