Extramission (Swallowing Black Maria) Tate Triennial, Altermodern, Tate Britain, London 2009
(Materials: wood, cardboard, MDF, paint, projection, cinema seats, pipe).

‘Extramission’ is an episodic work, which forms a pivotal point in a large body of biographical/auto biographical works by Lindsay Seers. The DVD ‘Extramission’ is not a fixed film work but a constantly evolving piece, which is reconfigured each time it is exhibited. The work explicitly takes memory and the problem of history as its themes but the form of the film itself also continually rewrites its own history through its reconfiguration.

The work currently takes five forms. This document shows images of Extramission 6/6 in which the DVD (15 minute 26 second loop) is housed in an installation of Edison’s ‘Black Maria’ (a structure which is only known through contemporary photographs).
Excerpt from Richard Grayson text in Smart Paper “Swallowing Black Maria”

Seeks’ recent interest in Thomas Edison’s first film studio continues a path of convergence. The building constructed in 1893 was known as the Black Maria, named after the van used by police to take away prisoners. It was covered in black tar paper and had a large window in the ceiling that opened up to let in sunlight, as early films required a tremendous amount of bright light. The Maria was built on a turntable so the window could rotate to face the sun throughout the day, supplying natural light for hundreds of Edison movie productions over the eight years of its operation. Seeks is interested in this building as it was a space both for photographing and for projection. It is in a reconstruction of this dark room that she is projecting the spectacular, complex, reflective and mirrored images that constitute her explorations of her journeys through a world and an experience defined by the shifting operations, the flicker, the constructions and transformations, of photography.

It is a complex project — this text can only outline a few strands, make a rough outline — and it is quixotic. Her reclamations and analogues, her experiments and modelling with medium and technology, have a touching impossibility and a wry hint of inevitable failure built into them. We are left with the desire to reveal and to understand. Meaning and certainty become ultimately contingent, flickering. We are left with the glowing image of a human being repeatedly returning to the mystery of the image, its meaning, and finding ways to articulate and understand the ways it imprints and impacts upon a body and a life.
Extravision documents Seers' return to her childhood home on the island of Mauritius. The first narrator is Alicia Seers, whom one presumes to be the artist's mother. Family snapshots of the young Seers support this and are juxtaposed with digital black and white footage of the island. But modern shots of domestic spaces are very different. Still images of the former family home are animated by time-lapse motion; doors swing open into empty rooms revealing dark voids beyond, images which are underscored by a Lynchian soundtrack of an ominous drone that never resolves itself. In a film tableau, the artist and her mother stand some distance apart in silhouette on a patio; a moving spotlight beam quests across the image, seeming to be the emanation of the artist's own gaze, prefiguring the artist's attempt to become a projector. As the beam strikes the figure of Alicia Seers, she doubles up at the waist as if in agony. The whole film is steeped in a mood of childhood trauma revisited, of light shone on repressed memories and the guilt of parenthood.

Narrative duties are divided amongst three persons: 'Cultural Critic' Guinevere Doy examines the artist's own search for identity, as a third narrator; an unseen 'Art Dealer', links Seers' early work to the unique role Mauritius plays in the history of photography. Mauritius was the home of the 19th century plantation owner and friend of Daguerré, Ferdinand Wöhrmitz. Wöhrmitz visited Daguerré in Paris and returned to the island with a complete photographic studio in packing crates. He used the camera to make photographic identity records of the indentured workers labouring in his plantation. But the photographic portrait of the 7 year-old Seers which precipitated the loss of her eidetic memory bears the stamp of the photographer, Fred Wöhrmitz, the great grandson of Ferdinand. Seers' own crisis of identity and objectification is directly linked to the man who invented the identity photo. The narrator situates Seers' mouth-photographs, which bear the traces of her own body in their colouration, their distortions and saliva smears, as a deliberate attempt to achieve 'the destruction of photography's perfect surface... and turn it into something much more personal, emotional, a lived experience.'
Guinevere Doy takes up the narrative, explaining how Seers' compulsive attempts to reclaim the past ultimately founder. Her voice accompanies a recreation of another childhood recollection of a French television film crew filming a shipwreck on Le Chaland beach on Mauritius. A model square-rigged ship appears in a number of the images seen thus far in Extramation, a curious leitmotif which intrudes constantly into her photographs that echoes other footage of restless sea journeys undertaken by the artist. Finally, we see the model ship foundering on rocks in a mock storm like the final wreck of her first two harpoonings.

Now comes the new turn in the work trying to create directly with light. Basing her approach on medieval theories of vision, in which light was supposed to emanate from the individual to illuminate perceived objects, Seers attempts to become a 'projector'. Her first efforts in this direction, now sporting apparatus worn on the head, are shown in films which depict the characteristic questing spotlight beam roaming over the environment. We recall the opening scenes of the film in which Seers 'projection' caused her mother to double up in apparent pain. But no apparatus was visible in this scene, as if the mechanism is not an essential part of the process but merely an enhancement of innate powers. Extramation ends with a newspaper clipping from the Mauritius L'Express, which contains eyewitness accounts of the projection events which hint at unexplained phenomena.