

# *to be - to see - to be seen*

Susan MacWilliam *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N*  
NCAD Gallery, Dublin, 2010

*Text by James Merrigan.*



Susan MacWilliam, *Faint*, 1999, colour with sound,  
3mins 40secs; image courtesy the artist.

In 2010 at NCAD Gallery, Dublin, Susan MacWilliam restaged the video installation titled *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N*. This was one of three works that were shown at the 53rd *Venice Biennale*, 2009. The press-release for *F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N* stated:

*F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N (2009) is based on MacWilliam's research into the spirit photography archive of T.G. Hamilton held at the University of Manitoba Archives in Winnipeg, Canada. Named after the French astronomer and psychical researcher Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), the work is inspired by a photograph which documents the appearance of a 'teleplasmic text' at a séance in June 1931.*

*Faint*, 1999, was the first work I experienced from MacWilliam's art practice - now resembling and measuring an archive. I say experienced and not viewed, or saw, because it has stayed with me since, wedged in my memory. Not because it was that visually traumatic, but it just left an imprint - a vestige. In *Faint*, MacWilliam herself is the performer - a Medium - collapsing repeatedly on a grassy clearing. This repeated moment, of what could be called "old fashioned female hysteria," is interrupted intermittently by details of poised hands against a backdrop of folds of drapery and filigreed furniture. There is also what I imagine to be, a male voyeur present - breathing heavily while watching the episodes of collapse. MacWilliam is fully committed to the fall in the work, you can see her upper body collapsing in on its haunches - it is almost believable - but it is not real. The event is a fabrication: the faint, the dress, the birdsong, - it is all a reworking. In a sense, MacWilliam is acting out a desire - to be - to see - to be seen.



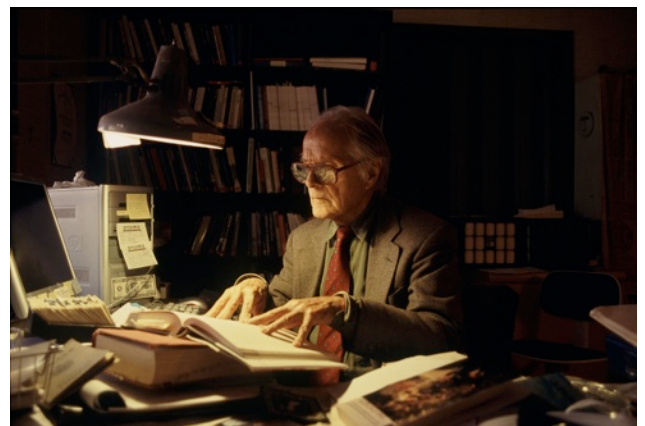
Susan MacWilliam, Stereoscopes and F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N, NCAD Gallery, Dublin; photo: Ronan McCrea.

Teasingly at NCAD Gallery, MacWilliam has placed two stereoscopes in plain view from outside the full window of the Gallery's facade. As an introduction, and also seen in full view of the street, the artist has sited a plywood cutout text, spanning 12-feet across, which spells out the unfamiliarly-exotic word - F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N. The placement of the stereoscopes suggests a view within a view and supplants a kid's desire to enter the space to get a sneak peek. Traditionally, the common themes seen through a stereoscope were either fairy tales or travel destinations; commonly procured as a last minute 'panic buy' from the foreign gift shop. The recipient, usually a child, had one look and then it was discarded, the image trapped inside without an audience - *ad infinitum*-. The structure of the stereoscope can give some insight to where my line of inquiry is going: two images of the same subject are placed side-by-side. The trick of the eye is caused by one of the images being a slightly different view of the subject. The lens of the stereoscope aligns the two images at a virtual distance of infinity (vanishing point), and what you get is a 3-D effect. It is this articulation of a view through the nostalgic stereoscope that is pertinent to the themes that underpin MacWilliam's art practice.

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This multifarious viewing and articulation of those varying points of view is what dislocates her work from pure research. Image and language are placed side-by-side in this private theatre.

The British Philosopher Gilbert Ryle denounced the Cartesian theory of mind, which claimed that the soul was a separate nonmaterial entity - a ghost. Ryle, (following Wittgenstein), also thought that philosophical problems were caused by our misuse of language.[1] From this philosophical standpoint, the basic nature of our understanding and view of the world is always compromised by the very things that we try to explain it with - language and speech. This path of inquiry situates MacWilliam's work in an argument that not only revolves around issues of an "extramundane" nature but also one that is concerned with language.



