

# SUSAN MACWILLIAM MODERN EXPERIMENTS

Solo Survey Exhibition

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Exhibition Guide

## SUSAN MACWILLIAM MODERN EXPERIMENTS

Susan MacWilliam: Modern Experiments is the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of MacWilliam's work to date. It presents key pieces from the artist's career with a focus on works created from 1998 onward when the artist began working with video. Since then, MacWilliam's work has investigated obscure and overlooked histories and cases of perceptual and paranormal phenomena. Using anecdote, reconstruction, forms of portraiture and detailed editing, she has made work about mediumship, ectoplasm, x-ray vision, telepathy, table tilting, clairvoyance and dermo optical perception.

The work presented in this exhibition forms a unique and significant body of material exploring subjects that are on the periphery and beyond mainstream scientific and psychological study. Consisting of twenty eight of Susan MacWilliam's works Modern Experiments features fourteen videos and video

installations including The Last Person, 1998 (Shortlisted for IMMA Glen Dimplex Artists Award 1999), Dermo Optics, 2006 (exhibited at 2009 Venice Biennale) and KATHLEEN, 2014 (Derry-Londonderry City of Culture Commission) alongside other aspects of her diverse practice, including photographic works, stereoscopes, neon and sculptural works such as Book Spheres, 2014.

MacWilliam has worked with prominent parapsychologists and psychical research institutions, including poltergeist investigator Dr William G. Roll and the Dermo Optical Perception Laboratory of Madame Yvonne Duplessis, Paris. Her sustained engagement with the New York family of the Irish born medium Eileen Garrett has resulted in the production of a substantial body of work. She has worked with historical archives including the T.G. Hamilton Spirit Photograph Collection, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, the Parapsychology Laboratory

Records, Duke University, Durham, NC, and those of the Parapsychology Foundation, New York and the Rhine Research Center, Durham, NC.

Born in Belfast in 1969 and based between Belfast and Dublin, where she teaches at the National College of Art and Design, MacWilliam has exhibited nationally and internationally with solo shows in New York, Dublin, London, Victoria, BC, Winnipeg, Manchester, Northampton and Derby.

Initiated and curated by Riann Coulter, Curator of the F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio, Modern Experiments has been made possible through the North South Touring and Dissemination Scheme, a joint initiative of the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and Arts Council of Northern Ireland. In 2017 the exhibition will tour to Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda; Uillinn: West Cork Arts Centre, Skibbereen and Butler Gallery, Kilkenny.

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### Susan MacWilliam Modern Experiments Tour

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F.E. McWilliam Gallery, Banbridge:  
10 September – 26 November, 2016

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The Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda:  
17 February – 8 April, 2017

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Uillinn: West Cork Arts  
Centre, Skibbereen:  
9 September – 18 October, 2017

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The Butler Gallery, Kilkenny:  
28 October – 17 December, 2017



### **AN ANSWER IS EXPECTED**

2013

yellow gold neon

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### **NOW**

2013

flashing red neon

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### **KUDA BUX**

2003

installation with video

10mins 40secs

Taking his act to variety shows and making appearances at Radio City Music Hall, the New York mystic Kuda Bux (1905-1981) gained fame and notoriety in the 1930s and 40s for his dramatic demonstrations of eyeless sight. Kuda Bux specialised in performing such feats as reading a newspaper or writing on a blackboard while blindfolded. Viewed from a 1930s armchair Kuda Bux's acts are restaged and played through a 1950s television within a theatrical open set.

### **THE ONLY WAY TO TRAVEL**

2008

video

38mins 30secs

Irish trance medium Eileen Garrett first travelled to New York in 1931 on invitation of the American Society for Psychical Research. During the 1930s and 40s Garrett and her daughter, Eileen Coly, frequently crossed the Atlantic from Europe to New York. The Only Way To Travel reveals a world of 1930s high living, the cocktail hour, the rise of the New York skyscraper, and an era of glamorous travel, optimism and new horizons.

Featuring: Eileen Coly (1916-2013), daughter of Eileen Garrett, Lisette Coly (b.1950), granddaughter of Eileen Garrett. Eileen Garrett (1893-1970) founded the publishing house Creative Age Press in 1941 and the Parapsychology Foundation in 1951, both New York.

## 13 ROLAND GARDENS

2007

video

22mins 30secs

Eileen Coly (1916-2013), daughter of Irish medium Eileen Garrett, describes her mother's famous R101 airship séance in 1930 and their time living at 13 Roland Gardens, London, site of Harry Price's Laboratory of Psychological Research.

