

National College of Art and Design; Fine Art, Sculpture

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# WITHOUT THE STEREOTYPE

A study of how people and artists with disabilities see  
ourselves in a society that marginalises people with disabilities.

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## Introduction

In our society as in most societies one can depend widely on information as a source of evaluation. By evaluating our society, through means of gaining knowledge about ourselves in regard to human nature and in accordance to our behaviour one should be able to judge between good and evil, in what's right and what's wrong. And by gathering information to formulate one's mind, one's consciousness and one's perception one can then offer that perception to a greater audience. the knock-on effect of that perception could become a consensus within a society. This may all be so until someone decides that such a consensus is provocative, discriminatory and untrue.

Throughout the history of time and in society today, the knowledge and perception of disability and people with disabilities has been on many counts alienating and humiliating to people with disabilities.

People with disabilities are generally marginalised by society because of society's inability to recognise us as human beings but instead as a homogeneous mass of "cripples", "freaks" and "outcasts" to bestow pity or ridicule on. On the other hand people with disabilities are stereotyped by society. The stereotyping and alienation of people with disabilities which provokes harassment and verbal abuse - not to mention the prejudice that people have towards us and the language that is aimed at people with disabilities by the media and the general public is the basis for which society so badly evaluates itself.

However, people with disabilities, and especially artists with disabilities have for some time questioned and re-evaluated our position in society.

In this dissertation, I will assess how the acts of discrimination and racism portrayed by the media and the general public (whose evaluation of society is very much influenced by the media, as being arguably the predominant source for information for the public to assert it's opinion on) are seen by people with disabilities in relation to their contribution to society. With that completed (to the best of my knowledge) I will incorporate that with the artistic outlooks concerning disability in society with regard to the work of Gene Lambert, Mary Duffy, myself and others.

## Chapter One: Disability in Relation to the Role of the Media

*A journalist shall only mention a person's race, colour, creed, illegitimacy, marital status (or lack of), gender, sexual orientation or disability if this information is strictly relevant. A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination on any of the above grounds.*

The National Union of Journalists "Code of Conduct" (Clause 10)

In December 1991, a two day conference was held in a Dublin hotel entitled "Challenging Images. Perception of Disability and the Role of the Media.". One of the keynote speakers, Donal Toolan, journalist and broadcaster of the RTE radio programme, "Not So Different" which specifically deals with issues arising out of disability talked quite emotionally about the misconduct and abuse of Clause 10 in the NUJ's "Code of Conduct".

He recalls an article in an Irish Tabloid newspaper in February 1990 concerning a man convicted of indecently assaulting two boys. It was not so much the article that enraged but rather the headline. It read, 'Crippled Beast is Caged for Two Years'. Of all the papers that covered the story they all used the word "crippled". "The word 'crippled' was there for a purpose," says Toolan. "It was there to be dramatic. And in this case the 'cripple' wasn't even a man, a human being. He was an animal, a 'beast'".

What Toolan was emphasising was that what the headline is saying is that anyone who uses a wheelchair is not really human. "They are different insofar as they are beastly. They have been conjured up to the images of a children's story-book villain: ugly, deformed, equated to evil." argued Toolan.

Such headlines in newspapers, the attitudinal barriers in the form of prejudice, stereotypes and discriminatory remarks that occur in the misuse of words such as cripple, dwarf, hunchback, deaf and dumb and lunatic are not just deeply offensive (as we know or rather should know), but in the majority of cases are wholly inaccurate. These terms can only be described as base sensationalism which blatantly exploits and can further marginalise people with disabilities.

Some time ago in an effort to redress many of the negative and damaging consequences that sensational reporting tends to perpetuate, the NUJ and the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom initiated the Campaign for Real People. The Campaign issued guidelines for journalists on the reporting and representation of people with disabilities in the media. The leaflet pointed out "at least one in ten of the population has a severe disability at sometime in our lives". It also stated that "people with disabilities are not the problem" - as is all too often insinuated in articles and broadcasts - rather it is society that handicaps people in its environments and attitudes.

In this country, as elsewhere, it is non-disabled people who control the information sources, the image making machines. So where does that leave us, people with disabilities?

One must ask how objective and unbiased is the Irish media's value system? Values such as materialism, success, perfection, strength, beauty, the survival of the fittest are the ideals we are expected to strive for, the qualities against which we judge ourselves. They are either gained or lost. A politician, entrepreneur, or a rock star gains them and is admired, loses them and is pitied.

People with disabilities, however challenge those values because we present something other than perceived perfection. We present vulnerability, fear, loss, powerlessness. We represent the opposite pole to society's ideals. Most of us are financially deprived, powerless, weak, imperfect and not attractive. In reality, everybody has levels of vulnerability, fear, loss and powerlessness in their lives - their reality exists for everyone. However the symbolic value of these qualities has been projected onto one particular group of people who have come to represent the majority's darkest fear of their own mortality - people with disabilities. When mentioned in the media it is these negative qualities which are stressed time and time again. We are poor, tragic, needy, dependant, struggling. We are the epitome of the problem, never its solution. Our difficulties are seen as a 'plight'; our triumphs are not seen as the result of hard work but as 'miracles'. If we do manage to climb out from under the weight of symbolic human misery it must be despite the odds. By reporting the achievements of people with disabilities as 'miracles' the media denies the contribution of people with disabilities and our control over our own lives.

On the other hand, by endorsing fundraising images showing a smiling nurse helping a 'brave' physically disabled child, (generally a boy) to walk or a patient teacher coaxing a child with Downs Syndrome to sort shapes, image makers reinforce the notion that people with disabilities need able-bodied people to explain to us our own potential, to teach us to be ourselves - all according to someone else's image.

How can we as people with disabilities value ourselves when we are up against this sort of image every day of our lives? How can we develop healthy self-esteem, a positive self-concept when everything we and the rest of society see reinforces the idea of our difference, our failure to so much as approach the ideals that smile down at us from every street hoarding and newspaper and television set?

We can and do, however, get on and live our lives to the best of our ability, just like any-one else. But what maintains us in our powerlessness, what keeps us at the bottom of the agenda, at the bottom of the heap, is the inability of image-makers (in common with non-disabled people) to see in us anything other than that which is difficult. Dazzled by our own blindness, our lack of conventional mobility, our elegant sign

language, our grinding routines, our disordered thinking, the media fails to see us as whole people with dreams and nightmares, successes and failures.

We are simply ciphers in someone else's iconography. We symbolise the triumph of achievement over the odds, we symbolise the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we symbolise the awfulness of life on earth. We don't symbolise what we are: ordinary people living ordinary lives and desiring the same things as everybody else.

If we are to progress at all, the media must penetrate beyond the apparently negative and difficult surface perceptions that shield the honest truth of real people with disabilities. We are neither tragic nor divine. We have love, warmth, strength, personal power in our lives, just as able bodied people do.

Essentially what the media is doing is reflecting the dominant medical model of disability, a model which says that my problem is a genetic imperfection within me rather than the social discrimination I experience. It is a model which says that I should be offered concessions out of pity, rather than being granted my rights. It's a model I reject and which the media can do something about, too, by reflecting my reality rather than that of an oppressive majority.

The picture of us presented by the media at present is inaccurate and offensive - but it will go on being so until we can all begin to see the real picture of real peoples lives.

People with disabilities and the media both have a part to play in this process. As the media's attitudes change and develop into good practice, so the knock on effect in public attitudes to disability will be felt. People with disabilities, seeing themselves accurately reflected in the media, will develop a greater sense of pride in who they are, will feel more confident and will be seen to participate in society on an equal level without being discriminated against as a cripple or stereotyped as a dwarf.