Susan MacWilliam, *Can we explain the Poltergeist?*, stereoscopic image, (With Dr William G Roll), 2008; courtesy the artist.

As I look through one stereoscope and then the other (both of which I learn later show portraits of the two participants of the video work F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N, Dr. William G. Roll, Poltergeist Investigator, and Ciaran Carson, Poet and Novelist) I am conscious of being watched from the busy

street level of Thomas Street. There is something perverse about bending down to look, arse backed up to the people who walk past the full clear window of NCAD Gallery. Consciously or not, MacWilliam has created a scenario that harks back to the view assumed in *Faint*, 11 years earlier, with the exception that the viewer is being viewed.

I look in MacWilliam's *Biennale Monograph*, titled *Remote Viewing*, a particular page is open, p III. It shows a view of the *séance* cabinet that was used for the performance by Carson in F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N. It all becomes a little clearer as I walk through the fabricated architecture that MacWilliam has designed for the display of the work. This is made up of a light corridor to house the stereoscopes and a dark intervening corridor that leads to a darker viewing space for the projected video. The space seems to turn in on itself. As I enter the dark space within, I realise that moments earlier - from without - I was looking through the stereoscopes on the backside of where the video is now projected. Images of B.F. Skinner (the American Psychologist) and his philosophy of "Radical Behaviourism" come to mind.[2] Skinner's "Operant Conditioning Chamber," or more commonly referred to as "Skinner's Box," was a fabricated space to analyse human behaviour; with the help of rats and *operandum* (levers), or the more appropriately sounding term - *manipulandum*. Reinforcers such as food and water were used to get the participants to do the psychologist's bidding. The chamber was sound and light proofed, stimulus control was paramount.

There is a similar tendency for environ-

-mental control inherent in MacWilliam's display of F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N at NCAD Gallery. Such control was plainly illustrated in an earlier press image for a previous work by the artist at Temple Bar Gallery, bluntly titled 'Headbox'. For the sake of documentation and maybe "correct" procedure, the participant in the photograph looks into a less sophisticated stereoscope and holds onto a handle, or what could be equated to a Skinner lever. This leads me to aspects of MacWilliam's work which suggest that control is paramount to her method.



Susan MacWilliam, *Headbox*, 2004, Wall mounted Headbox housing stereoscope and speakers. Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin 2004; courtesy the artist.

Straight forward narrativity is already shot when you go to view video in the context of art. Unless you know the score you will always arrive late to an already fragmented art narrative. On arriving at NCAD Gallery I asked the gallery invigilator what the duration of MacWilliam's video work was? In the process of explaining there was a mix-up, a misunderstanding. To cut a convoluted story short, the timescales that were juggled about were - 7 minutes - 17 minutes - 70 minutes, and in that order. I took the latter dubious timescale, saying I was parked two minutes from the gallery. I persuaded myself that MacWilliam is playing

with duration, maybe the true length of a *séance*, or twenty minutes more than a therapy session. The Freudian hysteria case of *Anna O* popped into my head, probably due to the change of position that MacWilliam herself has taken since *Faint*, from victim to dominant. This transformation is cemented by way of the relationship between the two protagonists in F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N and the director of proceedings - MacWilliam. Interviews generally take the form of a one-to-one with perspective interviewee sitting across from the interviewer. The setting is intentionally intimate and polite. The interviewer wants information that is relevant to the trajectory of their research. In F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N, MacWilliam is outside of the vanishing point, almost swinging from the chandeliers to get another view. In a first person narrative that Carson gives in the monograph, he discloses the directorial process that the artist uses with her “guests.”[3]



Susan MacWilliam, F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N, 2009, Video still, Ciaran Carson (Poet), sits in the *Séance Cabinet*; courtesy the artist.

*“I begin to recite the wordlist Susan has given to me to recite. Not a glossary, since no meanings are given. Just the bare words, the bare boards deprived of their contents. Terms relating to film, over 180 of them. Some of these are familiar to me. Some leave me guessing. Some others are*

*beyond my ken...From time to time I take my eyes off the list, memorising a few words in advance of speaking them to look into the lens of Susan’s camera...”[4]*

The diaristic form of writing that Carson plays with in the monograph suits his position in F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N. He is a subject in an experiment. Whether these experiments are true or false is beside the point. The “teleplasmic text,” which is the accelerant for MacWilliam to re-fabricate these events - finds a form in Carson. His accent trips over meaning to form clear pronunciation - from the gut. Looking at the documentary photographs of the *séance* and the sporadic positioning of the teleplasm (or more commonly termed “ectoplasm”), the *séance* sitter’s body becomes a maw, when unable to speak - the human conduit either faints or vomits out ectoplasm; spirit - ghost - meaning: communication is made fleshy.

