

BOOK REVIEWS

TED SERIOS: THE MIND'S EYE

Edited by Lucy Kingett. Atelier Éditions. 2023. 223 pp. £32.96. Hardback

Ted Serios: The Mind's Eye is a fine anthology, designed by Emma Singleton, that accompanied the exhibition “Mind's Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios”, curated by Emily Hauver at The Image Centre, Toronto Metropolitan University in 2023.

The cover is a photograph, folded to create a book jacket. Out of focus, it features a man's eyes and forehead, looming, filling the frame. The eyes have the intense gaze of someone in an altered state; they could belong to a performer or a punk rock star in the zone. Tucked away on the inside sleeve, a second male figure appears in the background, peering in with an inquiring look on his face.

The wide eyes on the outer cover belong to Ted Serios, a working-class American who claimed to project images from inside his mind onto unexposed Polaroid instant film. The other figure, in the background observing, I assume to be the psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud who, between 1964 and 1967, extensively researched, documented, archived, and wrote about Serios's extraordinary abilities.

This beguiling book jacket envelops a softback 8 × 10 inch publication which consciously has the look and feel of a research dossier—as if it has come straight out of Eisenbud's archive. The aesthetic of this book, with its intriguing cover and the six specially commissioned essays within it, illustrates beautifully the narrative of Serios's extraordinary talents and his relationship with Eisenbud, and takes us into the borderlands where science and the sensational intersect. This book eloquently and thoroughly presents the evidence, while leaving readers to draw their own conclusions about the authenticity of Serios's and Eisenbud's paranormal claims.

For those who are not familiar with their story, here is some background. Ted, that is, Theodore Jude Serios (1921–2006), sometime hotel porter at the Conrad Hilton, Chicago, USA, was charismatic and witty, with a love of alcohol that led him to several run-ins with the police. Serios had an interest in the paranormal, and in the 1950s began to explore his psychic capabilities, claiming to experience “remote viewing” when being hypnotized. These initial experiments evolved, with Serios attempting to project the mental images of

his visions onto film in a Polaroid instant camera, a process already known in Spiritualism as thoughtography. Mysterious images did indeed emerge on some of the photographs, and Serios went on to develop his thoughtography technique using a small cardboard tube he called a “gizmo” to direct his thoughts on to the photographic paper inside the camera. His thoughtography gained the interest of the Illinois Society for Psychic Research, which invited him to demonstrate his alleged paranormal powers. Eventually, Serios came to the attention of Dr Jule Eisenbud (1908–1998), who had himself experienced what he considered paranormal events. Eisenbud set out to study Serios’ psychic abilities.

Over a four-year period, Eisenbud meticulously recorded Serios’s production of thoughtographs, documenting these in *The World of Ted Serios: Thoughtographic Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (Eisenbud, 1989/2021). Eisenbud’s studies were conducted during a period marked by the Cold War and emerging technologies, where there was heightened interest in psychic phenomena. Eisenbud remained a firm believer, though many critics, including magicians and scientists, suggested that Serios’s thoughtographs were achieved through trickery. In addition, the conditions under which the experiments were conducted have come under scrutiny: Serios was an alcoholic, and insisted on consuming dangerous amounts of alcohol in order to produce his phenomena, which Eisenbud facilitated.

Jule Eisenbud’s extensive Serios archive is held in the Special Collections of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), USA. A fine selection of thoughtographs, research data, letters, and other ephemera from this archive, many of them previously unpublished, is included in *Ted Serios: The Mind’s Eye*. These were also displayed in an exhibition, “Mind’s Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios”, and this book was created to accompany the exhibition. Published by Atelier Éditions, which specializes in artist publications, this is a limited edition run with just 3,000 copies. Atelier Éditions is known for its attention to detail and craftsmanship. High-quality paper and printing techniques are used to reproduce the photographs and ephemera with precision, ensuring that the textures and tonalities of the original Polaroid images are faithfully represented. It is worth getting your hands on a copy while it is within an affordable price range.

There is a curator’s sensibility in the presentation of this publication. Serios’s Polaroids, Eisenbud’s research materials, letters, the commissioned essays, and other materials are arranged in such a way as to create a visual narrative contextualizing Serios’s thoughtographs as both historical artefacts and artistic objects.

