

Transformative Voices

Lindsay Seers

“I am not someone who accepts the binary idea of fact and fiction.” Lindsay Seers weaves a magnificent and hallucinatory web using strands of memory, history, fantastical personal tales and collaborations with neuroscientists, schizophrenic patients and more. Elizabeth Fullerton meets the British artist on the Isle of Sheppey, in a former Georgian police station which now functions as her home and studio.





Opening pages
Portrait of a Circassian Beauty,
2020

This page, both images
Nowhere Less Now,
2012/2020
Installation view

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My first meeting with Lindsay Seers (in 2014 at her former North London studio) felt like one of her phantasmagorical multimedia installations in which fact and fiction, memory and biography blur in a lattice of uncanny coincidences. Surrounded by theatrical props and maquettes, I sat entranced as her hypnotic voice recounted memories of her childhood in Mauritius, how she was mute until the age of eight, her mother ran off with a diamond smuggler, and her stepsister developed amnesia and went missing following a moped accident. Interspersed with this information was a discussion about alchemy, esoteric beliefs, the occult and Seers' use of dead bees as a means to determine her actions—indeed, she showed me a box with labelled bees in different compartments. As we talked about symbols and talismans, a fox appeared at her window, peering at us brazenly for several moments. “It’s a sign,” Seers said. “You brought the fox in. And look, I bought this new fox knocker in Malta.”

Most definitely unconventional, the artist is a profoundly philosophical thinker. I left her studio after four hours, enthralled but disconcerted as the cumulative effect of the congruences between her stories appeared increasingly outlandish. Was any of our discussion true or had I been taken for a ride? On reflection, I concluded that the question of factuality was irrelevant. Seers herself is mistrustful of distinctions between what is real, remembered and invented. She believes reality and memory to be constructs shaped by factors including social conditioning, prejudices, biological determinism and emotional impulses. It is far from clear if even she knows where the elaborate mythologies she creates begin and end, but in drawing on her own and others' biographies, philosophies, histories, science and literature, one might say she ends up arriving at deeper truths. “She takes all that and weaves it into a magic spell. She lives the whole thing,” her gallerist Robin Klassnik, director of Matt's Gallery, told me recently. “The work's also highly manipulative.”

When I visit Seers several years later at her home on the Isle of Sheppey off the Kent coast, I feel less discombobulated as we discuss veracity again. Each film “is its own truth”, she explains. “They are often made through real actions and reconstructions of events that all existed in some form, made present in the act; we are all actors of our reality. I am not someone who accepts the binary idea of

fact and fiction as they are always embedded in each other, nothing is entirely factual or entirely fictional.” Seers lives with her partner, Keith Sargent, who does the animation for her films, in a building that served as the port's police station in Georgian times, complete with three cells for drunken sailors. Her home is a trove of her early works—an anamorphic vase sculpture revealing a female nude with flowers protruding from her vagina; eerie red images taken from inside Seers' mouth; and several unsettling ventriloquist dummies, one of which takes my photo from its own mouth. These objects bear testament to Seers' conflicted relationship with the camera ever since, so the story goes, as a child she was presented with a photograph of herself and spoke for the first time, bringing a curtain down on eight years of pre-linguistic oneness with the world, when her eidetic memory recorded everything in photographic detail. In 1995, to evade the camera's objectifying gaze, Seers turned herself into a “human camera”, placing photographic paper in her mouth and exposing it by forming an aperture with her lips.

Next door to the house is a historic boatyard, which happens to be where *HMS Kingfisher* was built, the ship that took Seers' great-great-uncle George Edwards on an anti-slaving mission to Zanzibar. (Seers is unusually alert to serendipity, so it may not surprise to learn that she shares the same birthdate as Edwards, 100 years apart, and that the artist's rescue Staffy turned out to have the name George.) Seers shows me a sepia photograph of Edwards dated 1860, which became the starting point for her magnificent multimedia work *Nowhere Less Now* (2012). The work was commissioned by Artangel and staged in a former chapel in North London, decked out like an upside-down battleship. Visitors donned headsets and perched in the gunwale, as a bewitching narrative involving performance, photography, video and animation unfolded across geographies and epochs, on concave and convex screens. Entwining Seers' biography with that of three different Georges in the past, present and future, the fragmentary storyline drifts between tales of blood sacrifice, Masonic ritual and explanations of an ocular condition related to having differently coloured eyes. The authorial voice is undermined by multiple shifting viewpoints and the camera is exposed as an unreliable chronicler; yet all this instability opens up myriad interpretations. “There's something about the complexity

of Lindsay's works that is difficult for people to get their head around,” says Artangel's co-director James Lingwood. “You can't encounter them in a breezy, informal way; they demand your immersion in their world.”

