

Altered ego



Ester Gould

Filmmaker Ester Gould talks to Melanie Goodfellow about her IDFA competition title *A Strange Love Affair with Ego*.

From childhood to her twenties, filmmaker Ester Gould was in awe of her older sister Rowan, a larger-than-life figure with a huge ego and belief in her central position in the universe. While Gould remained at home, Rowan set off around the world, touching down in various cities from London to Los Angeles, in an endless quest for success, fame and recognition.

But when these failed to materialise and mental health issues kicked in, Rowan's self-confident persona and peripatetic, bohemian existence unravelled and Gould's awe turned to concern. Inspired by these experiences, her *A Strange Love Affair with Ego*, supported by the Netherlands Film Fund, explores the human affair with ego, the fragility of self-esteem and the darker side of narcissism as it manifested itself in her sister.

It is an intricate essayistic, partly biographical, multi-layered work

that is difficult to define. "I call it an ego fairy tale which goes bad," says Gould. "It's a struggle to pin down because it's an odd construction. You end up asking, is it a documentary, or is it a fiction film?"

The trajectory of Rowan's life is captured through a running commentary of one-line title cards based on thoughts about ego, exchanges between the sisters and Gould's memories. A series of portraits of real-life female characters – from a self-confident school girl in Scotland to a party event organiser in Los Angeles, whose glitzy public persona is tragically at odds with her humdrum, debt-ridden reality – evoke the stages of Rowan's life and explore the subject of ego at the same time.

"I never wanted to make a direct portrait of my sister... not least because I don't have enough home video. I thought it would be interesting instead to look for female characters who reminded me of Rowan in specific locations and who would also say something about ego in that phase of life." A haunting score by Marc Lizier at Amsterdam-based sound company Klink, envelops the words and images, evoking a sense of expectation and disappointment.

There is not a single photo or frame of Rowan anywhere in the main body of the film and yet it is imbued with her presence, while at the same

time exploring the topic of narcissism. Beyond being an exploration of ego, it is also a touching portrait of sisterly bonds. Gould says she did not intend to make such a personal work when she first submitted her proposal to the Netherlands Film Fund some five years ago. "Because of my sister, I have a soft spot for people with big egos. It started out with a different slightly tongue-in-cheek title, *How To Become a Narcissist*. I thought it would be funnier," says Gould.

"Our personal story was simply a paragraph in the section marked motivation," she continues. "I wanted to make a film about narcissism linked to what I had experienced with Rowan but as I developed the project it became clearer and clearer to me that the personal story was not just the motivation but also the backbone."

Produced by Zuidenwind Filmproductions, *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* is Gould's first solo feature documentary after the 2010 *Shout*, co-directed with Sabine Lubbe Bakker, and a number of shorts and TV productions.

Alongside *Ego*, Gould has also been working with Reijer Zwaan on former IDFA Forum project *Strike a Pose* about the seven young male dancers who joined Madonna on her controversial Truth or Dare tour in 1990. The work is expected to be ready in time for Berlin 2016.

A Strange Love Affair with Ego ◊ Ester Gould



Production: Zuidenwind Filmproductions, www.zuidenwind.nl