Featuring: Eileen Coly, Lisette Coly, Dr Stanley Krippner (b.1932), psychologist and academic, Dr William G. Roll (1926-2012), parapsychologist and poltergeist investigator.

## ARTIST AS MEDIUM

2008

stereoscope

Self-portrait of Susan MacWilliam in the Eileen J. Garrett Library, Parapsychology Foundation, New York.

## MEDIUM'S DAUGHTER

2008

stereoscope

Portrait of Eileen Coly (1916-2013).

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## ALDOUS'S EYES

2014

video, silent

4mins 50secs

Reflecting on the narrative explorations of Aldous Huxley's 1942 book *The Art of Seeing*, in which the writer discusses the Bates Method of improving eyesight, *Aldous's Eyes* is a visual exploration of perceptual phenomena. It features glass eyeballs from the History of Medicines Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.



## DERMO OPTICS

2006

video

4mins 9secs

*Dermo Optics* is an account of the artist's visit to the Dermo Optical Laboratory of Madame Yvonne Duplessis, Paris. Duplessis (b.1912), a senior researcher in Dermo Optical Perception is observed with her colleagues as they demonstrate the experimental apparatus in the cellar laboratory. The artist participates in the experiments with very good results.

Dermo optical perception (also referred to as eyeless sight or fingertip vision) is the ability to 'see' without using the eyes. Dermo optical perception is often observed under test conditions with the subject blindfolded or behind a screen. The subject identifies colours via non-visual perception distinguishing them either through touch or remotely from a distance.



## FEELERS POSTER SERIES

2005

Living Room, Dancers, Feelers  
digital collage  
Giclée print on cotton rag paper

Blind man's buff, remote viewing, the fainting girl, Kuda Bux, Kathleen Goligher, Helen Duncan, Rosa Kuleshova and Mollie Fancher make appearances in this series of images originally designed as artist pages for publication in Visual Artists Ireland's journal 'Printed Project'. Feelers Poster Series draws analogies between the parlour game of blind man's buff and the experimental demonstrations of dermo optical perception.

## LIVING ROOM

Feelers Poster Series  
2005

digital collage  
Giclée print on cotton rag paper

## EXPERIMENT M

1999

double-channel video, silent  
5mins 43secs

Between 1914 and 1920 Dr William Jackson Crawford (1881-1920), a lecturer in mechanical engineering at Belfast Municipal Institute and Queen's

University researched the mediumistic phenomena occurring at the séances of the Goligher Circle, Belfast. Experiment M presents textual excerpts from Crawford's books and reconstructions of his experimental testing apparatus. Crawford's relationship to the table tilting medium Kathleen Goligher (b.1898) is explored.

## HEADBOX

2004

TV cubes with three videos  
Rosa and Collar Model, 14mins;  
Hands Through Screen Model,  
12mins, 55secs; Woman Behind Screen  
Model, 13mins, 8secs

The remarkable ability to read with her fingertips, made the young Rosa Kuleshova the subject of intense observation in Russia in the 1960s. Blacked out goggles covered her eyes, large paper collars were placed around her neck, and screens with holes for her hands to pass through were used to ensure that it was Rosa's fingers that were doing the 'seeing'. Headbox explores the contraptions and devices employed by scientists to prevent Rosa from using her eyes during experimental testing.



## THE LAST PERSON

1998

video, silent

10mins 30secs

A strange substance, 'ectoplasm', emerges from the medium's mouth; hands appear and spirits are conjured up. The Last Person reflects on the case of Helen Duncan (1898-1956), a medium from Portsmouth who in 1944 was the last person to be tried and prosecuted under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735. The artist poses as the medium and footage follows the séance room events described in the court reports (The Times, 1944) that followed the trial.

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## DANCERS

2005

Feelers Poster Series

digital collage

Giclée print on cotton rag paper

## KATHLEEN

2014

video

33mins

A childhood accident, the death of a beloved pet and a library of books provide the formative experiences of the young Kathleen. Using excerpts from Kathleen Coyle's books, manuscripts, personal letters, unpublished poems and scribbled notes, KATHLEEN is an exploration of the existential and the melancholic, an observation of life and death. It is a study of overlooked Derry born writer Kathleen Coyle (1886-1952).

Voices: Anne Craig, Jim Craig, Ken McCormack.

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## ECTOPLASM

1999

stereoscope

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## SPIRIT TRUMPET

1999

stereoscope



The Last Person, 1998



KATHLEEN, 2014



## PULL DOWN

2016  
video, silent  
3mins 10secs

Conjuring up the dark spaces of the séance room, Pull Down observes the repeated collapsing of a girl through the focusing lens of a camera. Continuing the artist's explorations of the phenomena of spiritualism Pull Down draws attention to the role of the camera as observer of the medium within historic psychical research studies.