If the situation of people with disabilities were satisfactory in our society and if we had sufficient access to the camera, the microphone and the printing press and we were truthfully portrayed on radio and television, there would have been no need for the "Challenging Images" Conference or the weekly radio programme "Not So Different".

However since people with disabilities do not have equal or sufficient access to the media there is great need for such weekly programmes as "Not So Different". Up until 1988, Ireland was the only country in the European Community which had no programme dealing with the issues arising out of disability. The function of "Not So Different" with its subtitle, "A series which looks at the realities of being disabled in Ireland today." involves people constantly denied a voice on radio today, including people with mental disabilities and people who use augmented forms of communication such as Light Writers and Touch Talkers. Both of these groups have now established themselves as people who can be heard on mainstream radio.

"As well as taking advice, criticism and suggestions from listeners, the programme has kept to its listener-led philosophy which ensures that the vast majority of interviews are carried out by a person with a disability." says Toolan. Toolan's own response to the radio show he founded with others is nothing but sincerity. Toolan says:

I am proud that "Not So Different" has been credited with enabling the process of raising the consciousness of people with disabilities as well as informing the general public. For too long the majority has accepted participation in Irish society as a hard won privilege rather than demanding it as a right.

Since that Nirvana is somewhat remote, in mainstream programming, there is great need for the programme to fulfil a consciousness-expanding role, taking the opportunity both to provide a model of good practice in reporting on disability issues and to criticise poor practice.

Due to commence after Easter 1992 is the launching of a six-part television series entitled "In From the Margin". As the title suggests, the programmes will focus on people with disabilities who wish to be regarded as central rather than peripheral to our society.

Finally in opening the "Challenging Images" Conference last December which was jointly hosted by the National Rehabilitation Board and Radio Telefís Éireann, Mr. Vincent Finn, The Director General of RTE highlighted an interesting fact about television. Owing to his belief that it is the most powerful communicative medium in what is becoming an extremely visual culture, he said:

Access to the media is a civil right, and we would not be providing a constitutional service if we did not acknowledge that and act upon it.

Considering that ten per cent of our society are people with disabilities, the issues relating to various forms of disability must be accounted for in broadcasting with real images of the real lives of real people with disabilities. In doing this it would continue to create a climate in which disability can be seen as a positive condition where people with disabilities can celebrate their disability and can be seen and heard to do so. To be seen as entrepreneurs, politicians, journalists and artists.

Prior to the "Challenging Images" Conference and shortly after the launching of "Not So Different" a very interesting exhibition of photography, held in England, dealt with the idea of self-image. The exhibition entitled 'A Sense of Self' in the CameraWork Gallery in London was a collaboration of artists' work regardless of their ability or disability. the integration of work there, showed itself as an answer to the sort of oppressive, offensive and humiliating press which labels people with disabilities.

Under the paving-stones by the grass, as the saying goes, and under the layers of ostracisation and stereotyping and bigotry, under the buy-your-distance bleeding heart charity culture, under the 'victim',

'brave sufferer', 'crippled' terminology, is the beginning of our own definition of ourselves and a constructive relationship with our conditions and disabilities on our own terms.

As David Heavey, (a photographer with disabilities and co-organiser of the exhibition) argues quite defiantly in the catalogue introduction that one of the reasons for the exhibition was to put an end to that type of media coverage so that people with disabilities would be reported as people.

The organisers of the CameraWork Gallery set out to make an exhibition of photographs that overturned the idea that able-bodied people act on the assumption that people with disabilities are always to be dependant on them so control of images of disabled people should naturally be in their hands.

The object of a 'Sense of Self' was to provide an opportunity for a group of people with disabilities to begin a process of self-discovery, self-image, self-projection and a sense of self are often alien to people with disabilities.

In reminding the media of its so-called responsibility to society, Heavey states that, "To be totally ignored or totally oppressed is to be powerfully reminded of the status of disable people for the majority of our society.". The exhibition was to start a process of questioning, not only for people with disabilities but also for able-bodied people about how much a sense of self has been banished in disability by stereotypes.

Chris Davies, another co-organiser of the the show, made the simple point, "Everyone ought to know themselves. It is a fundamental right."

One of the exhibitors, Rebecca Sinker, who's sitter was presumable her husband Charles Sinker, who has Parkinson's disease, discovered his sense of self by the way he presented himself to the world. To quote Sinker,

The extremes of rigidity and jerkiness which I present to the world seem to alarm the young (or provoke ridicule in the not-so-young) because they are both unfamiliar and unpredictable. To the casual adult I must appear either mentally deficient or drunk. I count as friends (both children and adults) who have the patience to discover the human under the puppet. (See illustrations No's 1 and 2).

Sinker is on the treatment, L-Dopa, a drug invented by Dr. Oliver Sacks in the mid-sixties, which in the long run can produce side effects more conspicuous than the disease itself. The two photographs attempt to portray this two-sided self.

The exhibition consisted of four photographers and twenty-one sitters. Evidently the work they achieved was of great importance to them because a sense of self-image is something most people take for granted. As we have seen this is not so with disability. Probably more so than any other section of society, people with disabilities are conditioned into developing an inadequate sense of self awareness and potential. "A

Sense of Self" managed successfully to overcome that for the greater awareness and benefit of society.



Illustration No.1

Rebecca Sinker, "Charles Sinker".





Illustration No.2

Rebecca Sinker, "Charles Sinker".



## Chapter Two: The Work of Gene Lambert as an Artist with a Disability

Gene Lambert was born in Dublin in 1952 and after leaving art college in 1975 he began to build a solid reputation for himself as a figurative painter, showing regularly in annual open exhibitions and receiving a number of awards. In 1981 Lambert's life changed dramatically. He was involved in a serious car accident that left him partially paralysed in both legs and suffering from chronic pain. Throughout his time in hospital he continued working, making a series of drawings which he later developed into an exhibition 'Work from a Ward' in the Hendricks Gallery 1981. The paintings were small, intense panels of frozen episodes seen through a very raw temperament. Iron bed-ends appeared to cancel the surface with grey vertical bars diagonally divided by white traction cords which place the viewer in the position of Lambert.

Lambert spent the next two years going through a process of rehabilitation. He had to learn how to walk, wash and dress himself again at the age of thirty. After forging himself into a completely new way of living he undertook his first photographic exhibition in the Lincoln Gallery in 1983 and succeeded in bringing a fresh approach to the overworked subject of urban decay.

By 1985 he was ready to develop a major issue he had been working on the attitude of other people to his disability. "A general attitude to people with disabilities is to perceive them as either geniuses or morons." Lambert spent that year working with disabled people. Seeing the way people with disabilities were portrayed by the media, by the community and by their own friends and relatives illustrated the need for him to make a radical change in our perception of people with disabilities. He interpreted what he saw as an opportunity to give these people what they had been denied for years - their civil and human rights: "They hadn't been photographed before except by people who had a vested interest in selling their disability."

What Lambert had a vested interest in was giving them an identity, an identity that was not to be seen as infringing, humiliating or degrading to the individual. What Lambert was essentially doing was taking society's idea of disability out of the dark ages and bringing it right up to the forefront of our consciousness. Something which did awake, straighten-out and disturb the naive minds of Irish society.

Lambert, who could be said was acting as the Godfather of disability and people with disabilities, was launching his commitment to himself and society by using the most manipulative and challenging medium of all, photography. Lambert learned a lot of his photographic techniques from Ansel Adams's autobiography, 'Ansel Adams 1902 -

An Autobiography'. Adams believes it is very important what the print is going to look like before the shutter is opened. the pre-visualization of the image is essential to both Lamberts and Adams work. To quote Adams:

The first thing one must understand is that the image lies. The myth of telling the truth is wrong. However, once you understand that and you can make it do whatever you want it to do, you had better understand where you the photographer stand.

