

JAMES COLEMAN
DUBLIN, IRELAND

Though we live in a world saturated with images, our relationship with them rarely seems straightforward. Our comprehension of images remains a highly mutable and complex process. The image's context, the medium's particular characteristics, our powers of perception, frame of mind, knowledge, memory, and, most importantly, willingness to perceive all come into play. The work of James Coleman has long been concerned with such issues. The first major survey of his work in Ireland, *James Coleman* draws attention to the artistic achievements of this Irish-born artist, celebrates his contribution to twentieth-century pictorial production, and counterbalances his work's lack of exposure in Ireland [Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA); Project Arts Centre (PAC); and Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA); March 7—April 26, 2009].

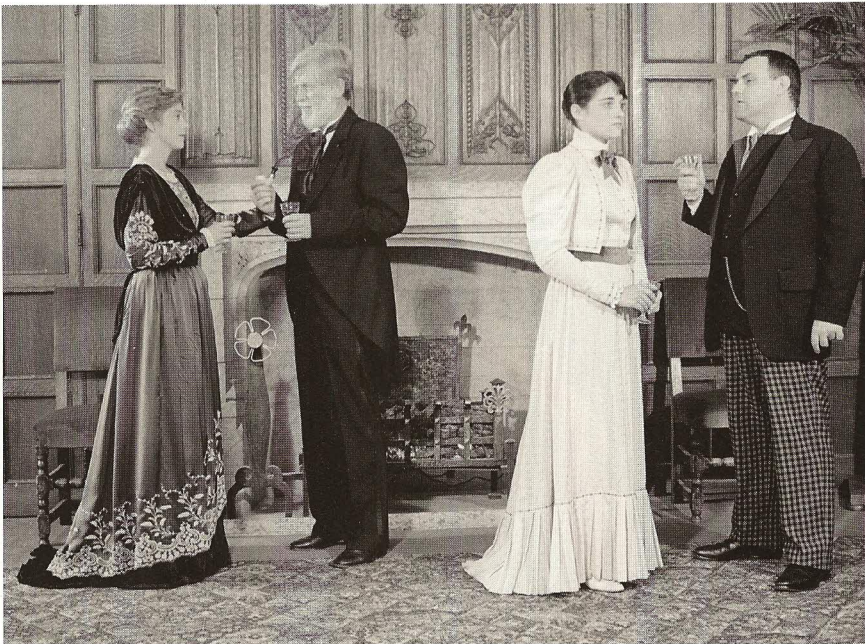
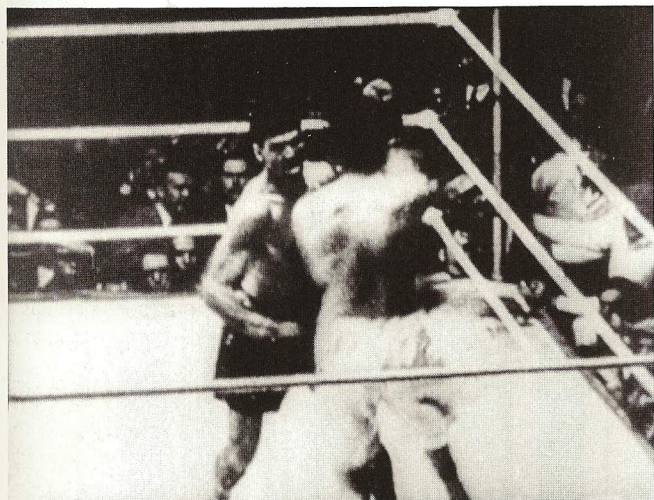
The artist's involvement in the exhibition's organization process has resulted in a presentation that eschews chronology. Initially, we might think that the selected works have been grouped to meet a combination of medium and spatial requirements. At the IMMA, we find a ten-meter-wide LED video screen; a pairing of film and video projections inhabits the more modest confines of the PAC; and three slide projections take up the RHA's spacious galleries. The

collaborative arrangement is fortuitous as it prevents viewers from trying to see too much in one go. We can start anywhere and the impact of the work has a chance to filter through the brain before we make it to the next location. Tessa Giblin, curator at PAC, emphasizes that the resulting layout also holds historical importance: witness Coleman's longstanding ties to the RHA and the fact that he did performances at PAC in the 1970s and 1980s.

