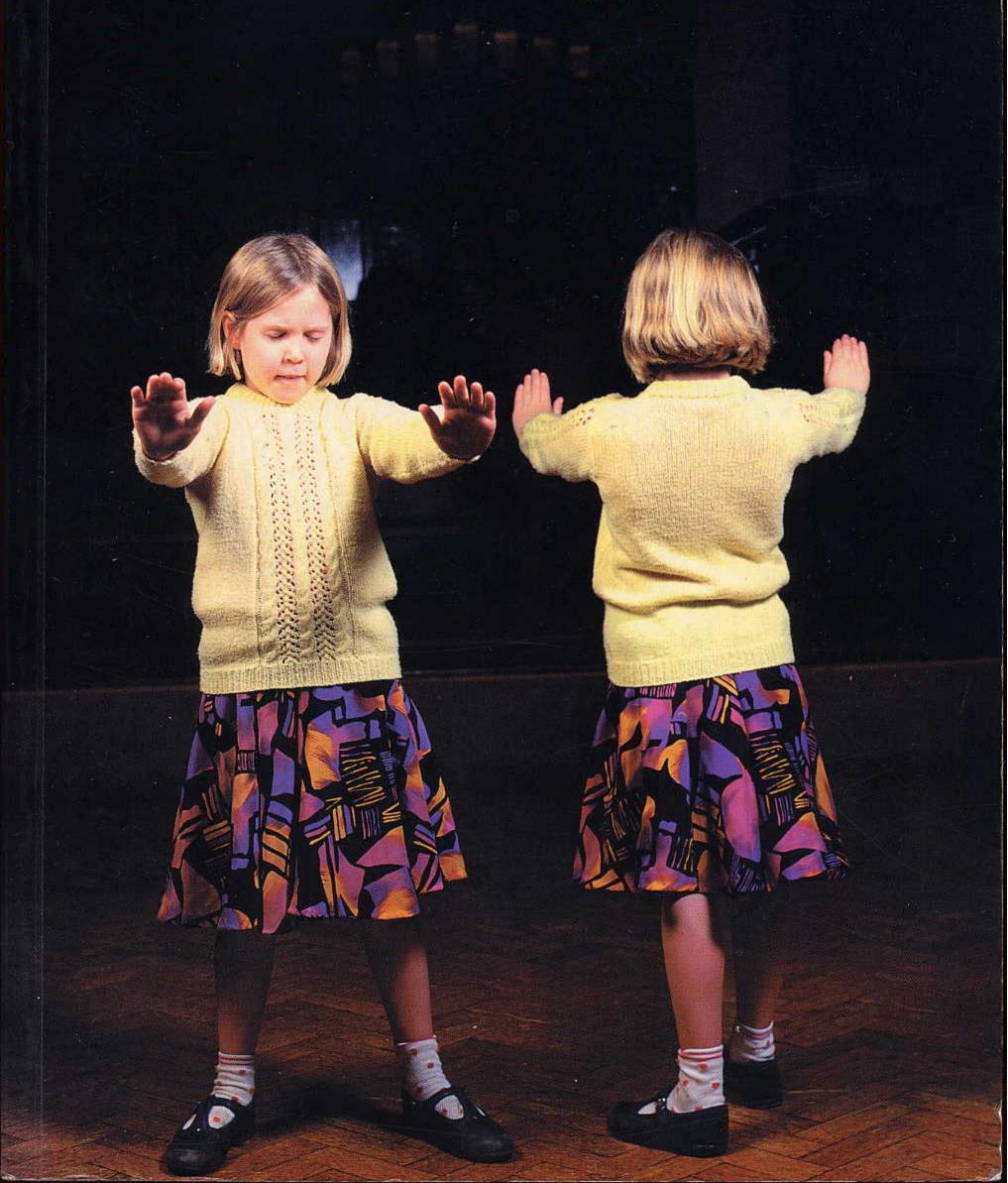# Creative Camera

30 years of writing

Edited by David Brittain

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Doppelgänger
Wendy McMurdo interviewed
by Sheila Lawson (April/May 1995)

Sheila Lawson is a Canadian artist who is presently living and working in London.

Wendy McMurdo is a Scottish artist who was a Henry Moore Fellow at the School of Cultural Studies, Sheffield Hallam University.

Sheila Lawson interviews Wendy McMurdo about the role of the uncanny in her surrealist-inspired images

Sheila Lawson: In your recent work you have been exploring the relationship between the traditional photographic image and the composite, computer constructed image. In your group images you quote seance photographs, a particular form of 'trick' photography popular as novelties in North America in the 1940s. Formally, your images differ from these early photos in that your sleight of hand is invisible. In the early composite images we can see the means employed to produce this effect. How does your body of work engage or underline the differences or non-differences between these two modes of image making?