Lambert had only one option: to achieve a level of trust and honesty seen by both participants as a fundamental base for all the work they would collaborate on.

The level of communication Lambert and the models had was vital to him, but it was not easy to achieve. Some of the models spent two weeks establishing a relationship with Lambert before they felt confident about going into the studio. Lambert saw this as being very important with regards to the work because a lot of people identify people with disabilities as people who are completely and utterly dependent on able-bodied people and, therefore, considered as second class citizens. Perhaps some of them were completely dependent on others but Lambert was not interested in that. He wanted his models to feel completely confident in themselves and in their disability. he wanted to overthrow what people identify as the badge of disability, the wheelchair, the walking stick, the surgical foot. Lambert's intention and commitments was to make photographs celebrate their humanity with or without their medical aides.

One of the children photographed was catatonic. Gary (See illustration No.3), who has since died, was very carefully photographed by Lambert. Gary presented himself to Lambert in bed, strapped in with his head resting on a furry pillow. Lambert photographed him in that position. he took very careful light measurement and saw Gary as a still life. he felt extremely guilty about doing this - creating a composition. however, he took away everything unnecessary so that he could get as much eye contact as possible. He believes that any level of contact, whether it's visual, oral or through physical senses, is fundamental to the development of his photographs. But he says, "It is important not to have a preconceived idea as to what you are going to find."

Of the thirty one photographs in the exhibition 'Work from a Dark Room', Gary was the only one who appeared in bed. his head and right hand being the only parts of his body not covered by the bedding suggested to the viewer that the body was struggling under the strapping that held him in. However, that was not the case and by examining the expression on Gary's face one can see that he is concentrating greatly on the photographer. Moreover, in other photographs as in those of 'Leslie' and 'Paddy' (See illustrations No's 4 & 5) the sitters are photographed dealing with their disability. Again, the preconceived notion of the viewer was that they were in pain. in this case the viewer was right. However, that was not what Lambert had intended to convey. he instead wanted to show the reality of their lives which does include pain and overcoming pain. The responsibility Lambert had to his models and himself and to his

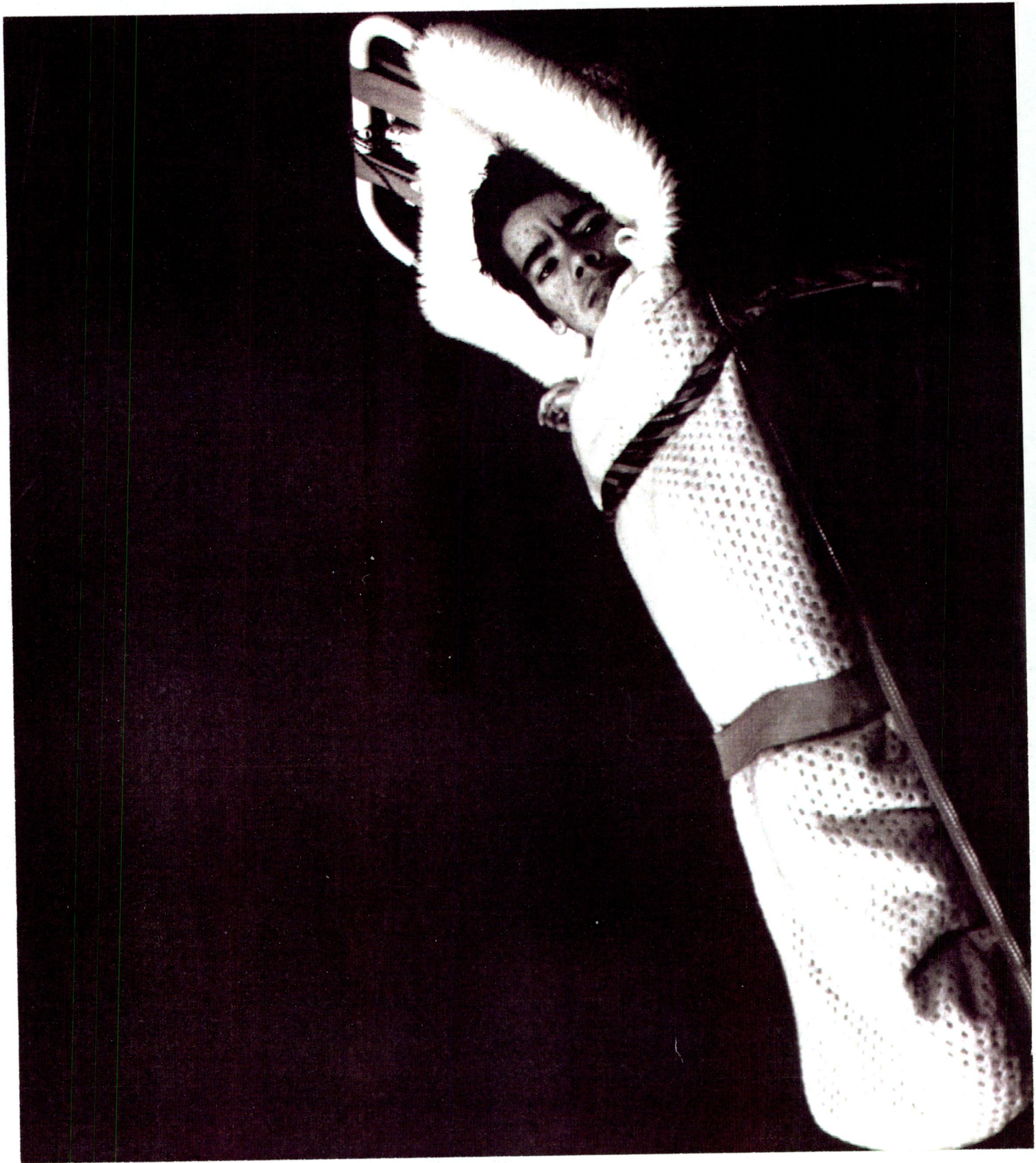


Illustration No.3      Gene Lambert, "Gary".



