



Telling images: as with all Lindsay Seers's work, her show at the Gallery of Photography sets the viewer a series of artistic puzzles to solve



# Artistic sleight of hand

Lindsay Seers is something of an enigma, which is just how she wants it, says CRISTIN LEACH

For someone who enjoys blurring the line between truth and fiction, it is hardly surprising that British artist Lindsay Seers is drawn to ventriloquism. But while light entertainers such as Rod Hull and Roger de Courcy threw their voices into their puppet alter-egos for our entertainment, Seers can seem more concerned with making a dummy out of the viewer.

Seers, whose latest work, *Eyes of Others*, is on show at Dublin's Gallery of Photography, thrives on ambiguity and confusion: not her own — she knows exactly what she's doing — but ours. She is not so much a photographer as a performance artist who documents her life and actions through photography, film, text and installation. The catch is, the documented events may or may not be true.

Disorientation and disinformation are key, but Seers adopts a deliberately subtle approach. Her work, which here consists of three DVD films, a book, some photographs and a large two-headed ventriloquist-style mannequin, sets out to intrigue by telling her strange life story, from childhood to the present day. By leaving gallerygoers uncertain as to what is real and what is a construct, she gleefully gives us just enough rope to hang ourselves.

The purpose of the art is to tell the life story and the purpose of the life story is to frame the art. It's a neat construct, an autobiographical narrative with just enough real characters to make the potentially fake ones believable, and just enough real events to make the presumably fantasy ones

ring true. What it all adds up to is a grand platform for an exploration of how easy it is to blur the lines between reality and fantasy, memory and mythology, life and art.

The life story is fairly straightforward, although fraught with serendipity and bulging with carefully chosen references to art, history and contemporary culture. The stripped-down version goes something like this: Seers spent her early childhood in Mauritius, where she displayed evidence of having a photographic memory. She was mute until the age of eight when her first words, upon seeing a photograph of herself, were "is that me?" She grew up to be an artist, spending years travelling the world as a "human camera", then as a ventriloquist and most recently as a "human projector".

The opening act is a hardback book, bound in grey. *Other's Eyes* was edited by a man called Howard Hagen and contains three illustrated essays by Rufus Eisenbud, Steven Pearl and Guinevere Doy. A wall label claims a court order obtained by a subject of the book stipulates there can only ever be one copy, which must remain the property of the editor. Already alarm bells are ringing.

The Dublin show opened two days before another Seers solo show, *I Saw the Light*, closed in the Gasworks Gallery in London. That show also contained a copy of this book. So the first anomaly is exposed, but only to those willing to do a little research. Around about now one begins to suspect that Hagen is actually Seers. If he is, she's not telling.

The films are loosely based on the essays in the book,

which tell Seers's life story in three parts. They feature some people who are real (Doy is a professor of visual culture at De Montfort University, Leicester, where Seers also lectures) and some who are played by actors, as revealed by the credits, that are preceded by a disclaimer: "This DVD is solely for the purpose of entertainment."

These "documents" outline how Seers developed mouth photography by placing undeveloped film at the back of her throat and using her lips as an aperture. Although this sounds slightly fantastical, if not chemically hazardous, the photographic evidence is here in the form of Mouth Photographs 1997-2005: round, red images curling with age and mounted in glass cases, in which faces and places appear like blurry memories.

A wall label attributes them to the collection of Frank Weston, who appears in the life story as a kind of stalker, following Seers around Europe collecting her discarded mouth photos on the pavements of capital cities.

Although this is a solo show, Seers is credited with little of the work. Hagen edited the book and directed the films, while the photographs are attributed to the collections of characters in the autobiographical tale. Meanwhile, Seers did two live performances as part of the show, in which she presented the life story in her own words. She wore a wig, as she often does in her photographs, underlining the fact that nothing is to be taken at face value.

There are parallels to be drawn with the work of American



photographer Cindy Sherman, who sets up elaborate shots of herself, often wearing wigs, and the documented actions of French conceptual artist Sophie Calle.

Although Seers's work is apparently autobiographical, her output is far removed from the self-confessional mode of fellow Briton Tracey Emin, but the art of all four women does share something: a fascination with the idea of the double or alter-ego and a determination to construct a self to present to the world through their art.

In different ways all are self-portraitists, highlighting the fact that, even in more traditional mediums such as paint, the genre has always indulged in myth making with the artists presenting themselves only as they wish to be seen.

The success of this show hinges on the real-life references Seers drops along the way like breadcrumbs for those following the trail. The photograph that made her speak was taken by a descendant of photography pioneer Louis Daguerre; in her early human camera days she became the subject of psychoanalyst Jules Eisenbud (Rufus's father) who shot to fame in the 1960s by claiming the "thoughtographs" of a drunk called Ted Series were evidence of psychic photography; Seers's first ventriloquist's dummy was found in a London café that was the location for John Logie Baird's early television experiments with a dummy called Stookie Bill.

Seers presents all of these events, as well as the experience of discovering another artist who takes mouth photographs (an event that appears to be true, if coincidental), as



catalysts for progressions and changes of direction in her work.

It's almost believable but for a niggling feeling that on several points we're being had: for instance, the way Pearl wistfully muses about his old pal Seers in the *Intermission* film, although we suspect the artist is behind the camera: "I'm always hoping she'll be in touch again, but somehow I have a feeling she won't."

In the end, discerning what bits are true and which are fiction almost becomes irrelevant. What is important is the elaborate construct. Seers's last Irish solo show was *You Said That Without Moving Your Lips* at the Limerick city gallery in 2003. Then she described photography as "an act of visual ventriloquism" and mused on the way in which photographs can take over from and eventually replace memory.

Seers knows the real point of ventriloquism is its absolutely apparent artifice, that the audience enjoys looking for the twitch of the mouth that reveals the trick they already know is there. Those who swallow her life story hook, line and sinker will miss the point.

Yes, *Eyes of Others* is about building a mythology to accompany the work, but what is more important is that we grab the bait before realising we've been had; in other words that we do, eventually, catch Seers's lips moving. □

*Lindsay Seers: Eyes of Others is at the Gallery of Photography, Dublin, until November 27*