

Unreliable Witness

Art review | November 2008

*** TRAMWAY, GLASGOW "WE ALL know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth." So said Picasso, but that was before the conceptual revolution, when art began in earnest to analyse the processes of its own making. The interplay of art and truth was always complex, now it's a veritable labyrinth.

At the same time, it's a rich theme for a group show, which makes Unreliable Witness a little disappointing. It may be that it suffers from the legendary ability of Tramway 2 to make even a substantial show look slight, but one is haunted by the absence of artists who might have added to it: Jamie Shovlin, Jeremy Deller, Mark Neville, to name but three off the cuff.

Nevertheless, the six who are here offer an interesting spectrum of views on the subject. Peter Friedl is the most overtly political. He has taken a real incident – the killing of a young black man by four white policemen in Miami in 1979 which prompted riots when the men were later acquitted – and filmed a reconstruction, but with black youths attacking a white police officer.

If you were to find it on YouTube, you might assume his short, authentically shaky film was recorded on a mobile phone, not a painstakingly constructed fiction. And this is surely the point, not that either incident is in any way acceptable, but how easy it is to make a lie so believable, and why we believe it so quickly.

Scottish artist Michael Fullerton, a graduate of Glasgow's MFA course, takes a more tortuous path. He discovered Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Lady Elizabeth Foster, all butter-wouldn't-melt innocence, despite the fact that she lived in a menage-a-trois for 25 years and had a string of affairs. The conventions of the painting concealed the truth. He then took the colours used by Reynolds and used them to reconstruct an anti-Bolshevik depiction of Trotsky as a kind of grotesque dwarf. A different set of conventions, for a different purpose.

Then, somehow, he gets from there to a c acoustics, a band with a mythology of Peel Sessions, big supporting gigs and unreleased material. A framed section of uncut tape seems to encapsulate this: as long as it remains unheard, the myth remains intact. However, unless you're intimate with the history of Glasgow bands, you won't know the distinction between the myth and the reality, and you might not care.

Young Romanian artist Gabriela Vanga's take on the subject is a lot more personal. When she was 13, she invented an imaginary boyfriend to impress her friends. Recently, she worked with police photofit experts to create a face for "George", neglecting to mention he was fictional. Four hours later, he had one, adding a more disturbing layer to this whimsical work: it didn't take the authorities long to create fact out of fiction.

Bulgarian artist Nedko Solakov has gone to tremendous lengths with his piece of trickery. In The Truth (The Earth is Plane, the World is Flat), he documents the stories of seven Bulgarians who "discovered" the earth is flat, in an installation of material which includes maps, newspaper cuttings, photographs, letters and recorded interviews. They were, he says, silenced by the authorities because their new world view was inconvenient.

It's a lot of fun, but there's a serious point here. Solakov made the work in the early 1990s when Bulgaria was emerging from under Communist rule. He cleverly uses the language of propaganda and conspiracy to question what is perhaps the most symbolically incontestable fact in the world. Is

there, he asks, such a thing as an authoritative truth?

Susan Hiller's work is more subtle. The key work here is her Unique prototype for From the Freud Museum, a trial for a much larger work where she pairs elements from Freud's own collection with found objects of her own, beautifully displayed in a museum vitrine. The objects link tangentially on esoteric themes: four different types of holy water, dowsing rods, a ouija board. Her Outlaw Cow Girl photograph is extracted to make an amusing larger installation. However, the subtlety and complexity of what she's doing doesn't have room to emerge fully from this small selection.

We're in no doubt, however, about the points being made by Andrea Fraser, best known as a performance artist who cleverly lifts the lid on the innards of the art world. In her 30-minute performance Official Welcome, filmed at a glittery evening the Kunstverein in Hamburg, she plays nine characters in a single flowing monologue.

Extensively based on artist statements, interviews, speeches and essays, it is a frighteningly well-observed satire on a world that can slip all too easily at times into the self-indulgent and sycophantic. You will recognise the fawning curator, the artist who's bored of it all ("I think the only interesting people are the people who say 'f*** off'"), the artist (female, of course) whose disastrous personal life is deemed to make her work more authentic (Fraser strips naked to hammer this point home). A lie, indeed, but one which contains a pile of uncomfortable truths.