



Corban Walker:  
Mapping Hugh Lane

The Golden Bough  
30<sup>th</sup> September 2009 – 17<sup>th</sup> January 2010  
Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

## Corban Walker: Mapping Hugh Lane Excerpt from 'Perceptual Encounters'<sup>1</sup>

In *Mapping Hugh Lane* (2009), Walker turned his attention to another mainstay of Minimalist sculpture – the making of boxes. Squeezed into the oblong oval gallery of Charlemont House, Walker's two boxes recalled works by Donald Judd, Larry Bell, and Sol LeWitt, as well as Dan Graham's pavilions.

Assembled from sumptuous, deep-blue sheets of Perspex tacked to skeletal wooden grids, *Mapping Hugh Lane* provided a disorienting encounter and forced viewers to de-accelerate. The immense scale was intimidating. After stepping into the gap between the objects, many viewers initially felt trapped by the reflective surfaces, which seemed to bar access to the rest of the space. But closer examination revealed the limits and volumetric qualities of this barrier. The Perspex simultaneously acted as wall, mirror, and window, making it possible to look at, into, and through the boxes. Its transparency demonstrated that the installation could be circumnavigated. Surveying the defining characteristics of the boxes also directed attention to the relationship between their structure and the room containing them, an obviously discordant affair.

Strategically placed in an interconnected series of classically appointed oval galleries, Walker's installation challenged both the design of the building and Charlemont House's status as home to a collection of historical art. Neither echoing the golden glow of a nearby selection of Corot paintings, nor intimating the pageantry of the central hall's pillared walls and vaulted ceiling, the cool tone and uninflected surfaces of these rationally organised structures accorded a disruptive presence, antithetical in mood and form. The boxes taciturnly ruptured the viewing space by imposing severe restrictions. With accessibility curbed to the corridors, viewing became a fragmentary experience that occurred in distinct stages. Standing in the gap, for example, revealed the objects' planar aspects. Not only were the front and back walls of the boxes visible, but a third wall floating in the space between them – the reflection of the box behind the viewer – could also be seen. From the gap, one sidled through the corridors, their sameness occasionally broken by minor changes in detail. In this environment, an air vent or the ghostly presence of another figure on the far side of the room took on great significance. The experience also foregrounded a discomfiting dichotomy of materials. A posted warning noting the susceptibility of Perspex to scratching led viewers to scrape against the walls as they passed through the cramped passages. Physical contact with the hardness and opacity

1. John Gayer, 'Perceptual Encounters' in *Sculpture* magazine, International Sculpture Center, Washington, DC, Vol. 30, No. 1, Jan/Feb 2011.

of the building reiterated notions of permanence and strength, drawing a sharp contrast with the see-through, aquarium-like framework of Walker's boxes, as well as the hydrous colour and fragility of the Perspex. The concave and shadowy extremities of the room conveyed another range of experiences. Here, movement through the space produced constantly changing reflections that contradicted both the uniformity of the grid and the continuity imposed by baseboards and patterned wood. These distortions upended points of reference and stimulated careful observation. In the process, moving in to peruse the surface of the wall disclosed a Newman-esque colour space.

Walker's installation distinguished itself through its engagement of the architecture. His abruptly rectilinear presentation came fully lit. Moreover, though it echoed the symmetrical configuration of the room, it rejected cyclical or circular motifs. *Mapping Hugh Lane* operated more like traditional sculpture – one experienced it visually and through its relationship to the body. It also embodied humour. With each box encapsulating one of the built-in wooden benches, the opportunity to sit idly was surreptitiously nixed. Walker literally kept people on their feet and, by extension, ensured that viewing remained an active process. In redirecting traffic through the oval, *Mapping Hugh Lane* influenced behavior and divulged characteristics of the architecture and its own constitution that might otherwise never have been encountered. It challenged viewers to sort through myriad intricacies – the play of light, colour, scale, and proportion, planar correspondences, ornamentation, materials, the limitation and extension of space, and themes of fractionisation and containment. Navigating its twists and turns created a compendium of images and impressions. Looking engendered more looking, and the tension instituted by the looming presence invigorated the room and changed its role. Pulled into a face-off pitting one vocabulary against another, the gallery transcended its role as outdated backdrop and attained currency. The confrontation treated viewers to an adventure that altered assumptions regarding both the nature of the room and that of the boxes. As intrusions into the rudimentariness of artistic excursions go, the physical, perceptual, and conceptual consequences of this detour occasioned one of the best types of art experience.

— John Gayer