And what does the work show us? To put it simply, things are never what they seem. Set outdoors in the IMMA's courtyard, *So Different...and Yet*, 1980, offers a stream of identities performed by two individuals: one off-screen, the other onscreen. Replete with lies and clichés, the work has been conceived in the form of a sultry cabaret act, which unfolds at rock-concert scale. Not only does the story shift from one situation to the next, but the camera's position also frequently changes, implying our re-positioning in relation to the performance. The work exudes a hollowness that is amplified by the setting. It offers dips and curves, recalling a roller coaster and its unchanging sequence of empty thrills. In *Charon (MIT Project)*, 1989, at the RHA, Coleman focuses on the elucidating and deceptive nature of photography. The work's fourteen episodes include an auto-

mobile accident, portraits, and a series of dream rooms. In the synchronized audio, the narrator recounts the stories behind the pictures—what had to be left out of an image or how people were cajoled into acting out of character, for example—which changes our perception of them. The process effectively sheds light on our susceptibilities by showing how the images reinvigorate memory, inspire dreams, modify or hide truth, and influence behaviour.

Notions of drama, terrain, and reference connect *Connemara Landscape*, 1980, and *Seeing for Oneself*, 1987-1988, which share a subdivided space at the RHA. The earlier projection presents a conundrum for it appears to neither represent the Irish locale so popular with tourists, nor a topographical diagram. The implied movement of this energetic collection of curving lines dances within the frame, contradicting the solidity and sense of stasis normally associated with mountainous depictions. The second work, a melodramatic whodunit set in a rustic chateau in Canada's Rocky Mountains during the 1890s, leaves us wondering whom the titular one might actually be. The slides shows us Tamara's quest to uncover her father's murderer while we hear servant Polly's eyewitness account of the events on the soundtrack. But only we see the whole story,



PAGE 1: James Coleman, *Charon (MIT Project)*, 1989, projected images with synchronised audio narration [courtesy of the artist; © James Coleman] / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Box (ahhah-turnabout)*, 1977, projected 16mm black and white film, continuous cycle [courtesy of the artist; © James Coleman]; *Seeing for Oneself*, 1987-1988, projected images with synchronised audio narration [courtesy of the artist; © James Coleman]



which, in turn, reveals how each participant's relationship to the events differs.

In PAC's more intimate spaces, a second pairing features works that, in the context of this exhibition, bracket the artist's career: the film *Box (ahhahreturnabout)*, 1977, and the video *Untitled*, 1998-2000. The film consists of footage of the 1927 boxing match between Irish world heavyweight champion Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey, the first live sporting event to be radio-broadcast nationally in the U.S.A. Coleman transforms the event into a series of visual pulses—or punches—that alternate with short, loud throbs and intense snippets of Tunney's imagined interior monologue during the fight, which convey the charged, physically draining and quasi-sexual nature of the bout. As we move from the film installation to the video, the contrast between the works makes a profound impact. Noise, aggressiveness, flash, and action give way to silence, restraint, and an absence of movement. Even when our eyes have adjusted, the nature of the subject—amorphous bodies and a shape that resembles carved

plaster—remains unclear. To investigate the work means eye squinting and moving about the room. At times, we have trouble discerning shapes and textures, but eventually we realize that our eyes are not the cause. Incremental shifts in the angle and intensity of light across the surfaces in the image account for this effect. As such, emphasis on physical sensation is the dimension that connects these overtly opposite visual expressions.

Coleman's skillful use of narrative entertains as much as it informs. *Charon (MIT Project)*, for example, bubbles with humor and warns against impending doom. The title also conveys these features as it both refers to the humorous use of ferryman and the mythological figure who carried the dead to Hades. The installations at the RHA also direct attention to the slide projection's former currency as an artistic medium. In addition to conveying an air of nostalgia, they also remind us of the slide projection's use as a didactic tool, the way it bridges still photography and cinema, and the inherently inalterable character of a photographic slide.

Coleman's work functions on many levels. His skillful mimicking and calculated exaggeration of conventional narrative formats draw attention to the substructure of stories and images, revealing their artifice. Merging photography, film, and performance, his projects entreat us to stop, look, listen, put aside our expectations, and actively consider what we are seeing. Their speciousness induces a palpable uncertainty. In an age of contrived photo-ops, digitally-enhanced images, publicity stunts, and news hoaxes, when we passively consume because we are too hurried to really take the time to look, this is a very positive thing.

—John Gayer

ABOVE: *So Different... and Yet*, 1980, video installation, performed by Olwen Fouéré and Roger Doyle (courtesy of the artist; © James Coleman)