

'Have you ever seen/The reality of your dreams/With your own eyes?' Matthew Day Jackson, *Everything Is Connected*

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With her organised jumble of fact and fiction, medium and message, subjectivity and objectivity **Lindsay Seers** plays fast and loose with our preconceived ideas about representation

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WORDS: OLIVER BASCIANO

LINDSAY SEERS has made a sequel to *It Has to Be This Way*, her multifaceted 2009 work in which she investigated the strange circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a stepsister named Christine, who vanished following a moped accident which resulted in an unusual form of amnesia. The sense that Christine is an enigma is further compounded by the fact that this chain of events is narrated, in a film that forms that work's centerpiece, by Christine's anonymous lover. This new work, titled *It Has to Be This Way*² (2010) – which, like its precursor, comprises a film projected in a large-scale architectural installation, a series of documentary interviews and an essayistic book – apparently centres around Christine's obsessive academic research into the life of Queen Christina of Sweden, a much-mythologised monarch who reigned in the seventeenth century. Seers's follow-up investigations take her to modern-day Ghana, where she traces the country's colonial past under Christina's rule, a trip she undertakes while dressed in a version of the historic uniform that was worn by the then occupying infantry. The point-of-view footage, shot from a camera mounted in the helmet of this outmoded outfit, edited together with still photography and overlaid with quasi-mystical animated symbols, is projected as a circular pool that the viewer looks down upon from a raised platform within the installation. It makes for beguiling viewing, in which one is immersed in Seers's narrative and simultaneously flummoxed by its supposedly biographical nature.

In the film, Seers seeks out the forts that testify to Ghana's subjugation under Queen Christina. Yet what appears at first to be some sort of abstract-travelogue-cum-history-doc is framed as a far more personal exercise when coupled with its two voiceovers,

both spoken by the artist's mother, one while under hypnosis. The opening lines of the compos mentis interview typify this strikingly personal monologue: "I was her mother, but she [Christine] was never my daughter, and now she has gone missing I can honestly say that I never loved her".

Speaking about *It Has to Be This Way*², exhibited at the Baltic, Gateshead (where it arrived after showings at the Mead Gallery, Warwick, and the National Gallery of Denmark), Seers explains, "I wanted to go into a very personal narrative about my mother leaving us and going to live in West Africa. Leaving your children is considered to be a very unnatural, traumatic thing to do. I wanted to offset that family trauma against Ghana's colonial trauma." This rather liberal clash of the personal and the universal is typical of the artist's work. "It's a dissection of where one's past exists", she continues. "Does it exist in historical memory or personal memory? So, when walking around in Africa, I'm thinking about my sister and her relations to my mother and my mother's relationship to Africa. So the whole things ravel back through time."

Significant in much of Seers's recent work is an emphasis on the formal design of the environment in which the films are seen. In this new work the architecture mimics a fortlike structure, which the viewer enters via a set of steps. As well as the obvious reference to the forts of the film, this construction foregrounds the sensations of invasion and protection in the context of the viewer's access to what might be termed the skeletons in the Seers family closet. Ultimately the viewer is left in a curious position of both activity (mounting the 'stage') and passivity (a viewer of the action 'onscreen'). "It's an interplay between the power structures of





those scenarios”, Seers agrees. “Its influence comes by way of Werner Herzog’s *Cobra Verde*. The characters are all just trapped in a game that is being played out beyond their control. Their choices are driven by things external to them.”

Seers’s approach, both to storytelling and photography, is firmly wrapped up in the artist’s interest in and ongoing dissection of Henri Bergson – in particular his conception, set out in *Matter and Memory* (1896), of the world as mere representation, and of the individual subject as some sort of discrete, machinic aggregator of representational images. It is a dense, metaphysical concept to describe, but the language used can just as happily be applied to the making of photographs. Seers has consistently sought to embody picture-taking as theatrical action. The artist most notably performs this Bergsonian vision of the individual as empty, mechanical processor when she uses her own body as a camera: when she encloses herself in a black sack, inserts light-sensitive photographic paper into her mouth, emerges briefly into daylight and uses her lips as aperture and shutter to make the exposure, before pulling the cloth – a makeshift darkroom – back over her head to develop the print. The result of all this is a work such as *Lost Room* (2005/2010), a diptych that juxtaposes a photograph of the artist’s hand captured in this way alongside a documentary image of its production. Seers’s mechanisation of the body is evident too in *I Saw the Light* (2005), which features a series of staged self-portraits depicting the artist with a projector mounted on her head. In placing the camera in her hat for the production of *It has to be this way*², Seers seems to embody the final tool of the photographer’s kit, the tripod. “I was becoming an anthropomorphic camera”, she says. “The act itself causes me to become a specific thing in relation to the medium of photography. It creates a theatrical shift in my personality.”

Unlike many an artist’s work, onto which theory is retrospectively grafted by critics and curators, Seers’s ongoing autobiographical practice – this multifaceted exploration of her life and family history – consciously deploys theory as an escape route from both notional historical constructs and family narratives. “I don’t think fact and fiction are useful definitions”, the artist explains. “It’s an ultimate question as to where ‘truth’ lies in these mediums. They [photography and film] are constantly producing their own truth.” Seers’s work seems to set up its own hierarchy in relation to the notion of empirical truth: while the



narratives the artist weaves are presented as straight autobiography and historical documentary, there nonetheless remains nagging suspicions about their veracity. These are grievances Seers isn’t willing to be drawn on. “I think Bergson would say that truth and falsehood are differences in kind, not of degree. Fiction is not an inverse of fact; they’re completely different things. In a sense you’d say all films, documentary or otherwise, are fiction, or all fact. One or the other, not both.”

Seers’s work demonstrates this point of view admirably: the fictions, if that’s what they are, are maintained beyond the framework of the formal artwork itself, insisted upon in such arenas as the press release and the interview between artist and critic. This permeation of the boundaries between art and real life draws studious links between art as means of representation, and the Bergsonian understanding of the world as merely representational construct. For Seers this translates as an impossibility of separation between art making and life-living, in which the artist embodies both the work’s subject matter and its means of production, to captivating ambiguity. •

*Lindsay Seers’s It Has to Be This Way*² is on view at the Baltic, Gateshead, through 12 June

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Extramission 6, 2009, video still,
Tate Collection, London.

*It has to be this way*², 2010, installation view.
Co-commissioned by Mead Gallery and National Gallery of Denmark

*It has to be this way*², 2010, film still.
Co-commissioned by Mead Gallery and National Gallery of Denmark

*It has to be this way*², 2010, film still.
Co-commissioned by Mead Gallery and National Gallery of Denmark

Lost Room, 2003/2010, photograph, 40 x 25 x 6.5cm

all works
Courtesy the artist and Matt’s Gallery, London