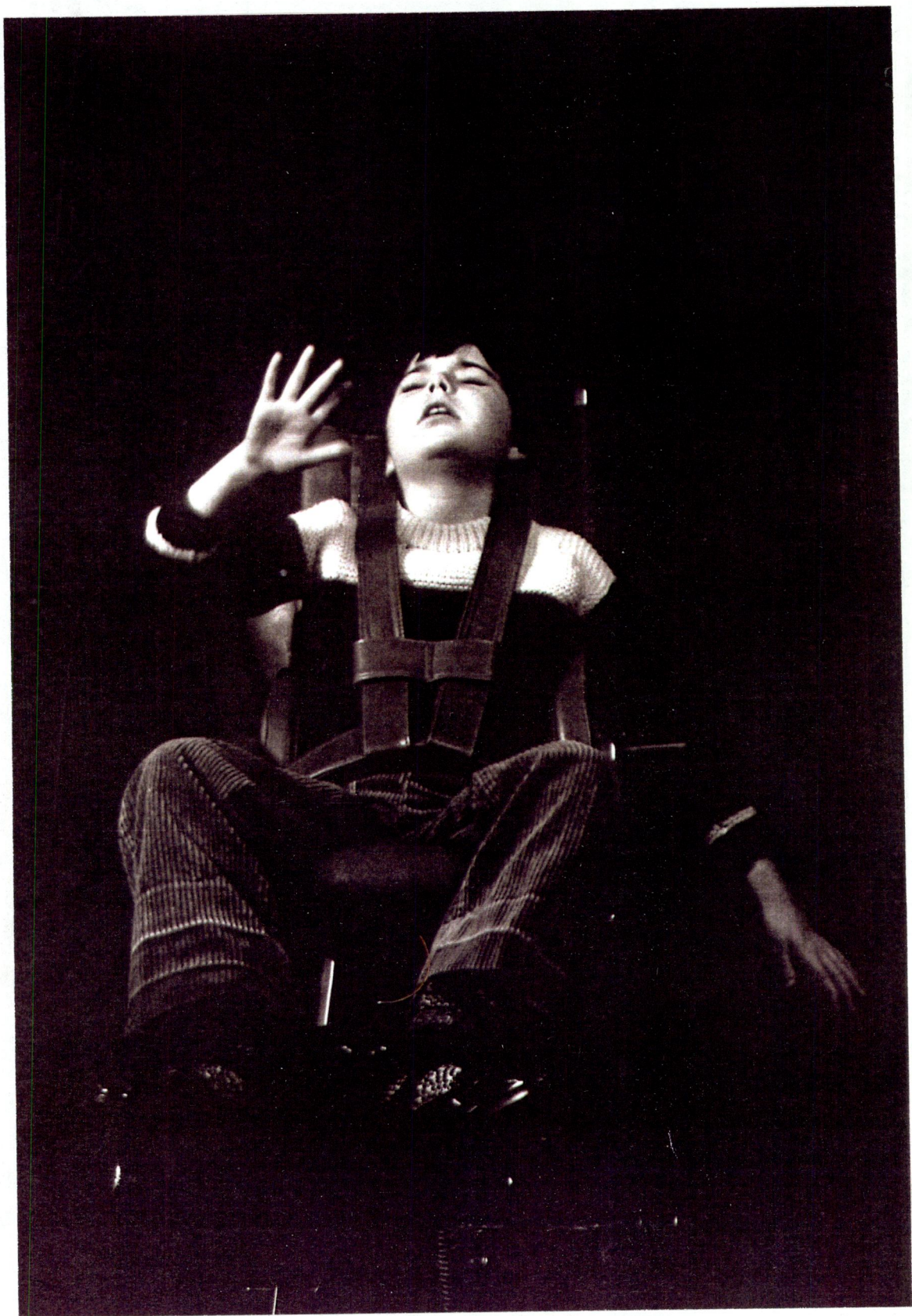


Illustration No.4      Gene Lambert, "Leslie".



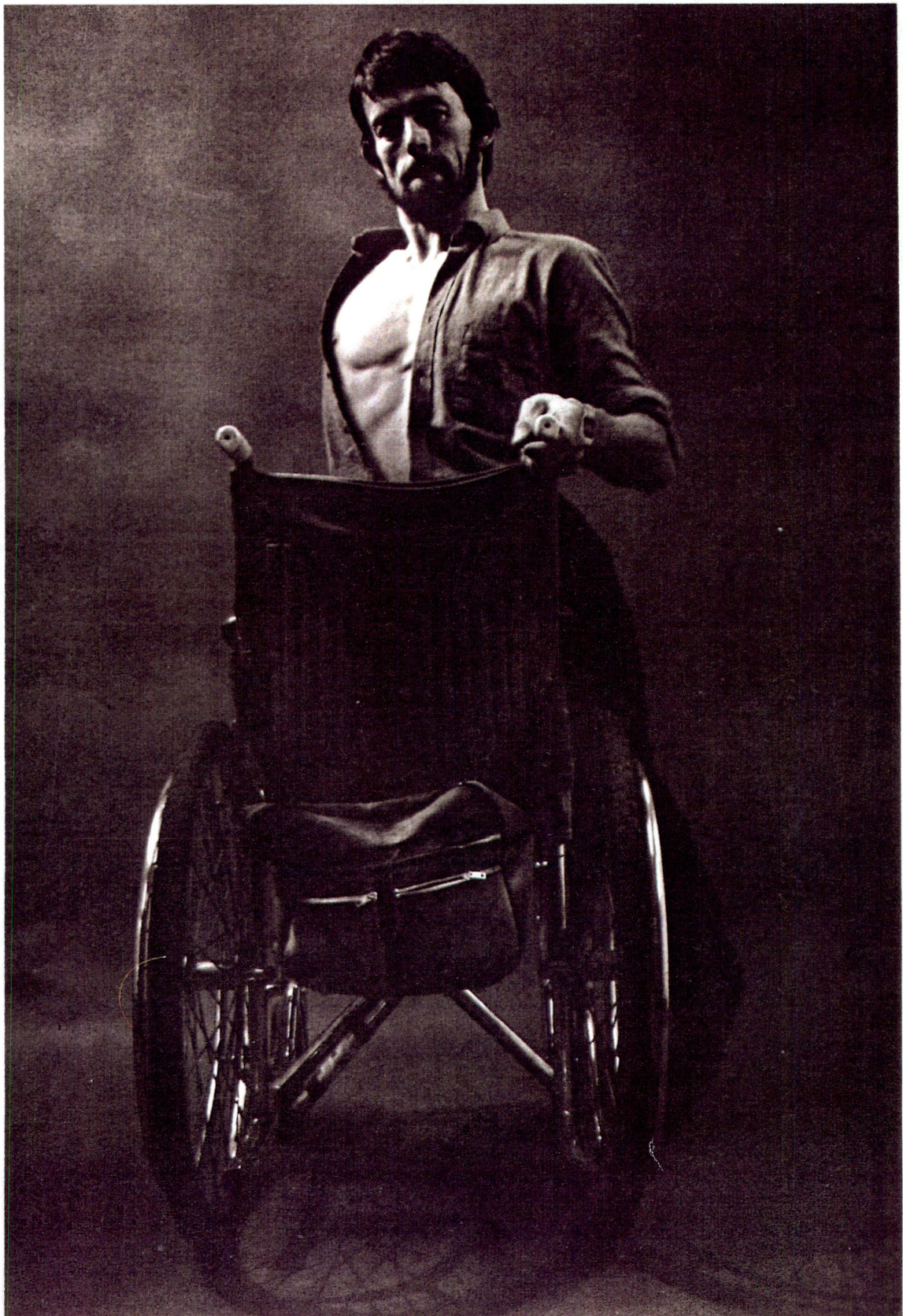


Illustration No.5      Gene Lambert, "Paddy".



viewers was crucial to his work in order for it not to be as an excuse to portray sympathy but rather as an exercise in expressing dignity through mood and behaviour.

It was primarily up to Lambert to decide on what way he would photograph each individual or couple based on what he saw as important to convey to society, without any preconceived idea of what he was going to discover. Lambert asks:

When the image is stripped of Ears, Clothes, Arms, Eyes, Legs - what is left? Could it possibly be? Dignity, Spirit Frustration Despair Compassion Anger Tolerance Love Pain Fear Sexuality Humanity

I asked Lambert what he found with colleague artist Mary Duffy, who is thalidomide. He said that what he discovered was that she celebrated her sexuality. That was the key to the two images of her Lambert had composed, one seated portrait and one classical nude portrait (See illustrations No.6 and No.7). Traditionally the life class has always worked from the so-called 'ideal type of classical beauty'. However, Lambert saw the opportunity to take on the tyranny of the body beautiful. According to Lambert:

The ideal of a beautiful culture is a myth anyway because the ascription of beauty to anything can only be said to be an opinion made up from stereotypes. The essence of the photographs only illuminates what many artists have done before all of whom relied on telling the truth as it is.

