

...the rest
is smoke
HELEN SEAR

**Helen Sear in conversation with Ffotogallery Head of Education
Lisa Edgar**

**LE Can you tell us about the process of making a piece of work?
What stages does it go through? How do you record the process?**

HS It's like an on-going assessment through the making of the work. The more work I've made, the more it refers to past work, it's a much more organic process. Rather than starting off with a particular project, and that project having a beginning and an end, I see it as an on-going process of work. I don't use conventional sketchbooks, but I do a lot of writing. So I would say it is much more pedestrian note taking. A lot of my references are from literature; they might be from other artworks, so it's a way of notating my thinking. It is a very important process for me.

**LE So it's not always linear process for one body of work but you
may go back to previous ideas you have had?**

HS Most artists interrogate one or two ideas, and that's it. Perhaps even over a whole lifetime, so it's a case of approaching things slightly differently, it's not so much about rejecting some things and not rejecting others, it's about trying to get closer to what you might be trying to say. That isn't already laid out right at the beginning (of a project), so I'm trying to illustrate a particular idea necessarily.

**LE In terms of the visual elements of your work, absence is
frequently used. Is what you can't see as important as what you can
see?**

HS I think that using lens based media, a camera or video camera, prioritises the eye over all the other senses. What I'm interested in seeing is if it's possible to visually represent something that might be invisible or something that might be internal, or

something that might be felt. So it's not so much the idea of absence versus presence, but it is perhaps how do you visually represent something that is invisible?

LE you use lots of different materials and different methods to construct your work. Why do you choose to present them as a final 2 dimensional photograph or moving image?

HS The photograph and moving images are image based, so the resolution of any work has to be thought of in parallel to the idea that you are working with. I don't say in advance this is going to be a photograph, a film or a sculpture. The resolution of the work is led by the idea and through the development of the work. So I may not know at the beginning exactly how it's going to resolve itself.

LE For the Caetara Fumus piece, were you tempted to use the pierced image as opposed to a photograph of the pierced image?

HS What happens when it's re-photographed, and in this case it's going to be backlit, you get this kind of trompe-l'oeil effect or illusion so you do feel like you could pick the sticks out of the picture, but then you can't. I think by showing the actual piece you are limited to a particular scale, so by re-photographing it, it transforms it in a very different way - that you have this illusion of the crumpled paper, it's not like an advertising image, it's got all it's flaws and you can see that, but you are not quite sure if that piece of paper is actually inside the lightbox. You are not sure if it's a re-photograph or not and that is what I like to play with. I have only had the piece up in the studio to test it so far, we haven't seen it finally installed, but what was really interesting, we didn't know what was going to happen, was the optimum viewing distance of the piece. In this piece you are really drawn to the surface of the image, so the optimum viewing distance is actually quite close even though the actual piece is large. That was very exciting, because you wanted to go and see if they are real sticks, sticking in there and then you realise they are not. There is an enticing and then a refusal as well, which is something that really interests me about the photographic.

LE Can you expand on that little? Would you say there is almost like a tension tension in the photograph?

HS Yes I suppose. When you think of photography you think of seamless surfaces, something glossy a seamless window into the world. I want to heighten the fact or bring the materiality of the image as it's presented in whatever context to the fore,

so that the audience is brought to the skin of the image. That is related to a lot of the ways I've dealt with the materiality of the image in previous work as well.

LE There are numerous and complex relationships to other art forms and artworks in the exhibition. Architecture, Film, Folklore - can you tell us about some of your influences and how they are specific to this body of work and its presentation at Venice?

HS The relation to architecture is very much about how the work is going to be sited within the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice. We thought very carefully about the scale of the work in relation to architecture of the space. Part of the process of developing the large-scale film work was directly in response to the architecture of the space and the columns, so that the scale of the trees has a correlation with the scale of the columns in the space. That's one consideration. In terms of subject, yes there are a lot of references. There is the painting reference of the Mantegna Painting that's housed in the Ca'd'oro; there are filmic references from a number of films that I've been interested in over a long period of time. Peter Greenaway's Drowning by Numbers, Fahrenheit 451 by Francois Truffaut and also I'm visually interested in the early material experiments with celluloid film. There are references to materiality of film in the way that I've edited it and the way that I've used numbers in a countdown, so it looks a little bit like a leader film going 10, 9, 8, 7, 6,....