Seers, who studied at the Slade and Goldsmiths College in London, has made five iterations of *Nowhere Less Now* from Wales to Tasmania, and is preparing a sixth for a solo show at Sharjah Art Foundation. For each version of her work she creates a site-specific architecture and adapts the narrative to fit the location, so the work is continually evolving. Staging is significant, to frame the viewers' mentality. Besides the inverted frigate, Seers has placed viewers in peep-show booths, a Norwegian boat hut and a reconstruction of Edison's Black Maria, the first motion picture studio. “I want to take things to a point where you see its fakeness but experience its intensity, in a Brechtian idea of seeing the mechanism but having a choice to accept it rather than losing your moral, ethical or social imperatives.”

Over the last few years, her works have become much more technologically sophisticated, incorporating robots, virtual reality and a greater degree of animation, while the biographical narrative appears secondary. *Every Thought There Ever Was* (2018) is a real tour de force, employing lunging screens controlled by robotic arms and surround sound combined with headsets to convey the frenetic visual and aural bombardment which is experienced by people with schizophrenia, who have no filter to block out harmful or trivial thoughts and sounds. Projected on three circular screens (two are robot-operated) is a stream of disquieting animated images: writhing maggots, fluttering moths, magnified cockroaches, heads with mouths for eyes, satanic symbols, manacles, maces and spinning racks of eyeballs. The accompanying soundtrack emits a cacophony of voices, keyboard clicks, buzzing, interference and music, inducing an intense sensation of alienation and anxiety common to the condition. “It's impossible to cope, to act if every single thing has equal status from a speck of a crisp on the floor to an angry human face,” Seers notes. “If they all have the same relevance and sense of agency, how do you move, how do you make decisions?”

The work, which was funded by the Wellcome Trust and has toured the UK for the past two years, was in part inspired by Seers' discovery of Avatar Therapy, a