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*Séance cabinet with teleplasmic F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N text*; courtesy Hamilton Family Fonds, University of Manitoba Archives.

MacWilliam threads a fine line between document and fabricated fiction. In some revealing e-mails she says:

“...I have always thought the process of manifestations and materialisations of the *séance* room to be similar to the realisation of ideas and objects in the studio.” (email to Slavka Sverakova, 21/12/2008, 14:32.).

On the same day - 7 hours later - MacWilliam goes on to describe the materialisation of these fabrications:

“Last night, at 11pm, I found myself on the sitting room floor stitching a teleplasmic ship using muslin and working from the photographs from the hamilton archives.” ( e-mail to Slavka Sverakova, 21/12/2008, 19:29.)[5]

Like the appropriated boards from Orchid Studios, Belfast, that formed the *séance* cabinet, or MacWilliam’s own stitched muslin “teleplasmic” ship, Carson is a fabricated 'character-object' in the video. He has been given a script to adhere to, but it is not a script that forms a narrative *per se*. It is a recipe. A menu. A word-association test. Dressed in a dark wool suit, white shirt and red tie - the cut of his jib is not poet like. The odd angles of the camera view frame the context that MacWilliam has staged - a fake *séance* cabinet - a list of words - Carson is made into a false prophet without knowing the meaning of the words. He is left “guessing” while trying to form a meaningful sentence. The differences between Carson (the viewed) and MacWilliam (the viewer) is knowledge. Carson has no-knowledge (in the context of MacWilliam’s process), so he works off spontaneity - drenched with hope. The artist on the other hand has

some idea of the outcome, or the result of the fragmented edit. Twice on one page of the monograph Carson likens the *séance* cabinet to a “coffin.”[6] His unease is especially heightened by the downward shot by MacWilliam, catching Carson pale and perplexed, rubbing his palm along the boards that shadow him. Or is it all an act?

All participants become interlocutors through the perpetual unwinding of the event in F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N. There is no beginning or end - no scientific conclusion. Snippets of reworked *séance* episodes shuffle indiscriminately throughout the duration: bodies slump over wooden kitchen chairs - all objects and subjects cornered in the cabinet. MacWilliam seems to like alcoves, where you can trap what you are looking for - 'it' can't get out if the perspective end is a wooden corner. There is no Shakespearean EXIT for ghosts here.



Susan MacWilliam, *Séance Cabinet and Teleplasmic Ship*, 2009, Sculpture; courtesy the artist.

Dr. William Roll is also cornered in his own study. The stereoscope portrait and the video interviews are set at a fixed stare. Dr. Roll is the counter-Carson. In “Abstractions”, Dialogue (Canadian Philosophical Review), Ryle creates an analogy for learnt and experienced knowledge, that mirrors the protagonists

in F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N, he writes:

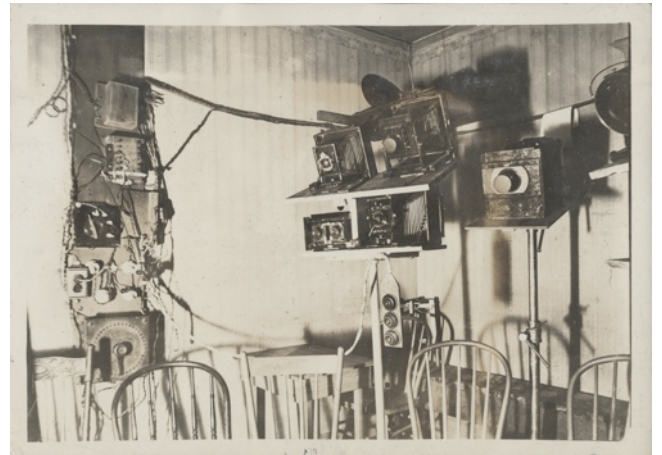
“Competent speakers of language are to a philosopher what an ordinary villager is to a mapmaker. A local villager knows his way by wont and without reflection to the village church, to the town hall, to the shops and back home again from the personal point of view of one who lives there. But, asked to draw or to consult a map of his village, he is faced with learning a new and different sort of task: one that employs compass bearing and units of measurement.”[7]

Like Ryle’s “villager,” Carson is unconsciously playing the part of the experienced *séance* sitter. Dr. Roll on the other hand is portrayed as the equivalent “mapmaker.”

