

# PERCEPTUAL ENCOUNTERS

## Corban Walker



BY JOHN GAYER

It could be argued that Corban Walker, who will represent Ireland at the 54th Venice Biennale this year, stands as one of Minimalism's most talented heirs. Take, for example, his "Grid Stacks" series (2007), glass works that echo Robert Smithson's *Glass Stratum* (1967). Executed with intense precision, these vitreous constructions prove how the mundane process of placing one thing atop another can lead to the production of alluringly complex visual structures. Other stacked works include the more architectural *Untitled (10 x 4 Miter)* (2009), recently shown at the Pace Gallery in New York.

In *Mapping Hugh Lane* (2009), Walker turned his attention to another mainstay of Minimalist sculpture—the making of boxes. Squeezed into the oblong oval of the Charlemont House wing of the Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, 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* 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.

Opposite: *Mapping Hugh Lane*, 2009. Plexiglas and timber, 2 elements, 305 x 304.5 x 406 cm. each. Above: *Float*, 2008. Low-iron and clear-float glass, 96.8 x 60.3 x 60.3 cm.



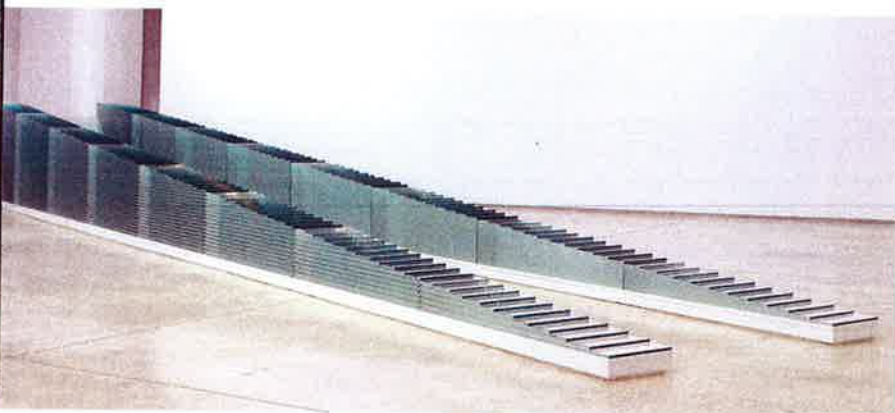
DENIS MORTELLI PHOTOGRAPHY 2009. © CORBAN WALKER, COURTESY DUBLIN CITY GALLERY, THE HUGH LANE AND PACE GALLERY



Above: *Bridge Year*, 2006. Stainless steel, glass, and LED, 640 x 176 x 330 cm. Below: *Mapping 4*, 2000. Glass, two-way mirror, and acrylic, dimensions variable.



Below: *Runway*, 2007. Diamante glass, 117.5 x 10.6 x 159.4 cm.



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 unreflected surfaces of these rationally organized structures accorded a disruptive presence, antithetical in mood and form. The boxes tacitly 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 discomforting 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 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 color 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 color space.

*Mapping Hugh Lane* was the most recent installment of "The Golden Bough," an exhibition series developed by senior curator Michael Dempsey. Referring to both Roman mythology and Sir J.G. Frazer's early 20th-century study of magic and religion, the title represents a key or passport that permits passage into realms enveloped in darkness, mystery, and danger. And indeed, previous incarnations—the powerful expression of darkness in Garret Phelan's gargantuan splotch of black paint and tombs eliciting faint radio transmissions, the engagingly mysterious intertwining of time and space in Grace Weir's videos, and the dare-devilish risk permeating Brian Duggan's immersive facsimile of a

TOP © CORBAN WALKER, COURTESY PACE GALLERY / CENTER AND BOTTOM: ELLEN PAGE WILSON © CORBAN WALKER, COURTESY PACE GALLERY



Three views of *Mapping Hugh Lane*, 2009. Plexiglas and timber, 2 elements, 305 x 304.5 x 406 cm, each.



motorcycle thrill show — responded to facets of the theme as if on cue. Walker's installation distinguished itself from the preceding presentations through its engagement of the architecture. While the other artists attempted to work with the oval and evaded artificial illumination, Walker's 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 humor. 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, color, scale, and proportion, planar correspondences, ornamentation, materials, the limitation and extension of space, and themes of fractionization 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.

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