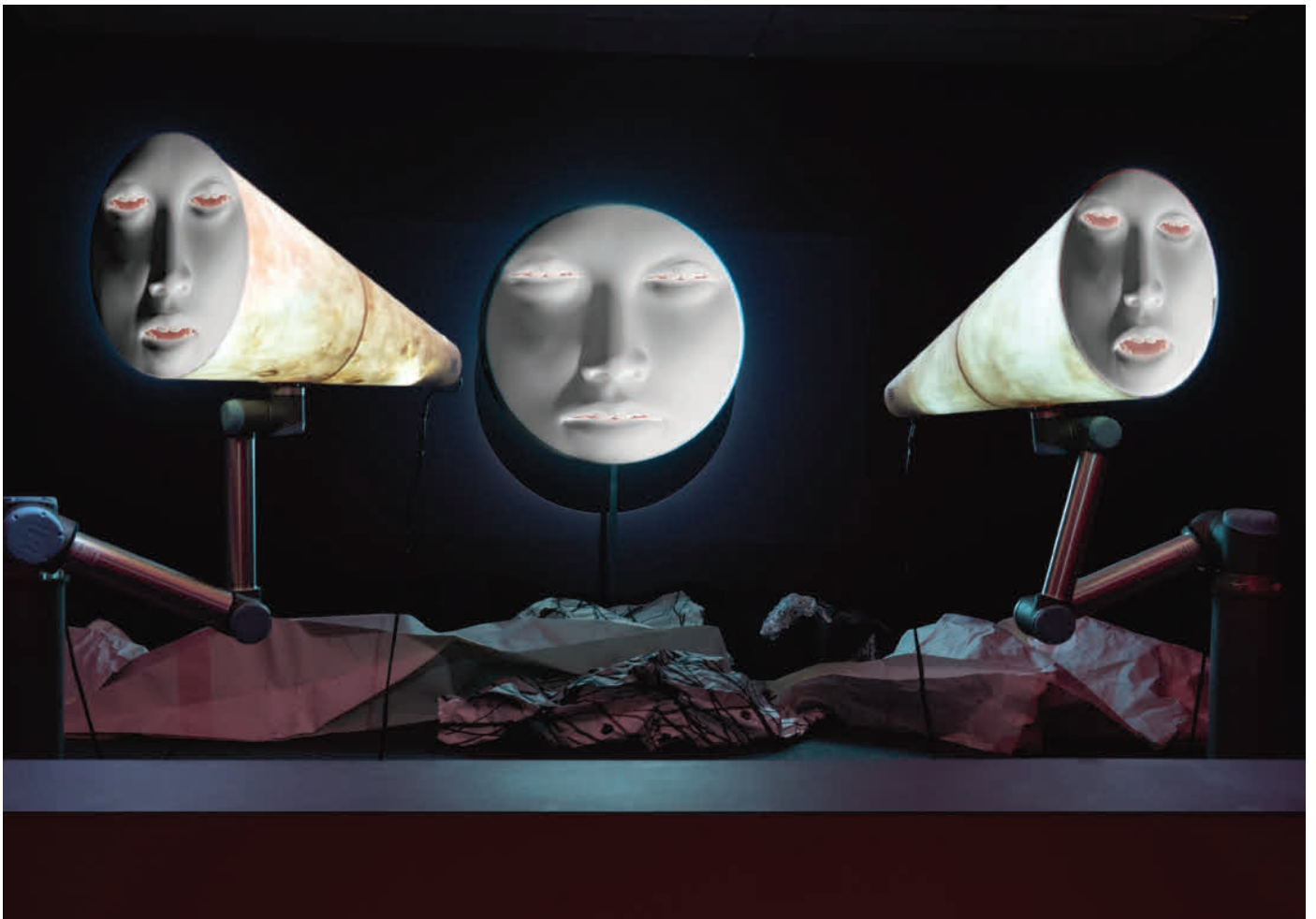


Opposite page
Auto Cannibal/Vampire
Camera, 1999/ongoing

This page
Auto Cannibal/Vampire
Camera (Mouth Photo),
1999/ongoing



“I want to take things to a point where you see its fakeness but experience its intensity”



treatment using avatars to embody the persecutory voices tormenting schizophrenic patients. British psychiatrist Julian Leff, who invented the therapy in 2008, found that patients took comfort in having the existence of the voices affirmed, which opened the possibility of confronting them. For her research, Seers interviewed Leff and several neuroscientists, listened to recordings of the treatment and met with people who had schizophrenia. Viewers hear a jumble of voices, from the therapist reassuring the patient, “Yes I can hear the voices,” to the persecuting voice threatening, “If you stop listening to me, the consequences will be enormous, you little piece of shit,” to the patient’s comments, “I know they’re trying to get to me. They’re watching me all the time.”

Both the sinister and benign voices switch in and out, mimicking the lack of consistency frequently experienced in psychosis. Threaded through the work are cryptic references to historical figures such as the Reverend George Trosse, whose seventeenth-century memoir reveals possibly the first written account of schizophrenia, and Victorian painter Richard Dadd, who became delusional during a trip to Egypt and killed his father. The main narrator is British Army surgeon James Miranda Barry, a classically fluid Seers character who was born a woman but lived as a man, undetected until her death in 1865. Barry is brought back as a healing avatar from a post-linguistic future where everyone’s brain has expanded capacity to hold every thought. Seers is sceptical about clichéd notions of a future dominated by robots; the vision she posits here is of humanity sharing a collective consciousness. “Much work that one sees is great, but doesn’t always have a lasting impact or legacy, whereas this is something that will stay with me and resonate for a very long time,” says Ros Carter, senior curator at John Hansard Gallery, where the work was shown earlier this year.

While Seers’ work around schizophrenia may seem like a departure from her more performative, fantastical early pieces, it is nonetheless an extension of her interest in the complexities of being and the workings of the mind. The nineteenth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson remains an enduring influence, notably on her understanding of the self as a multiple, fluid concept and of time as elastic, connecting forwards and backwards—ideas that seem to chime with current scientific thinking about consciousness. “My whole idea that’s come from neuroscience is that we’re not consistent. We have a very fractured consciousness and we’re constantly leaping between past, present, future; desires; fears; phenomenal experiences in the body,” says Seers. “I might be thinking my foot’s hurting, I can’t see now that I’ve taken my glasses off, I’m dying to go to the toilet, I’m seeing the builder out the window, you’re writing now, I’m a bit conscious of my dog. It’s all there, but some of it’s coming more forward and some of it’s not. And that’s really how the brain functions, but we don’t notice its incredible fragmentation because it’s a necessary fiction that we are coherent.”