According to Duffy, however, a lot of people saw the photographs of her as being pro-abortionist and pornographic. Duffy was somewhat annoyed with Lambert because he had allegedly circulated the photographs of her to friends of his (before the exhibition had opened) who through word of mouth found them offensive. The gossiping about the photographs which Duffy inevitably heard about forced her to consider withdrawing from the exhibition. Lambert who was in the throes of losing one of his models, not to mention the rift he had caused with Duffy, was in the embarrassing position of being accused of negligence and lack of commitment to his project. At the same time he faced the implications the remarks made about the Duffy photographs would have on the other models not to mention that there was more controversy in the show, with threat of a law suit by another sitter in the exhibition which was almost completely installed anyway.

However, Lambert pleaded with Duffy to remain in the exhibition, which she agreed to do on the grounds that she felt in control of the images and in order to take a stance against the attacks on her body.

'Work from the Dark Room' opened for a month in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Trinity College, Dublin, in 1985. The exhibition which went on tour around Ireland and the United Kingdom following its run in Dublin received extensive press coverage in all the Irish national newspapers despite very little artistic criticism.



Illustration No.6      Gene Lambert, "Mary".





Illustration No.7      Gene Lambert, "Mary".



Lambert's success in what he set out to do, was for many an introduction to the 'human race'. A lot of people said they had never considered people with disabilities as being people. Moulded into thinking of us as 'The Disabled', 'The Handicapped', as though we were a homogeneous mass of 'weirdos', 'freaks' or 'beasts'. Lambert's presentation of people with disabilities was purely human without the stereotype. The accusation or objective of Lambert's show was to say to society that it can no longer deny people with disabilities human rights in the society we all live in.

Within a year Lambert was in the middle of setting up the Clashganna Mills Trust, an old mill renovated for the use of people with disabilities interested in the arts. the complex was to be designed to cater for all the needs of the disabled whatever their needs were. Lambert set it up with the idea that disabled people could go somewhere without having any problems of access and without any discrimination in the disability the person had. He tried to get beyond what he saw as 'the social management controls that are used in prisons complete with walls and uniforms that are applied in the same way as with people with disabilities. Like blacks in South Africa, they are not allowed into certain buildings. there is the same sort of stereotyping of the sort of work they can do.

What Lambert is forgetting here is that his exhibition in the Douglas Hyde Gallery; its main space at the bottom of a long flight of stairs, was inaccessible to people with disabilities. And in spite of the good efforts Lambert was trying to achieve in Clashganna, the effect of what he was doing and still is doing is ghettoizing people with disabilities and not integrating them with the rest of society.

Lambert's next exhibition was held in what used to be the Hendriks Gallery in Dublin in March of 1988. In this show he returns to painting where he gives an account of how he felt about the 'whirlpool of violence' he was sucked into in his childhood. 'In the Land of the Punt', the title deriving from an Egyptian love song taken from the Bible, was a collaboration with the Irish poet Paul Durcan. The two artists exploited shared beliefs on the prejudices and attitudes of Irish society concerning not only those with disabilities but the financially deprived too. Lambert struggles to separate institutional violence from the strains of the people who he lived with in Finglas in north Dublin. There is a glum apathy in Lambert's paintings where a chronicle of the hazards of the male life in youth and manhood occur. Remembrance of his childhood in Finglas are carried in both 'A Pair of Legs' and 'Snakes and Ladders' (See Appendix A and B) where the symbolism relates to male belligerency laced with male values and male prejudices. As Aiden Dunne said about the work:

We are presented with a series of cryptic surrealist vignettes conceived on a large scale. The space is characteristically shallow, stage like and the figures are like puppets, manipulated performers.

Lambert's work came to a lull following 'In the Land of the Punt' show. In September of last year an exhibition of his occurred, this time in the Rubicon Gallery, also in Dublin. the exhibition entitled 'Still Lives' was made up from various kinds of meat along with some fish. In what has been very much a tradition in painting that goes back a long way with, of course Rembrandt being one of the more predominant painters of meat. Lambert's slabs of beef, mutton and pork are what Aiden Dunne describes as:

Beautiful paintings of the end products of the butcher's craft. However the tension in his paintings arises not from gore or physical immediacy but from the restraint with which the meats labelled, are presented and the technical precision and tastefulness of his style.

Lambert's technical precision which he carries through-out his work, is now focussing on a more constricting range of imagery, somewhat unrelated to the disability. Nevertheless, he creates images of truth in a manner that is conveyed all the more forcefully by virtue of understatement. that combined with truth and honesty in Lambert's work, drives him relentlessly to the source of reality and leads to his belief and commitment to seeing things as they are, unglorified and real.

Velasquez believed that reality differs from myth in that it is never completed. Velasquez's spirit seems very much behind Lambert's work, especially in his photographs. The only thing that concerned Velasquez was to paint things as they were, whether or not they were to be seen by others as good or evil, beautiful or ugly (See illustration No.8) This direct parallel of thought from a different era shows that the naturalism of Velasquez and Lambert consists of their not wishing for things to be more than they already are. they both find it repugnant that man should seek to endow things with a perfection they do not possess. It is a lack of respect to the subject. To be an idealist is to deform reality.



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Illustration No.8 — Diego Velasquez, "Francisco Lezcano".

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### Chapter Three: The Work of Mary Duffy as an Artist with a Disability

Mary Duffy was born in 1961 without arms due to thalidomide. When she was growing up she was treated differently than the rest of her family, more like her brother than her sisters. Her two sisters were taught how to wash up and to serve people. She was never given that role model. As she says herself:

My body is not like any other body. Its shoulders are uniquely round and threatening. My body belongs to a specific time in our history and projects the spectre of a shadow on the future. My body has no past.

At the age of twenty one in Art College (NCAD) she decided to work on the idea of her body positions as her personal symbol. Her tutors reacted negatively, stating that she was being introverted and obsessive about herself and advised her to return to ideas about urban decay on which she had been previously working.

She felt somewhat miffed by the reaction of her tutors, which she thought revealed feelings about their own physical vulnerability and in turn, projected their fears onto her. Although loving the meditative quality of the painting, she was unable to live with the cliché of painting with her foot. She focused her attention on photography.

Photography, of course had no history of being produced by the foot, the nose or the mouth. Now working from an instantaneous pattern of work she began to look more closely at the way we all look at ourselves.

As a child and as a young woman her identity as a person with a disability had been systematically eroded. Because she could not, or did not, identify wholly with the majority culture she felt alienated from a world whose images most people could identify with. She asked herself and the world "Why were there no positive images of people with disabilities in the media? Why were all the charity images of disability of children? One could be forgiven for thinking that children with disabilities don't grow up...we just disappear!"

In the area of disability there is no clear cultural identity, but in terms of visual images, and especially photography there is a strong historic association of disability with charity and need. Images of people with disabilities are either images of problems or of courage. We become objects. So for Duffy being a woman with a disability and an artist leads her to state "I am aware how, disability, differentness and identity are represented in our culture. I wanted to create new images. Images that would celebrate, challenge and change."

By confronting and contradicting the stereotypical image of herself she created a mirror image of herself thus creating the notion of sameness and subtly introducing the notion of difference. The question she was asking herself and other people was could one understand and accept her assertiveness in her differentness and would one share the celebration with her? This fundamental question arises time and time again throughout Duffy's work. Certainly, her body does not have all the piece's that fit the 'human jigsaw' but she manipulates her body in her images in such a way that overthrows the able-bodied cultural prejudice. So from that she began to see her disability not as a medical condition but rather as something which was socially constructed.

Ironically after she completed a series of lectures on her thoughts about disability in America, (Boston, New York and San Francisco) her next artwork in 1988 was wanting to celebrate being her own hero. 'Cutting the Ties that Bind' (See illustration No.9) was commissioned for a group exhibition called 'Heroes' <sup>1</sup>. Made up from eight photographic images with Duffy wrapped up in a large cloth, then breaking out of the mould to walk free as herself. "I wanted to acknowledge that I have created my own life. that I have taken many steps towards my own liberation."

