



HELEN SEAR
Angel Row Gallery
June 12 - July 12 1999
and Impressions Gallery touring
exhibition

Of course, we will never have done with the human face as an area of investigation in art and design - the most ubiquitous image of them all, and even if there aren't many likely to launch a thousand ships, faces gaze at us from a thousand bookstalls, and fill a million pages of newspapers and magazines. Though we might fret / feel smug about other parts of our bodies - we return always and overwhelmingly to the face, stare at it in the mirror, agonise about it; we must show it to the world, we want to bring it close to our loved ones. We scan all the faces we ever see - searching, checking, reading.

In *Unseen* (1994) - included in her Impressions Gallery exhibition - Helen Sear has placed two images, each one of her own eyes, each in a small light box, and these are shown mounted on the wall at about her own eye height. The background is a saturated yellow, and the eye itself photographed in such deep shade we see only a circle of black lying beneath each eyebrow. It seems to force our gaze back towards ourselves.

It's a strange, almost awkward piece - yet now it seems to be a key work. Visiting Sear's studio just prior to her Angel Row Gallery, I saw the sequence of 39"x36" photographs, with the overall title of *Twice ... Once*, she would be showing there. These pieces are achieved as a small selection from large numbers of photographs the artist has taken over a long period. Each time, she sits a friend under intense light and takes two shots of him or her. She then "sculpts" the two negatives into one. The vast

majority of these portraiture shots don't yield anything she's satisfied with, and the process in the darkroom is also an arduous one, with maybe 30 or 40 attempts required before she obtains a composite image that seems right. The resulting works are really "non-portraits." There is a flowing and blurring of light and dark forming a face, but it's weirdly bland and sinister at once. Again, the eyes reveal no expression, there's no story for us to imagine we're being told here. Using richly contrasting black and white, these images suggest models - the make-up laid over the real face so utterly, the skills of a photographer lavished so minutely, that an ur-person is created. On to that smoothed-out face we can project ourselves or our desires. Sear's images suggest film noir (the studied inscrutability, say, of Alain Delon in *Le Samurai*.) She thinks of them as reminiscent of "replicants" - these images are of people who aren't quite people. She titles them as *2xCP* or *2xJE* - a reference to initials of the sitter. Identity is reduced to a code, a cipher. They might be genetic information; they might be something from which a person could be re-made.

Sear is also showing three self-portraits, though again the portraiture is subverted. The initial image was a snapshot of her own face, made simply by holding the camera at arm's length and pointing it at herself. She was unable to control the resulting image, and so a lot of rejection and selection followed. She worked on a selected image with a computer, altering it a little, then dividing it into 200 sections, and enlarging each. A print of each was then obtained and this in turn re-printed by using a transfer process: an emulsion is applied and then peeled off and attached to perspex. Every section retains a small number in one corner, so there is a lattice of numeration lying across the final image of a face - which is thus reconstructed but distanced. There's an aura of the forensic.

Helen Sear trained in sculpture. She has moved, through many pieces involving performance, installation and projection, towards primarily photographic work. She has included a recent projection piece (*Flown*) in the Impressions show but there is a photographic piece derived from the same image (a house-like birdcage made to spin) and that's a stronger piece - the motion is wonderfully trapped in it, and the actual video'd motion seems a bit pale in comparison. The show is a selection of work over ten years, and one feels connections are missing - Sear has made large and complex installations. Much of the show is of work in sequences (*Gone to Earth I - V*, *Moment of Capture I - III*, three pieces entitled *Covert*) which make a good coherence nonetheless. And the residues are there, in that two features of her work strike you: firstly, the preoccupation with both light and darkness as

active components in the making of a photographic image (and projection is often part of the creative process) and secondly, the way many examples of her work seem to be "objects" - they are more than images. A sculptural sensibility is present not so much in the simplistic sense of there being three dimensional structures but because the finished pieces are to an extent the recording of events and actions. She re-photographs extensively, often taking images from a store built up from earlier work, though by dint of focus shifts and other processes, these become simply colours or traces in the making of a new piece. Layers build up in her work. In the sequence *Gone to Earth* she has pierced the first photographic image with LEDs and re-photographed the result. The positioning of the LEDs is determined by map references, but the pierced image is of an animal. Skin and landscape become ambiguously linked: she denies us our sense of scale.

Easy meanings are denied too; her work evokes dreams. Helen Sear talks about "the impossibility of photography" - meaning, I think, that it reveals nothing, it is not a witness, it is not to be trusted. Or maybe, in Helen Sear's work, photography reveals that nothing is revealed when we look at the world: we see only what we want to see. There is a sense of struggle in her work, of search. She uses great technical skill, but her work remains the product of her deepest intuitions, even of her fears.

Hugh Stoddart