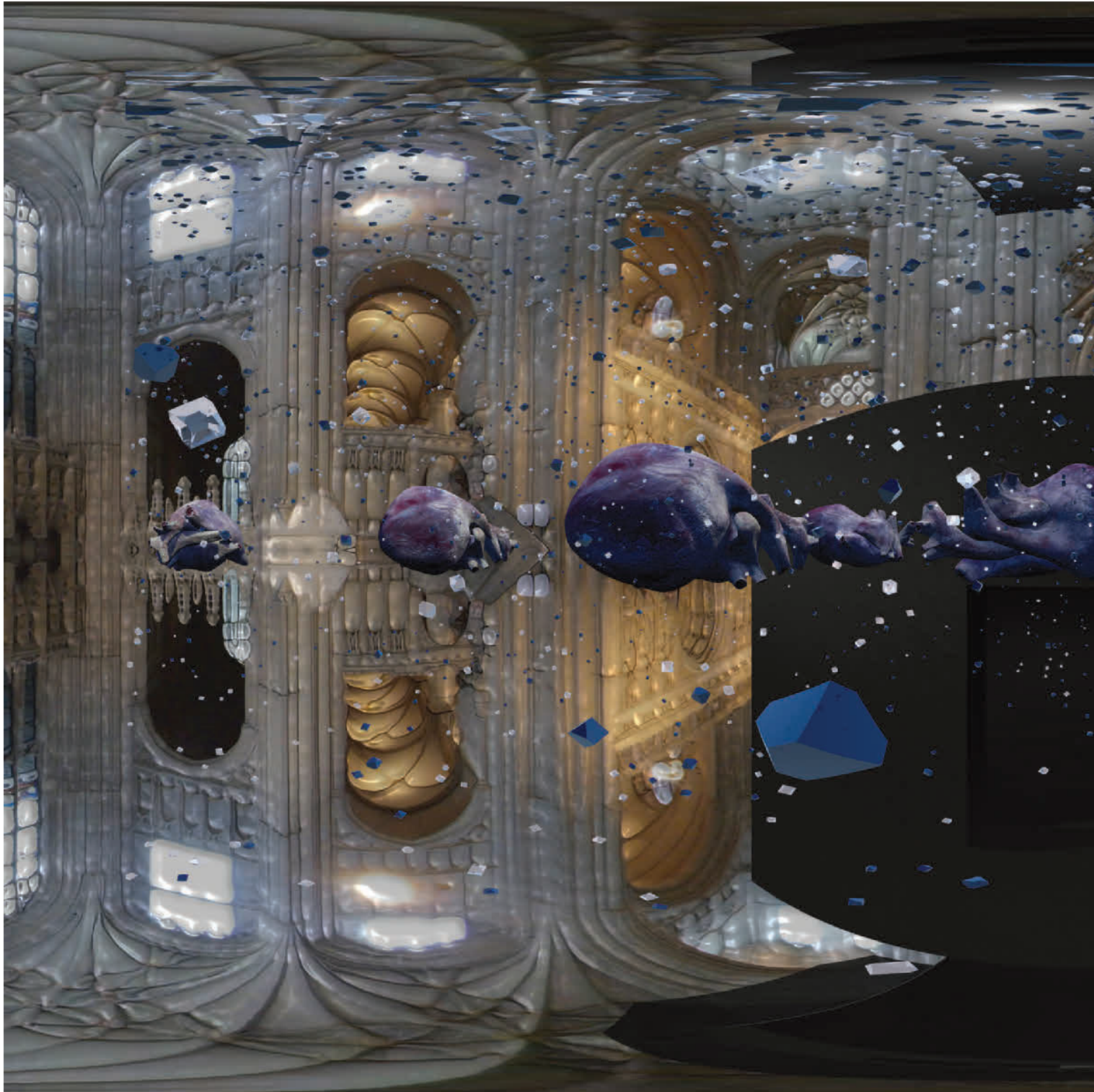
The artist has sought to reflect this fragmentation in the editing of her films. Her 2019 VR piece *Care(less)*, shown at Birmingham’s Ikon Gallery in February, immerses the viewer in the mind of an old woman, Pamela, who lies sprawled on the bathroom of a care home. Within a hallucinatory 360-degree environment, Pamela’s voice is interwoven with that of an avatar from the future who offers observations on our society. Based on research from three universities, the work highlights the deficient infrastructure around social care and asks questions about how society values its aged. We experience Pamela’s feelings of isolation as if first-hand (“I have become invisible... I am made of glass”), her memories of having beautiful long hair, of laughter and of sunlight falling on a chandelier in

Venice and her loss of decorum (“Now it’s bedpans and walkers”). The avatar reports that our society is wedded to the myth of youth, clinging to an ancient system based on material greed, individuality and exploitation that resists the idea of communal connection.

Seers has received much critical acclaim but remains under the radar, a place she doubtless prefers to the limelight. To my mind, she is one of the most talented and thought-provoking artists in Britain today; a museum retrospective is overdue. “She makes visually stunning works which transform space and one’s head,” says Klassnik. “You have to stand back and take a deep breath after you’ve been to one of her shows. It’s hard-hitting.”

Seers’ enigmatic works present unresolved conundrums which haunt the viewer long after the encounter. Their impact derives partly from her empathy for her subjects, whose worlds become enmeshed with ours. That sensation of embodying another is especially vivid in *Care(less)*, Seers’ first incursion into VR, but it’s an underlying motif through her work. “I like this idea of waking up in another body and becoming someone else. I’ve done this thing for years where I might walk behind somebody and try to do their walk and imagine what it is to have their hair, wear those clothes, what they might be thinking. It’s quite liberating,” says Seers. “If we could just understand what it is to be someone else, we’d be in a much better place in society.”

Opposite page
Every Thought There Ever Was,
2017/2020
Installation view



This page
Care(less), 2019/2020
360° film still, VR