Featuring a foreword by Paul Roth, director of The Image Centre, and an introduction from curator Beth Saunders, who is also curator of Exhibitions, UMBC, there are also six accompanying texts by Mikita Brottman, Clement Chéroux, Mark Alice Durant, Emily Hauver, Ellie Howard, and Beth Saunders—all distinguished writers, artists, curators, and archivists with

expertise in photography. Their essays interrogate and illuminate the work of Serios and Eisenbud with an acknowledgement throughout of the artistic interest that the thoughtographs, with their performative means of production, have stimulated.

“The scientist and his subject” by Mikita Brottman, psychoanalyst and author known for her interest in true crime, gives an introduction to Eisenbud’s research background and a glimpse into his personal life. It looks at his research methods, recognizing the scientific protocols, but acknowledging that Eisenbud’s own beliefs were active agents when it came to Serios. The scientific community may well have dismissed the integrity of this research; however, the artistic community has embraced and been inspired by it.

In “The prodigal son”, Emily Hauver, curator of exhibitions at the Library Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore, compares Serios to the ‘trickster character’ from myth and folklore. The trickster has secret knowledge and uses this to fool people. She looks into his early life and familial relationships and his character as anecdotally recounted by acquaintances, as well as his run-ins with the law and his mental health issues—both possibly linked to his alcoholism. Serios captured himself in action on numerous Polaroids when attempting to produce thoughtographs. What can we discern of his character through these images: the shaman/showman, the child seeking parental attention?

The power dynamic between Serios and Eisenbud is further explored by curator and writer on the paranormal and photography Mark Alice Durant in his chapter “Inscrutable documents”. “Serios is the act, but it is Eisenbud’s show” (p. 55a). Could their relationship be seen as a kind of collaborative performance or vaudeville act, with Eisenbud narrating and telling the audience how to interpret the act? Durant curated the exhibition ‘Blur of the Otherworldly’ at the Center for Art and Visual Culture, UMBC, in 2005. This show included some of Serios’s thoughtographs along with the work of major international contemporary artists. Durant brings insight into the enigmatic quality of Serios’s thoughtographs. These Polaroids are a testament to how the shifting technologies of photographic processes influence the visual qualities of paranormal images, in turn inspiring artists to reproduce these effects.

Ellie Howard, a photographer and writer interested in mediums in the intersection of art and science, eloquently describes Serios’s Polaroid images: “Like a half-remembered dream, they capture ruins lying abandoned in the abyss, or the watery traces of figures swirling down a dirty sink” (p. 66). Her essay, “Black cats and TV: A journey into the mind’s eye”, evokes the publication title. Are the images projections from inside the mind? Whatever you believe, the Polaroids, with their dream-like quality, remain as a prompt to activate the conscious and unconscious mind.

Beth Saunders, curator and head of special collections and the Library Gallery at UMBC, outlines the cultural background to this story, including research during the Cold War into using psi and the space race. Saunders muses

on how these could have influenced the images that Serios produced. She writes about some of Serios's and Eisenbud's critics, including the magician James Randi (1928–2020), and how Eisenbud eventually lost the support of his peers.

The final essay, "Serios beyond belief", from the director of the Cartier-Bresson Foundation Paris, Clément Chéroux, locates Serios's Polaroids alongside contemporary photography practice, particularly the use of deliberately distorted images by such artists as Barbara Ess and Nancy Rexroth in the 1970s and 1980s. Ess organized the first gallery exhibition of Serios's photographs in the 1990s.

Serios's thoughtographs have continued to be exhibited in group and solo exhibitions, and are often featured in art publications. A large number of these enigmatic photographs, many of which have never been published before, are displayed in the central section of this book, "Psychic Polaroids". The Polaroids are reproduced close to their actual size, and are mostly one to a page, placed centrally, with a large area of blank page framing each photograph. This gives each image gravitas, allowing us to focus on the artistic merits—tone, composition, subject, angle, etc.—within each. One can return to gaze repeatedly at these blurry, distorted Polaroids—unique artefacts with an aura and an extraordinary 'back story'—and wonder: are we seeing visions from Serios's mind or the product of a clever trick? Whatever you may conclude, these are beguiling and haunting photographs in a rather wonderful publication.

shedlady@hotmail.com

SARAH SPARKES

REFERENCE

Eisenbud, J. (2021). *The world of Ted Serios: 'Thoughtographic' studies of an extraordinary mind* (2nd ed.). White Crow. (Original work published 1989)