

In *Conjurations* Films Clare Strand shows a series of improbable events – young women rotating their heads or pulling a piece of ‘brain floss’ right through them, or pulling endless streamers or eggs from their mouths. All the scenes are obviously impossible but what’s less obvious is how they have been faked – common sense dictates they’re tricks, but the films retain their air of innocence. Photographs and films, so often used as evidence, can be convincing falsifications because of it.

In fact photography and film have long been used to create fictions – Strand’s series is inspired by Georges Méliès’ early 20th century experiments, for example, which used jump cuts, animation and tricks of scale to take his viewers on *A Trip to the Moon* and more. But, as Strand’s other work shows, we still rely on images to evidence the what, the when and the where in police work, science and the media. Photography’s indexical relationship to reality offers the tantalising possibility of evidence, lending a convincing smoothness to the most untrustworthy of fakes.

For Strand it’s the dividing line between the two that’s most interesting, so her fictions are never obvious – the secret of a good trick, after all, is to dupe the viewer into believing. Some of her strategies for doing so are deceptively simple, such as working in black-and-white to link her images back to the history of apparently trustworthy institutions. She also always works in series, aping the approach of typologists such as August Sander or Berndt and Hilla Becher, who tried to build up their cases through repetition. In doing so she gently mocks their rigorous classifications, while benefitting from our instinctive faith in inductive logic.

Perhaps similarly Strand also plays with tropes and clichés, here raiding the traditional British magician’s box of tricks to create something strangely familiar, and all the less strange for it. The streamer trick is often played out on stage, and may or may not be being done ‘for real’ here. Is the film recording something faked but real or altogether faking what’s in front of the lens? Strand’s images give little away, blithely continuing the narrative but, by looping endlessly before the viewers’ very eyes, adding a twist of their own.

Strand also often uses young women in her work, which plays out in contradictory but complementary ways. Traditionally associated with psychic abilities and the uncanny, young women might be expected to do the improbable; on the other hand, read as symbols of innocence, it seems unlikely they’d act to deceive. Magicians have long made use of the paradox, relying on distractingly pretty young women for assistants, to convincingly play out their tricks.

The fact that Strand herself is a woman is also pertinent because magicians are traditionally men, as are the majority of photographers. Here she works magic in more ways than one with her subtle sleight of hand – by ostensibly making films about tricks, she makes the real subject the image as document, and our uncomfortable propensity to believe it.