Wendy McMurdo: The images, at one level or another, refer back to photographic modes of production used as early as 1850 (some early images use up to 30 separate negatives). These images were intended to cater for a taste for elaborate compositions in painting rather than to refer to any critique of photography itself. Obviously, the work could also be considered to relate to a history of montaged work, and does reflect this (especially an interest in surrealist works). One image which is very important to me is a well known photograph entitled, 'Abatoir'. It was taken by Eli Lotar in Paris in 1929 and used most famously to illustrate Bataille's *Documents*. Leaning along the bottom of an exterior wall are a neat row of severed horses legs standing to attention. The uncanniness of the severed limbs and the uncomfortable relationship between the once animate and inanimate mirror, I think, an aspect of my group pieces. Thus the work did, in part, arise from an interest in historically located developments (or disruptions) but, more importantly it came

from an interest in and a desire to respond to the shifting relationship between the subject/object and the viewer which has been brought about by the introduction of the element of the digital. As you said, the registering (unlike montage) of a seamless space would suggest an altogether different type of space that is particularly interested in the digital. That is, in the creation of what is often described as a dead space (the description more possibly relating to the anxiety often expressed by the viewer when confronting such a space which is essentially, unknowable).

SL: Unknowable – yet we can see this space and change it though we can't physically (nor could we ever) inhabit it. In some ways it is no more unknowable than a photograph. We could say though that it is an autonomous space, that digital imaging – like painting – has its own laws. The axiom lies within the image and within the image anything can happen. At the same time these images are photographic and still retain the currency of the 'real'. This grating fusion of the two types of spaces is not, metaphysically speaking, seamless. On a formal level you have produced an impossible fusion of times and spaces which elicits a strong feeling of the uncanny.

WM: Yes, this fusion of the 'times' is a critical element in the work. As you say the group pieces are anxiety-producing because, rationally, we know or believe that only one of us can exist. Freud's text on the uncanny, written in 1919, is useful here. He attempts to describe the uncanny, defining it as arising from a number of fears or anxieties. In the case of these images, there are perhaps three major fears which result in a feeling of the uncanny. First, he states that the uncanny is aroused when we have 'Doubts as to whether an apparently inanimate being is really alive' (an anxiety as to the relationship between animism and mechanism – fear of the automaton); second, we fear the loss of sight (implied when we fear that only one of the real sitters is present, hence the rest must be sightless); and thirdly, we harbour a fear of what Freud describes as one of the most prominent themes of uncanniness, that is the idea of the double or *Doppelgänger*.

SL: The creation of *Doppelgänger(s)* through the use of multiple images of the same sitter contributes to the 'unease' in the images. There have been many films which use this fear of substitution; Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and Don Segal's *The Body Snatchers* are all films involving creatures animate yet not human – something other. The replacements are indistinguishable from their originals. These films are made in times of anxiety about individuation and autonomy when technologies' evolution changes our concept of the nature of being human. The substitutions which occur of man/alien and man/machine are revealed only through the *Doppelgänger*'s unusual lack of 'proper' emotional response. Our eyes have failed to detect this replacement. Emotional response it seems is the province of the real, the familiar, of humanity alone.

WM: Initially I began working with a group of young actors. I was interested in why someone would be fascinated with becoming someone else, in taking over another's persona, becoming in some sense a *Doppelgänger*, neither real nor entirely fantastical. Both theatre and film play with the potential of the medium to slip back and forth between reality and fantasy. Buñuel's films constantly slip between the two very different types of spaces of the dream space and reality. The images in my work are composed of different levels of the real. In this respect perhaps the work is related more closely to film than to photography.

SL: Perhaps different *instances* of time rather than *levels* ... There are references to the double in myth as well as in film.

WM: Yes, the word 'double' for me evokes the two-faced Janus and particularly the Medusa who looks both forward and back. There are many examples (again in film) in which the power to see into the future or the past ends in disaster. The gifts of prediction and time travel are causes of trauma and disruption. I think anxiety is also produced when you are given an overwhelming amount of options through technology. A new space is opened up and this creates a schism between the choices we are asked to make and our traditional means of making them. Perhaps these films can be seen on one level as expressions of our profound ambivalence in the face of overwhelming choice.

SL: In response to multiple images of the same figure I scan from one to the other in order to choose the 'real' figure. My desire to identify (and identify with) the 'person' imaged is confounded. How should we read this emptying of the sitter's/our identity in relation to traditional portraiture and photography?

WM: In traditional portraiture, we do expect to encounter a kind of veracity. That is, historically, there is a certain acceptance that what is portrayed does or did actually exist. Simple double or multiple exposures, that is, one negative reproduced two or more times – for example Man Ray's famous photograph of Kiki de Montparnasse – rarely produce an effect that could in any way be described as uncanny. Because the image is merely replicated within one frame each works as a carbon copy of itself, or flipped they act as Rorschach blots. Like the encountering of our mirrored selves the symmetrical double is, on the whole, a normalised experience which does not involve the uncanny. The figures in my work, unlike the conventional double, are shifted digitally. This subverts the comfortable laws of the mirror and gives the images an uncanny sense of animation.

Like traditional portraiture the work includes the figure, but it is most definitely not about the figure. That is, the work concerns itself above all with the space which surrounds its supposed subject. In this sense the work functions very differently from traditional portraiture which defines itself through its interest in the figure, the 'visage'.