What she had done was to simply break down the barriers she had held against her own liberation which had protected her from the "uncomfortable knowledge that I create my own destiny. It is always easy to live with the belief that there is someone to blame."

Realising what she owed herself in her own liberation, she then methodically returned to the physical contact or lack of physical contact she has with other people. In the video/text piece 'Asking for it' <sup>2</sup> she asks to be hugged, to be embraced and for her to embrace the other. her desire to be hugged changes from warm and rooted to lifeless and stiff:

Sometimes I feel like a tree when you hug me, radiating and rooted. other times I feel like a telegraph pole, straight, unbending and wired.

Although she uses her legs as arms in order to greet the other, hug them, embrace them spontaneously, though the "fear of difference encourages invisibility and keeps everyone apart.". Such emotions are common to everyone whether able-bodied or not, and what Duffy points out is that the way she feels about her body and her life is not very different from how non-disabled people feel about themselves. For instance, when discussing racism or sexism there is no risk in having a white attitude one day and a black attitude the next day because you can view it with a degree of objectivity. With disability, however, it is certainly possible to go to bed able-bodied and wake up with a disability. The fear is real and it is universal.

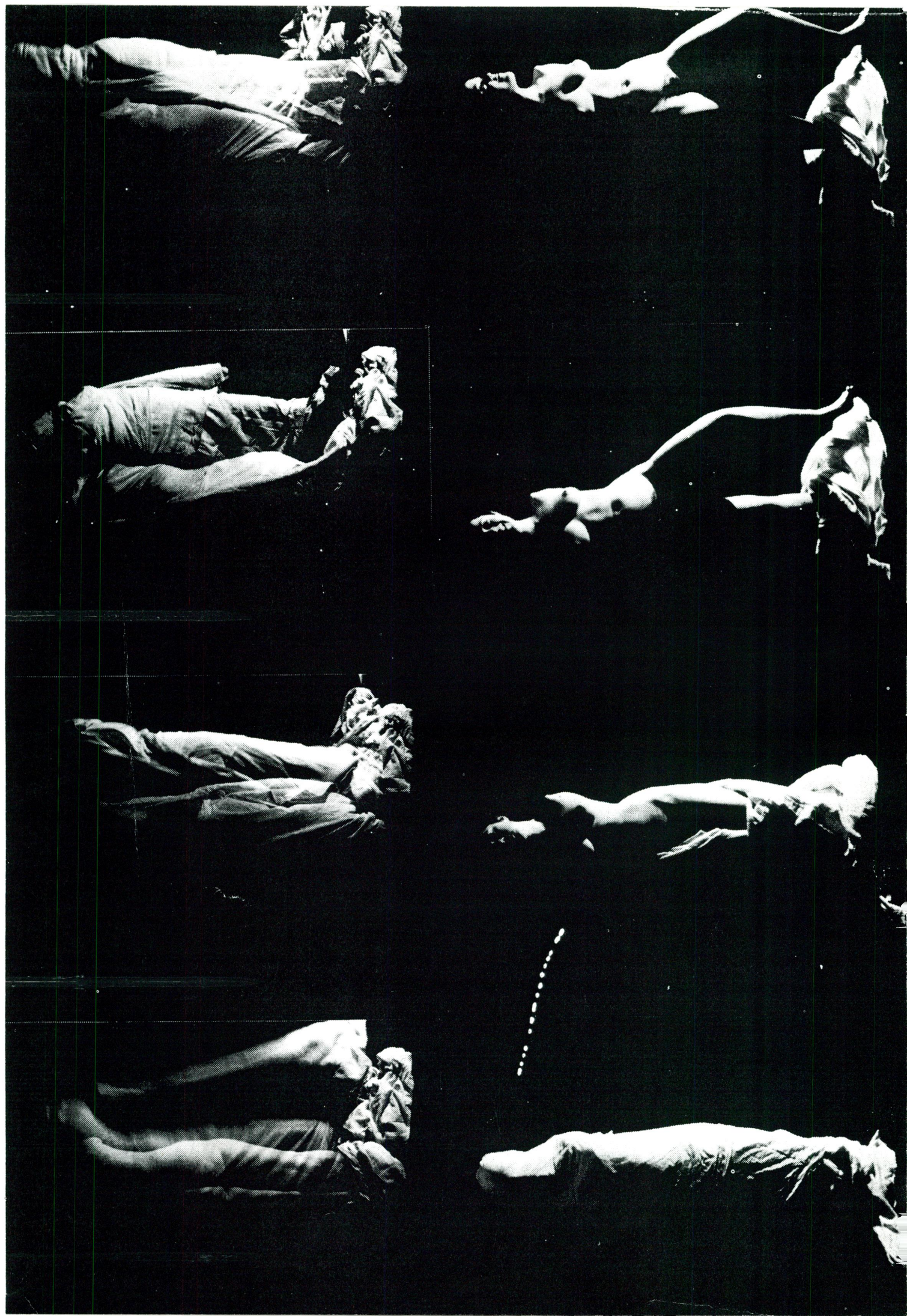


Illustration No.9

Mary Duffy, "Cutting the ties that bind".

The essence of 'Asking for it' is that able-bodied people have a shield that is called normality, a concept which makes her defenceless, and so is forced to forge her own identity. Her identity is that she is disabled and she asks to be hugged just as anyone else. The difference of her being disabled only renders the fact of her being different, but her moral instincts and values remain the same as a lot of other people's.

Essentially what I am trying to get at is the importance of Duffy's position on the fringe, looking back at society and questioning her own position and the position of others. She does this very effectively in her next work 'Prejudice and Pride' which she made in 1989, again using photographs accompanied with text. In this she used various themes of her life growing-up as a woman with a disability. They include, CHILD, WOMAN, LOVE, DEPENDENCE, WHOLE and HOLE.

In CHILD, she sees herself as a helpless child with artificial arms that are out of date thanks to the growth of technology. These useless arms overpower the use of her feet. Heavy, gas, cylindrical 'bionic' limbs last only two weeks and take away any attempts of her to conform.

In WOMAN, she is growing up, neglected of household abilities, taught is to be independent but not knowing when that will be and being conditioned to be a woman who should ignore her sexuality.

In LOVE, she has unconditional love for her sister, her oldest friend. She loves her in order to let her go (in a fear of uncertainty) to let both live independently.

In DEPENDENCE, until the age of seventeen she was dependent on her sister for life, care, control and humiliation. When her sister gives her an opening to be independent in her own life she pisses herself when all she needed was to ask someone else for help.

In WHOLE her grandmother gives life to her hand after a day of it kept in plastic armour. Her fingers naturally curl under her breast. She asks her Granny to scratch her crotch. Someone else scratches it now.

In HOLE Duffy asks "Will I grow breasts, will I bleed?" She explores the fear of being unlovable and permanently different under the Irish slang word for the vagina.

The truth and honesty that emerges out of 'Prejudice and pride' and the position in which it leaves Duffy, bring out the essential elements of how the community sees itself and how it sees disability. Acceptance is hard to come by. her lifetime existence means being stared at and discussed as though she were not there. It means anger and annoyance at the slagging and peoples inability to deal honestly with their discomfort and fear. This is what I mean when I talk of waking up with a disability. the existing

factor with disability is that it confronts people with their own fears of physical vulnerability and mortality.

Leaving the 'Prejudice and Pride' exhibition to tour around the United Kingdom for the eighteen months, Duffy returned to Dublin and in 1990 did a series of workshops in Mountjoy Women's Prison over four months. From January to May that year she took part in a joint Department of Justice and the Arts Council residency programme for artists in Mountjoy Prison. She enjoyed the residency as being part of another fringe in society and it gave the women prisoners an opportunity to learn about Duffy's work.

