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Houston Press

Exploring The Camera-Ready

The way broadcast journalists and politicians present themselves to the public is explored in Tell Me What You Want to Hear by Liz Magic Laser

What do ex-KPRC news anchor Linda Lorelle, former political candidate Maurice Duhon (a.k.a. Cornbread) and Houston Chronicle political cartoonist Nick Anderson have in common? They have all been drawn into the web of Liz Magic Laser.



In her commissioned video installation at DiverseWorks, *Tell Me What You Want to Hear*, Laser focused on the ways in which journalists and politicians try to control how they present themselves and their information. That politicians and broadcast journalists "perform," that they have media training to present themselves and their message in the best light, is not news. But the how and the why of it is a fascinating topic. Sadly, as one viewer observed, the ideas behind Laser's *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* end up being more interesting than the finished work.

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Liz Magic Laser is a young artist who, among other things, has addressed politics, the media, financial institutions and art fairs in past works, seeking to pick apart the tactics and agendas of each. Laser's projects have used actors as well as the willing and unwilling public. For her 2009-2010 work chase, she filmed actors performing Bertolt Brecht's 1926 play *Man Equals Man* in Chase Bank ATM centers. Bank employees, security guards, janitors and people just trying to get some cash unintentionally became part of the play. In *Push Poll*, a video commissioned by CNN prior to the 2012 election, Laser explored the influence and manipulation of polling using "man on the street" interviews as well as "focus groups" filled with members of the art world.

For *Tell Me What You Want to Hear*, Laser's show at *DiverseWorks*, the artist recruited well-known Houstonians with on-camera experience instead of hiring actors. In doing so, she gave up a measure of control for real-world input — an admirably gutsy move.

Glossy video stills of the participants line the wall as you walk into *DiverseWorks*. Images of the Emmy-winning Lorelle, the multitalented Duhon (he's also a realtor, reality TV star and rapper) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning Anderson hang alongside those of fellow participants, University of Houston broadcast journalism major Lizette Garcia, political strategist Mustafa Tameez, and journalist and UH communications strategist Shannon Buggs.

Another wall displays the pages of the script Laser wrote with input from the project participants for a program about media presentation and training. You can walk past a heavy curtain into the main gallery and view the videos that resulted from Laser's script. A three-channel video installation shows simultaneously shot images from three different sets. One is a static camera shot of the control room at the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication at the University of Houston. A second image shows the newsroom-like set at the school and the project participants. The third video shows an audience in the gallery at *DiverseWorks*.

Buggs acts as a host for the audience at *DiverseWorks*. She sets up the program with "Tonight we'll be discussing news, politics and performance: how different are they really?" The "panel of experienced media professionals" on the UH newsroom set is shown to the audience through a live video feed.

The question-and-answer sessions with the audience are largely lackluster — as are the scripted questions. Buggs asks, "Do you watch TV?" "Do you think a newscaster has to be an actor? Does a politician have to be an actor?" It's as if the audience is some grade school class. But Laser doesn't really have the audience there for their thoughts and ideas; they're there to help her realize her project. They are being used, and the group is packed with skeptical art types; most of them didn't seem to want to play along. It's an artificial discussion in an artificial setting — one that is even more manipulative than actual television. An interview program or panel discussion that wasn't someone's artwork would generate much more participation.

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Audience member John Guess managed to defeat the format — he had some insightful comments — but was also apparently nonchalant enough to doze off on camera while sitting in the front row.

It was a convoluted project to pull off, and the process itself dominated the work for me. The live show seemed more about trying to make the two locations (the video feed apparently routing through Google+ Hangout) work together. There is a whole local-cable-show vibe to the production — some of which may be intentional or simply a natural consequence of Laser's intentions. There are screw-ups, awkwardnesses and a lot of stilted delivery — even when off-script. Linda Lorelle, however, is a flawless pro as she talks about authenticity in reporting, explaining her series documenting a fellow anchor's battle with breast cancer. Lorelle becomes an illustration of sincerity and believability in the media. Duhon's scripted talk about crafting his role on the MTV reality show *50 Cent: The Money and the Power* was well delivered, but an unscripted interview with him would have been much more enlightening — even taking into account his "media training."

The most engaging and "authentic" aspects of the three videos were the people in the control room trying to make it all work together. It was far from slick and seamless, and as such, you became more aware of how they were trying to create shots that flowed with and reinforced the content. You have to put on earphones to hear the control-room audio, but it's also a relief from the stilted script — the real language of people trying to accomplish an actual task is refreshing.

Perhaps Laser needs to step back from her work and give the participants even more control. *Tell Me What You Want to Hear* has some interesting moments, but it feels halfway between Laser's past (and largely successful) use of actors and something that could be riskier but ultimately fascinating.