SL: The spot lighting which describes this space is striking, it is very theatrical

and painterly. It fictionalises the space. The chiaroscuro is reminiscent of Caravaggio's 'Last Supper' (in fact many of his works depicted figures whose face and physical stature resembled the artist's).

WM: It is interesting to think about the possible links between digital image-making and painting. The group pieces, especially, owe much to the compositional tradition of tableau painting and there is one painting in particular, although not from this tradition, that I have always found odd, disturbing ... and therefore fascinating. It is Gustave Courbet's 'The Meeting' or 'Bonjour Monsieur Courbet, 1850'. In it Courbet depicts himself stopping along a country road greeting two others who have stopped in front of him. The figures have clearly been transposed from three separate drawings (each figure is independently lit) and then brought together – 'staged' – on the canvas. There they form a strange triangle where none of them appears to meet the gaze of any of the others. They seem destined never really to meet at all. There appears to be a fracture in this painting. Within this work there is a struggle between different types of space – the painterly and the photographic. This conjoining of the two hitherto separate elements has resulted in the creation of this odd space – which is perhaps not unlike the conjoining of the digital to more traditional forms of image making. In this respect my work has as much to do with painting as it does with photography.

SL: In these images you depict a figure which can neither be subject or object of our desire. You force our regard to engage the disturbing non-space of the digitised image.

WM: I have been interested in this respect in the use of the gaze, particularly in much of Cindy Sherman's early work. By this I mean that the off-screen, or rather off-frame 'look' into the middle distance – the look of the dreamer typically presented as feminine – which suggests that the action is taking place elsewhere, close but just out of our reach. If one of the figures had been looking out of the group toward the viewer they would be very different images. They only look inward, toward the group; their gaze(s) never meet and in a way the image itself becomes sightless.

SL: Because the image is sightless it cannot see me (in the Lacanian sense) and I am not allowed that cathartic identification which normally takes place in front of an image.

WM: This identification is what we must at least attempt to do. This attempt to see ourselves in these images, to position ourselves as one, as individual, is an absolute and fundamental reaction to these pairings, to these groupings. Again, this relates back to Freud's remarks on a deep-seated fascination and revulsion with the notion of the double, of the *Doppelgänger*.

SL: The space of communication has been altered radically by the development of digital technology. We now experience the 'other' in a very different way.

Wendy McMurdo, *The Somnambulist*, 1985. Courtesy of the artist.

Conversely it has also changed the way we see ourselves. In some ways it has eradicated the barriers of distance by transcending space and time, yet we are cut off from a certain sensory input. When you lose a sense you automatically compensate for this loss by augmenting another. Perhaps people will communicate with others in a more fictionalised way; I mean this in the sense that we may imagine our correspondent through written clues in much the same way we form impressions about both the author and his characters when we read fiction.

WM: Traditionally, we build relationships based on sight and on the auditory connection we make with people. New technology is eliminating the need/context for this type of contact. We do not experience the gaze, the physical presence or the voice of those we communicate with. These things require the person to be present physically. They have to do with individuation. This does

not mean, however, that new technologies are not liberating and expansive, more that I am not sure as yet of the quality (of difference) of such exchanges. Communicating through the Internet is a very different way of building a relationship with someone. Home pages and social 'networks' which use theme rooms which you 'go into' to converse seem to be attempting to bring the *heimlich* (homely) into the *unheimlich* (uncanny).

SL: This seaming together of the familiar and the unknown strikes me as an intriguing way of coming to terms with the new. It is a type of grafting.
WM: 'Grafting' is an interesting word in that it implies both the uncomfortable space of waiting and a potential for failure. It echoes the grafting of times which this work involves and suggests the creation of something which is neither one thing nor another.

SL: What we are waiting for, what is not known then is whether the graft will take. Similarly, we are not sure of how to negotiate the time/space of your images. Our anxiety lies not in the fear of the unknown itself but revolves around the grey area which is the product of this synthesis of the known and the new.

Creative Camera
30 years of writing

Founded in 1968, *Creative Camera* has always been more than a magazine: it has been a forum for influencing the shape and direction of modern photography. This anthology of fifty texts and their images includes moments from the debate. There are strong and distinctive voices, many in lively disagreement, from writers and artists such as Roland Barthes, John Berger, Victor Burgin, Jo Spence and Helen Chadwick. There are many different types of writing: interviews with artists; reviews of exhibitions and books; fierce letters; historical profiles; polemics which question, reappraise, revise and challenge.

Through its thirty-year history *Creative Camera* has played its part in the changing fortunes of photography. In the 1980s opinions became polarised and the boundaries of 'pure photography' were radically reformed. This was the era of 'New Colour' and 'Constructed Photography' in practice and the new art history, feminism and post-structuralism featured in critical approaches to photography. In the 1990s, photography became a favoured tool among young artists. Debates about identity, the body, and the impact of digital technology are important features of the 'post-theory years'. In particular, the ability of the new technology to simulate photographic realism has revitalised the discussions about the relationship between photography, society, the media and 'the real'.

David Brittain is the Editor of *Creative Camera*.