During her residency at Mountjoy, she took part in a group exhibition called 'Beyond the Barriers' in Sheffield, England. Again her work in the exhibition was consistently personal.

In this work she explored the position of herself as an active participant in her own oppression. She was interested in exploring how her conditioning about disability has influenced her sexual identity. She says, "My conditioning was not traditionally female or Catholic."

Being freed from most of the traditional expectations she avoided in many ways the demands of a society that devalues women in society. Quote Duffy:

I am not expected to be a mother or a wife or a lover and I am free from being objectified by the male gaze. My body will never be used to sell merchandise.

No clear statement exists in terms of media representation about women with disabilities other than that we are usually invisible, sometimes victims, always tragic.

As a woman with a disability, if I can see the reality of my internalised oppression, I am free to define my own identity and to create one beautiful, proud, elegant and sexual.

Through her work she explores how we have bought into these inherited beliefs about people with disabilities and given them power. It is only by rejecting these adopted images of sexuality that Duffy forges a new identity for herself that really begins to define, not only Duffy's sexuality, but the sexuality of all of us. 'Beyond the Barriers' gives a great innovativeness to the area of identity and the desire to have sex of many people with disabilities. Duffy overthrows the uncertainty, the insecurity and the prejudice of sexuality between able-bodied people and people with disabilities.

Finally towards the end of 1990, Duffy had another performance 'Stories of a Body' (See illustration No.10) which was commissioned by the Gracie Fields Live Art Performances at the Rochdale Art Gallery in England which she later adopted for the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick at the end of November, 1990.

She made a piece telling stories about different parts of her body and how these stories related to aspects of herself and how they have changed and developed during her life.



Illustration No.10 Mary Duffy, "Stories of a body".



The performance involved the use of a Super 8 film projection onto her naked body. The film contained words and images dealing with the idea of personal barriers, both tangible and intangible. The performance develops as each barrier is confronted and challenged verbally using the soundtrack. After having her body painted out so that the film no longer projects onto her she appears to come through the barriers created by the images and words made by the projected film. The stories which are evocative, funny and poignant also map out a personal history.

One of the most poignant stories to come out of the performance was that of her encounter with someone in the medical profession. the story sums up a lot of what Duffy sees as the incongruent apathy and disregard of her body by the medical profession. Despite trying to overcome 'her shame and their guilt' she is landed with another prejudiced professional who can only go so far as to describe her as a tragedy (See Appendix C).

The recurring theme in Duffy's work is an explanation of difference and all that it implies - deviance, death, deformity, distrust, dismay and also of delight, wonder, variety, inventiveness, creativity and uniqueness.

#### Footnotes

- 1 'Heroes' was held in the Project Arts Centre in 1988.
- 2 'Asking for it' was Duffy's submission to the GPA Emerging Artists Awards exhibition held in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in 1988.

## Chapter 4: My Work as an Artist with a Disability

I was born in 1967 as a person of small stature as a result of a genetic disorder in my fertilization and conception. I learned how to walk, talk and think just as the other children were taught in my school. At the age of ten I went to a private school, by this time knowing that I was going to be small for the rest of my life. I was very much involved in the extra curricular activities of the school. I learned how to swim there but unfortunately lost the knack of floating a few years later and still haven't managed to regain that skill. I played rugby and enjoyed taking part in other sports.

However, the more I continued these sports the more embarrassing and humiliating it was for me in the changing rooms. The other boys in the class were overwhelmed and shocked by the structure of my disproportionate body. my torso looked too big for my legs to carry. My back looked all twisted and hunched. My head looked like it was inflated and my limbs looked very skinny and powerless.

When my friends and I were going through puberty I gave up sports because it was becoming a physical danger for me.

Anyway, when I left school I knew I wanted to study art. Having been brought up in a very concentrated art world at home and holding an interest in all aspects of visual arts, I aimed my future towards art.

It wasn't until the end of second year Fine Art that I started seeing myself as the subject-matter of my work. This happened quite accidentally, but traumatically when I was making a memorial piece for a late friend of mine, Karl Stephenson. The piece I made in memory of him was identifying his character as I saw it. I began to see a person's identity as a very important part of themselves and how one's identity is seen by others. I already knew how a lot of people saw me. The dwarf with long hair. The *poor* tiny little funny-looking man. The midget without Snow White and so on and so on.

I was very tired and angry about the ascriptions that were being labelled to me and as Mary Duffy says of herself, I began to forge my own identity, that of a strongminded, small, disabled artist.

I started my research in my home which I thought was a good place to start the work: how I fit into the household, what doesn't suit me, etc. I took photographs of myself doing different things around the house. I found myself stretching to reach the tap of the kitchen sink. I am dependent on a stool in order to reach anything on a shelf that is over five feet off the ground. Reading the paper means laying it out on a table, my arm

span can't hold it. Finally I went to sit down in an armchair where I found my biggest discomfort. Sitting back in a chair means that my feet don't reach the ground. They dangle over the edge of the seat where one expects one's knee to be. In this uncomfortable position, which has the appearance of a child sitting in a chair, my feet begin to swell up so much that the unbearable pain leaves me with no option but to get down off the chair to relieve the swelling. The only other way of sitting on these 'standard' chairs is to sit on the edge of the seat which inevitably means it slides away from under me unless I have a table or something else to hang on to.

Ironically the chair seems to be my biggest enemy as there is no possible means of relaxing in it. So I began to question what were considered set standards in the design and function of furniture, buildings, public services and general accessibility. What I discovered was that practically everything was designed for the 'norm', the average man or woman on the street and there was nothing outside that, nothing that catered for people with disabilities except for the odd ramp. In the society we live in, not the one we idealize, there is no such thing as normality as everything has its own identity. However, facilitating for the average man and woman alienates me from the facile world called normality.

To make this point I made a chair (See illustration No.11), eight feet high, three and a half feet in depth, three feet in width with the seat four foot off the ground. The ratio of the chair to a six-foot person is the same as my height in relation to a 'standard' armchair. Each measurement in the chair is adapted from my height to the height of a six-foot adult; the height of the seat off the ground; the difficulty of getting up on the seat; the depth of the seat itself - an able-bodied person's ankles dangle over the edge of the seat just as mine do in a 'standard' chair.

When the chair was completed, my initial response to it was that it looked narrower in life than on paper. Thankfully, that added to the emphasis on its height. height and expanse of space are two things that have always interested me, probably because of my awareness of myself in a given space and because I spend most of my time looking up.

The public response to the chair at the opening of the Degree/Diploma Exhibition in NCAD in 1990 was as I expected, but unfortunately not as I intended. I knew it would have a visual impact on people, even to make them take a step back away from it. But my intention was that they would overcome the enormous size of it and try and sit on it as a functional chair. People were frightened by it. They were too embarrassed or inhibited by it to be seen sitting up above everybody else. They reneged on seizing an opportunity of being in a hierarchical position given to them through disabled means. It reminded me of the prejudiced failing to overcome their fear and guilt and so turn their backs and walk away. Despite the fact that I had put a notice beside the chair saying

PHOTOGRAPH: PAT LANGAN

## Corban's chair

AS always the launch party for the exhibition of the work of graduating students from the National College of Art and Design in Thomas Street last Tuesday was a magic night. The jazz band playing away in Red Square, sun pouring through the many windows of the old Powers distillery building, and that wonderful sense of a new young creative generation on the crest of their wave.