There is something to do with the “changing of positions” in MacWilliam’s work that allows it to be allusive - like the subject that she is fabricating. A change of position occurred to me halfway during watching F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N, caused by two events which interrupted my viewing. The first event - another visitor arrived to view the work - a process of getting accustomed to the dark space and then stepping across me to sit down on the one wooden bench in the gallery. Secondly, my alarm went off - time to fill the parking meter. Two minutes later I arrive back to see the visitor is not on the bench - I take a second - and sit down, adjusted. Minutes later - with a bodily jerk - I hear a sound to my right in the darkness - a shuffling. I realise that the visitor has not left, but is lying on the floor, comfortable enough in

their surroundings to lounge and watch from that perspective. MacWilliam’s direction goes up-and-down, side-to-side and zooms. Maybe the other visitor to the gallery saw something off kilter, so they changed their position. Did you ever notice that when we witness anomalies we change our position or stance in order to see whether what we are seeing is real? Maybe for the witness the image becomes truer from a different angle? Like MacWilliam’s camera, we see things from side-to-side or up-and-down. The angle disturbs the viewer. When we are faced with something that is off-centre don’t we imitate it by standing askew?

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Bank of Cameras, Courtesy Hamilton Family Fonds, University of Manitoba Archives, courtesy the artist.

What I am left with are questions like the one posed by MacWilliam in the title of the stereoscope with the portrait of Dr. Roll - *Can we explain the poltergeist?* Dr. Julia Tanney, an expert on Gilbert Ryle suggests that “Ryle’s target was not merely the ghostliness of the mental processes hypothesized by the Cartesian; it was their essential hidden-ness.”[8] Descartes’s *theory of mind* hypothesised that the mind existed outside of the body, controlling the puppet-like human body with “Skinnerian”

efficiency (levers) - *the 'Ghost in the Machine'*. MacWilliam's practice seems to intentionally pose an answerless question in a space that threads the everyday and what Ryle describes as the "Occult" processes of language and the mind.[9] Art succeeds when it is paradoxically distinct from the everyday and recognisable as life. MacWilliam's art practice - especially F-L-A-M-M-A-R-I-O-N - serves the viewer potential by successfully managing multifarious viewpoints from a controlled objective standpoint.



Susan MacWilliam, *Artist as Medium*, 2008, Stereoscopic Image, Eileen J. Garrett Library, Parapsychology Foundation, New York; courtesy the artist.

Soon enough I notice that the video has looped back to the start. I think I have watched it one and a half times, realising that it is only 17 minutes duration rather than 70 minutes. On the way out I ask the invigilator "how many visitors have been to see the exhibition today?" He looks, counts and says "17." Afterward I read that "MacWilliam relishes the playful insistence of coincidences..."[10]

## Cited

[1] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson. Page references are to the 2000 republication, London: Penguin Books, 1949.

[2] Skinner, B.F., *About Behaviorism*, New York: Vintage, 1974.

[3] "Guests," the title that Dr. Slavka Sverakova (art critic) gives to the participants of MacWilliam's work in her text - *Susan MacWilliam: Portraying a World View*, from the book: *Susan MacWilliam: Remote Viewing*, Editor KAREN DOWNEY, Published by BLACK DOG, Designed by PONY Ltd. Writers: Ciaran Carson, Martha Langford, Slavka Sverakova, Brian Dillon, Marina Warner; p. 109 - 115.

[4] Ibid., p 49.

[5] Ibid., p 111.

[6] Ibid., p 48-49.

[7] Gilbert Ryle, "Abstractions", *Dialogue* (Canadian Philosophical Review), 1. Page references are to the reprint in *Collected Papers*, 1962, vol. 2, 435-445.

[8] Dr. Julia Tanney, *Re-thinking Ryle*, in progress; "Une Cartographie des Concepts Mentaux", *Critical Introduction to Gilbert Ryle's La Notion d'Esprit*, Payot, Paris, p 7-70. Sourced from: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ryle/>

[9] Gilbert Ryle, *Philosophical Arguments* (1945), from *Collected Essays 1929 - 1968: Collected Papers Volume 2*, Routledge; 1 edition, 2009.

[10] Susan MacWilliam: *Remote Viewing*, op.cit., p III.