

PSYCHICAL RESEARCH: AN ARTISTIC VIEW

*Susan MacWilliam's touring show explores
its people and phenomena*



*Susan MacWilliam's Modern Experiments, at
Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, 2017
(Photo: Ros Kavanagh)*

THROUGH reconstruction, anecdote and detailed editing, artist and film-maker Susan MacWilliam has been considering the world of the paranormal for more than two decades and depicting it in her own unique way.

Some of her work will now be engaging new audiences and provoking them to reflect on the traditions of psychical research and super-sensory abilities as her "Modern Experiments" touring solo show arrives at two more Irish venues, having already been staged in Banbridge and Drogheda [PN October 2016].

It is currently being exhibited at Uillinn: West Cork Arts Centre, Skibbereen (until 18 October) and then moves on to The Butler Gallery, Kilkenny (28 October to 17 December).

Concurrently, two of her films are also being shown on the other side of the Atlantic in an exhibition titled "Medium" at Zuckerman Museum of Art at Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA (29 August to 3 December).

Using video and photography, Belfast-born MacWilliam presents cases of paranormal and perceptual phenomena, featuring well known organisations, researchers and mediums, often staging them in large-scale installations.

Her work, in which she is both **observer and participant**, explores a range of phenomena including "fingertip vision", table tilting, psychic abilities and mediumship. With an interest in the esoteric, the historical and the peripheral, she reflects on the research, experimental apparatus, lives and personalities of those involved in parapsychology and whose work falls beyond mainstream scientific and psychology practice.

"Modern Experiments" is the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of her artistic output to date, with its focus on works created from 1998 when she began working with video.

The *Irish Times* likened it to having "wandered into the middle of a vintage laboratory devoted to paranormal research".

"Modern Experiments" features 14 films and video installations including the first she produced, *The Last Person*, in which MacWilliam assumes the role of materialisation medium Helen



Susan MacWilliam self-portrait at Rhine Research Centre with ESP Zener Card, 2011

Duncan as the film explores some of the events described in *The Times'* reports of her famous Old Bailey trial under the Witchcraft Act of 1735.

As well as their importance as works of art, MacWilliam's creations are



Susan MacWilliam with Eileen Coly, daughter of famous medium Eileen Garrett, in the Parapsychology Foundation's library in New York, 2007 (Photo: Facebook)

contributing considerably to psychical research's archives. Her 2007 video *13 Roland Gardens*, for example, contains interviews with Eileen and Lisette Coly, daughter and granddaughter of famous Irish-born medium Eileen Garrett whose

apparent spirit communications from individuals who died in the R101 airship disaster created a sensation in 1930.

The title of that video refers to the London address in Kensington where Garrett and her daughter Eileen lived and

which also became the location of Harry Price's National Laboratory of Psychical Research after the R101 séance. She later moved to New York, at the invitation of a wealthy congresswoman with whom she jointly established the Parapsychology Foundation.

MacWilliam has worked closely with the Parapsychology Foundation over many years, as well as with other psychical research institutions, notably the Rhine Research Centre, North Carolina, USA, famous for Dr J.B. Rhine's ESP experiments, and the Dermo Optical Perception Laboratory of Madame Yvonne Duplessis in Paris.

The videos in MacWilliam's large body of work also include interviews with the late poltergeist investigator Dr William G. Roll, of Georgia, and Californian psychology professor Stanley Krippner, a leading researcher into paranormal dreams.

She has also worked with the T.G. Hamilton Spirit Photograph Archive of the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, and the Parapsychology Laboratory Records at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA, incorporating many of their exhibits in her works. ■