LE The figure in the video work itself is very powerful. Can you tell me about her?

HS She is a surrogate. It's a figure of a young woman, the notion of 'about her' as a person is irrelevant. She is my stepdaughter, and I wanted a female figure in the piece. The use of the red dress comes from a lot of fairy tale, red riding hood, and archetypal images of the red dress. In fact it's an orange dress. A lot of people see it as red but I see it very clearly as orange and I chose it very specifically because it matched the colour of the numbers that were painted on the trees. It has shifted a little bit from that but I think she functions as a young female figure, but also because we only see her partially and it's the dress that's foregrounded; it moves across the screen of the image like a luxurious curtain, like that ones we see when we go to the cinema. So it has the function of a curtain which moves across the image.

LE The colour orange is a really important element of the work that appears throughout the exhibition.

HS It's very simple really, because it chromatically at the opposite scale of the spectrum from the leaf green (in the work). Formally it's a chromatic opposite

between the idea of the natural - the spring leaf green - against the synthetic opposite colour orange - which is a (manmade) painted colour.

LE Nature and gender are repeated themes throughout all your work. How are they connected?

HS When I was studying back on my BA in the 1970s in the first wave of feminism, there was an essentialist position where women aligned with nature, which was a position that a lot of people really wanted to remove themselves from. I suppose I'm relooking at that, but I'm not sure that they are connected in that sense. I'm a woman making art and I think I'm just trying to reinvestigate connections between the figure, in this case a female figure, and its environment in this case a non-urban rural environment.

LE You also employ traditionally feminine and decorative objects in the work, such as lace or flowers - what do they represent to you and how has feminism influenced your work?

HS In the first place, feminism influenced my work because it gave me permission to have an equal status and to be taken as seriously as male artists and that manifests itself for me through support from various people whether they were my tutors, Susan Hiller or Rose Garrard through to other artists like Helen Chadwick who incidentally the feminists were quite antagonistic about, particularly the way she represented herself lying naked on a photocopier with fruit and flowers. I think feminism had a lot of different positions even in that first wave. Men have used the decorative for many years, for instance Mapplethorpe made the most beautiful pictures with flowers. I have never used real lace but I have used a way of drawing that might allude to labour of the hand and it has maybe appeared like making lace or craft. I always enjoyed knitting and sewing and I like doing things with my hands. I have always fought in my work that the decorative elements are not superfluous, they are actually very much part of the idea. Most of the decorative elements in the work are to do with bringing the hand or bringing the rest of the body back into the image, or slowing down through a process of using the computer, slowing down that instant shutter click of the camera, expanding the photographic moment.

LE David Company in his essay ‘Seeing in the Dark’ suggests that you bring together the portrait and the landscape to make a third meaning. What do you think he means by that?

HS I think genres in art in general, the idea of still life, landscape and portrait are really redundant now. I'm always playing around with analogue, with the digital; I don't think one is oppositional to another. In a way for the work in Venice, I'm doing a portrait of the landscape in a sense. I'm trying not to make that separation of genres, so the landscape is equally as important as another character or figure in the work. We are part of our environment, we are part of our landscape, and I don't want to have that separate view.

LE Audiences will bring different interpretations of the work informed by their own experience. Does the work have a fixed meaning for you?

HS No, I don't think there are any fixed meanings. They are complex. I want to have a relationship with my work; I want the work to tell me something. It might tell me something now while I make it, but equally in ten years time it might be telling me something else that I haven't realised at the time or the time that has elapsed between when you make it and depending on when it's presented. I think things shift a lot. The meaning of work changes with what's happening in the world and how attitudes change, what's happening in the news. They can all affect a piece of work in ways that you couldn't possibly anticipate. That would include the audience and what they bring to the work in their own experience and at what time they bring that to the work.