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## Lindsay Seers, Nowhere Less Now, Tin Tabernacle: Fantastic voyage into the unknown

A dilapidated London church is transformed into the hull of an upturned ship for a remarkable new show that whisks you towards pasts both real and imaginary. Richard Dorment is impressed

★★★★★



Nowhere Less Now, Lindsay Seers, an Artangel commission

By **Richard Dorment**  
5:58PM BST 03 Sep 2012



2 Comments

The Tin Tabernacle is a pre-fabricated chapel erected in 1860 on a quiet residential road just off Kilburn's busy high street. Enthusiastic Victorian Christians either shipped such inexpensive, easy-to-assemble places of worship to remote outposts of the British Empire – or, in this case, opted to set one up in a pocket of Irish papistry closer to home. That this much-loved local landmark was not pulled down years ago is due in large part to its long service as a meeting place of another imperial survival, the Willesden and St Marylebone Branch of Sea Cadets.

Fragile buildings that beat the odds like this are like ghostly reminders of a vanished past. And when up-and-coming British artist Lindsay Seers first saw the dilapidated structure in Kilburn, it set off a chain reaction of personal and poetic associations that resulted in the complex installation she has created for Artangel. It will open to the public on Saturday.

Born in Mauritius into a naval family, Seers had long had an obsessive interest in the life of her great-great uncle, a seafaring son of the Empire named George Edwards, and of his eccentric wife Georgina. With a touch of lateral thinking and the generous support of Artangel, she therefore decided to transform the interior of the corrugated tin building into a ship, and then use it as the setting for the baffling video installation, *Nowhere Less Now*, that I shall try to describe.

Here's what happens inside. Having booked your place in advance, you will be ushered into the meeting room of the Sea Cadets, a sepia-tinted time capsule in which the clocks stopped sometime around 1953. Framed black-and-white photographs of the young Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh hang amid early 20th-century group photos of eager young cadets, trophies, insignia, and a quaint sign asking, "Are you correctly dressed?" While you wait, you can peruse a battered copy of the Admiralty Manual of Navigation. But be warned: not everything you see around you was there before Seers's arrival. You may spot some of these photos and objects again as they flash by in the story that is about to unfold in the next room.

Ready? Equipped with headphones, we are led into what was once the chapel's nave, now transformed into the hull of an upturned ship. We sit on tiered benches facing two large white spheres that appear to float in space, one above the other. Then the lights go down, and we hear the artist's voice: "Place is a trigger for memory."

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The strange, multi-layered monologue about Uncle George and Aunt Georgina that follows is synched to a densely woven visual phantasmagoria in which historical photographs are interwoven with fakes, abstract geometric designs, animation and sequences in which the artist appears dressed as the long-dead ancestors she is telling us about. As you watch, a swift stream of images flows in front of you while that soft, disembodied voice regales you with a tale of uncanny coincidences and blind chance.

At first, it's all believable, but before too long fact elides into fiction and we are told of magic symbols and fortune tellers, a secret society, a blood sacrifice, and of dreams, signs and forebodings. Instead of attempting to disentangle the real from the imaginary, my advice is to sit back and let this spectacular son et lumière wash over you. As you leave, you'll be given a book-length essay by Seers that may or may not help you to make sense of what you've just seen.

Call me a philistine, but I count any work of visual art that requires a 190-page book to be fully understood as flawed, though I'm sure Seers has given future generations of graduate students some meaty topics for their PhDs.

As for me, I am confident that Seers is telling two stories: the first is about real things that happened to real people, the second is her fantastically embroidered riff on those things and those people. The first (true) story begins with photographs of the two ancestors she knew nothing about. One showed great-great uncle George as a sailor on the deck of HMS Kingfisher, the other his wife got up in full Masonic ceremonial gear. These clues led Seers to an island off the coast of Zanzibar where – amazingly – she found a tree on which George had carved his name and the name of his ship.

Seers further learnt that she herself had been born 100 years to the day after her great-great uncle's birth, and that he had died at the age of 48 – uncomfortably close to the age she is now. About Georgina, she knew even less. Obviously, she was a keen Mason at a time when it was unusual for women to be admitted into the secret society, but that's about it. Except for having a mildly interesting idiosyncrasy – each eye was a different colour – George appears to have been a complete nonentity.

Yet, on this slender foundation, the artist proceeds to erect a baroque fantasy in which the Tin Tabernacle serves as a sort of Tardis, allowing her to travel in her imagination back and forth in time, taking on the personas of both George and Georgina.

We meet a large cast of characters including a man named Edward George, whose father had been a liberated slave in Zanzibar who may have known George Edwards. If I sound doubtful, it is because the story grows ever more convoluted, and by now I didn't trust Seer, who, to say the least, is not a reliable narrator. There is a lot of flimflam about twins and aliens, and about death, destiny and memory. But as all of this rushes past, you begin to realise that what did or did not happen to Uncle George is beside the point.

What matters is that someone went in search of him, and in doing so caused him to live again in memory. And, Seers concludes, it is in memory that we come to know who we are. How do we find a meaning in our lives? Where do we start to search for it?

For the people who first worshipped in the Tin Tabernacle, the answer to both questions was: in the word of God. But in a post-Christian era, we must seek the truth about our deepest selves in other ways. If we are not to become trapped in an eternal present, we must keep the past alive by treating its traces – old photos, objects and documents – with the respect such accorded to such relics in more primitive societies.

At times, Seers is so maddeningly fey that you long for her to say what she means in plain English. And yet, after all the flimsy one-liner art I see, I instinctively know when I'm in the presence of an important work by an artist of stature. That is the case here and, as always, Artangel has done her proud.

*Sept 8-Oct 21, 12-16 Cambridge Avenue, London NW6. Details and tickets: [artangel.org.uk](http://artangel.org.uk)*

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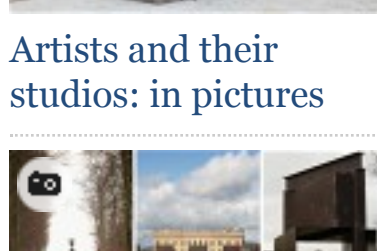
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