## WHERE ARE THE DEAD?

2013  
white neon

## FAINT

1999  
video  
3mins 40secs

Faint presents images of a fainting girl (the artist) set against the sound of bird song. Shot at Powerscourt Gardens, Wicklow and in the grounds and interiors of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Faint refers to ideas about mesmerism, trance and hysteria.

## LIBRARY

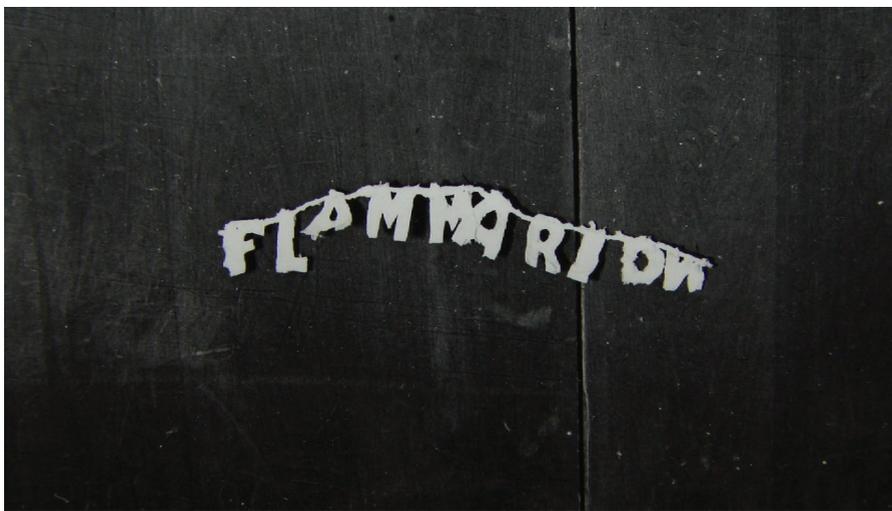
2008  
video  
14mins 10secs

Library is recorded in the Eileen J. Garrett Library, Parapsychology Foundation, New York.

## F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N

2009  
video  
17mins 13secs

In 1931 a 'teleplasm' spelling out the name Flammarion appeared on the wall of a séance cabinet in Winnipeg. Camille Flammarion (1842–1925) was a French astronomer and psychical researcher and his name appeared at Thomas Glendenning Hamilton's sitting of June 10th, 1931. F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N features a reconstruction of Hamilton's séance cabinet, the Belfast poet Ciaran Carson, Danish-American poltergeist investigator Dr William G. Roll and Arla Marshall, Canadian granddaughter of Hamilton's Scottish séance medium Susan Marshall. Recorded in three cities across the globe Carson, Roll and Marshall come together in F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N and respond to the image of the teleplasm.



## CAN WE EXPLAIN THE POLTERGEIST?

2009  
stereoscope

Portrait of poltergeist investigator Dr William G. Roll (1926-2012).

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## N TO Z

2009  
stereoscope  
Portrait of poet and writer Ciaran Carson (b.1948)

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## EXPLAINING MAGIC TO MERCER

2005  
installation with video and two framed images  
10mins 40secs

A number of obscure historical figures possessing a variety of bizarre and extraordinary phenomena have been the subject of MacWilliam's work. In Explaining Magic to Mercer the artist discusses the X-ray vision of Kuda Bux, the ectoplasmic materialisations of Helen Duncan, the multiple personalities of Mollie Fancher, the table levitations of Kathleen Goligher and the fingertip vision of Rosa Kuleshova, with her five year old nephew Mercer.

## FEELERS

2006  
stereoscope

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## FEELERS

Feelers Poster Series  
2005  
digital print  
Giclée print on cotton rag paper

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## BOOK SPHERES

2013 – 14  
sculpture, installation  
inkjet paper, plastic spheres

Using parapsychology book covers the artist imagines the book as telepathic device 'transmitting' information from writer (sender) to reader (receiver). Book Spheres employs imagery and titles from the Alex Tanous Library, Rhine Research Center, Durham, North Carolina and the artist's personal book collection.



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Kuda Bux, Dermo Optics, Book Spheres, installation shots by Eddie Byrne.  
All other images, video stills, courtesy the artist.

[www.susanmacwilliam.com](http://www.susanmacwilliam.com)  
[www.vimeo.com/susanmacwilliam](http://www.vimeo.com/susanmacwilliam)



Highlanes Gallery



**BUTLER ■ GALLERY**