Everyone will carry away their own image from the show which is open, free to the public until tomorrow evening but few won't have noticed 22-year-old Corban Walker's chair. Eight feet high and made from iroko it is this young sculptor's response to what he speaks of straightforwardly as his disability; the fact that he's small.

"I wanted to open people's eyes; to say 'here is another way of looking at our society'. To make the point that this is what I have to go through whether I like it or not; having trouble getting on buses, reaching up to doorbells, making phone calls from public coin boxes, cashing cheques in a bank when the counter is up to my chin."

Son of architect Robin Walker and art critic Dorothy Walker, their four other children have all, also, gone into similar fields; architecture, furniture making, painting and acting.

This is the first time he feels he has successfully used his disability in his art work and now that he knows it can be done effectively he thinks he'll carry on doing it. "Please Be Seated" says the label by the chair but so far he's noticed that of those who have taken up his invitation, a few have been ill at ease in the gigantic chair. "Prejudice derives from fear and there is a lot of fear about disability. People feel they don't know how to deal with someone missing an arm or four feet tall so they ignore them; turn a blind eye." Somehow Corban's chair just won't let you do that.

Clashganna Mills helped him get the £500 worth of wood sponsored for him by wood merchant Morgan McMahon. The piece is now for sale at £1,500 and it's maker would love to see it in the new Museum of Modern Art in Kilmaham — or, better still, in the new Financial Services Centre where, in all its majesty and power, it might just open more and more eyes every day.

The exhibition is open today (Sat) from 10-6 and tomorrow (Sun) from 2-6. Admission free.

Caroline Walsh

● Corban Walker (left) and his eight-foot chair.

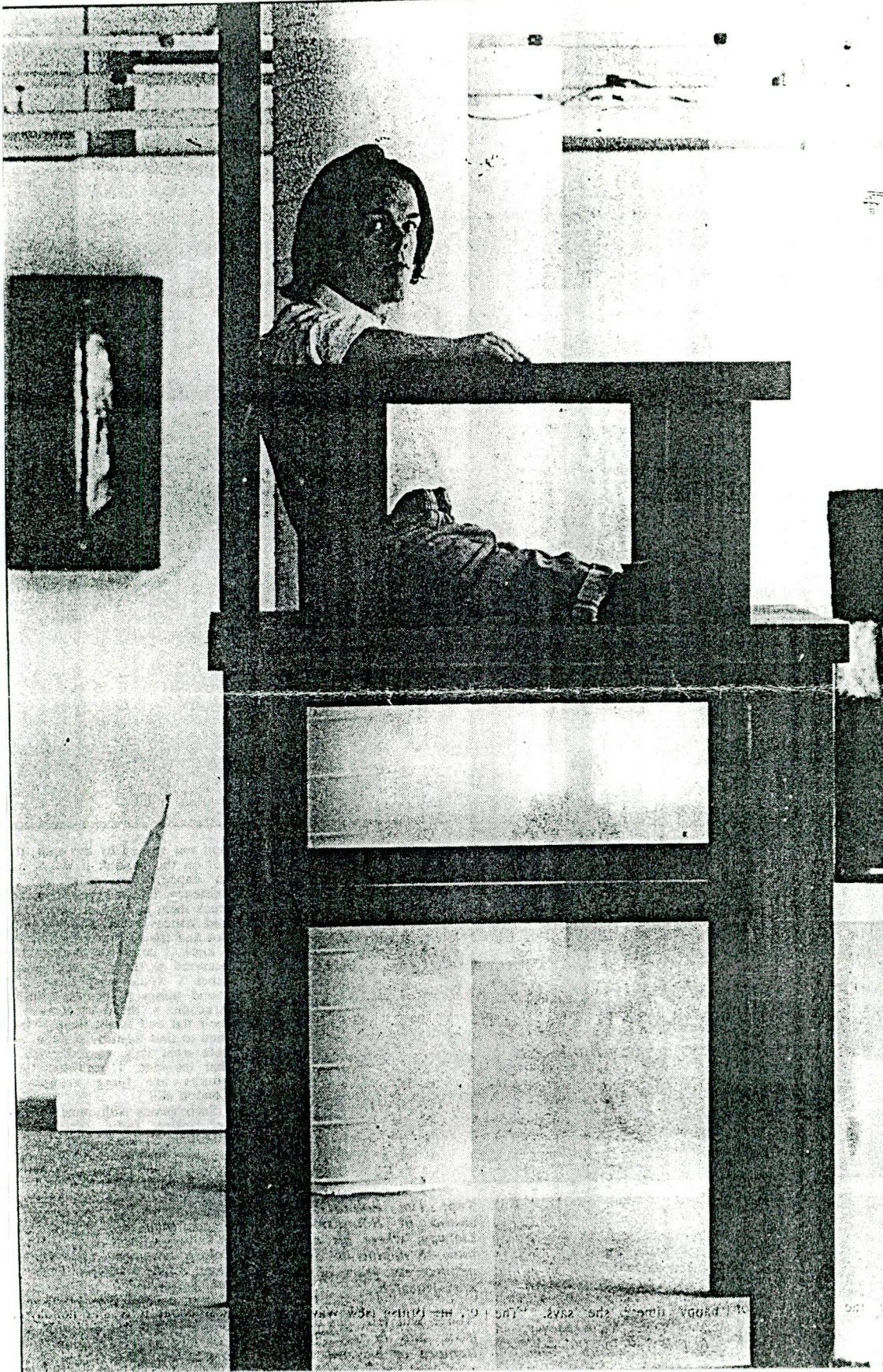


Illustration No.11 Corban Walker, "Chair".



'Please Be Seated', the general reaction was either to touch it, stroke it or walk away from it. Those who did get up to sit on it didn't go further than sitting on the edge.

On the other hand, the media were very interested in exposing it. I was somewhat surprised and initially thought I would be exploited as bait for a sudden interest the media had in disability. But essentially I was in control of the coverage which gave me a chance to increase the awareness of what I saw as important to convey to society.

The following academic year was very difficult for me for a number reasons. First of all, I was very worried that any work I made would not be as good as the chair. That fear was raised due to the amount of feed-back I got about the chair. I felt as though I had no grasp on the work I was doing which incorporated different areas of disability as well as my own. I was working on the idea of walkways in regard to accessibility. The idea never really got anywhere except for a few models of ramps and steps that had no signs of advancing anywhere. By Easter of last year I still hadn't come up with anything so I took the rest of the year off.

After half-heartedly looking for a studio, I isolated myself in West Cork to reassess my work. I started to look at all the ideas that go behind planning and construction of a building and how architects plans facilitate or fail to facilitate people with disabilities. The function of a building is to make it accessible to the public but if the public cannot gain access to it the design becomes defunct. In passing a construction site I have the regretful assumption that the result in the structure of the building will be far from flawless. By imagining a crane to be the tool of a building construction one can begin to question its function. The gigantic right angle instrument is crucial to development of a building but theoretically it is hindrance in its contribution to make a building inaccessible. Therefore, the crane becomes its own crutch. The duty of modern architecture, to design accessible buildings has not yet been upheld and is far too often made the excuse for high costs in facilitating a building to disabled people. So architecture goes on being decorative rather than functional. A prime example of such architecture is the Grand 'Arche in Paris (See illustration No.12). Regardless of how magnificent it may look it is the biggest insult to anyone who uses a wheelchair. And yet it is seen by many as the finest example of 'modern' architecture.

Moreover, it seems quite ludicrous to me that awards are given to architects buildings with disabled access. Either a building is good or it is not; it is the overall quality that is important. A quality of good building is where there is free movement and easy access for all members of society. that is what is expected and that is what civilised behaviour should be.

However, high costs seem to dominate the lives of human beings which effectively means people with disabilities are screened out. The idea of 'screening people' brought

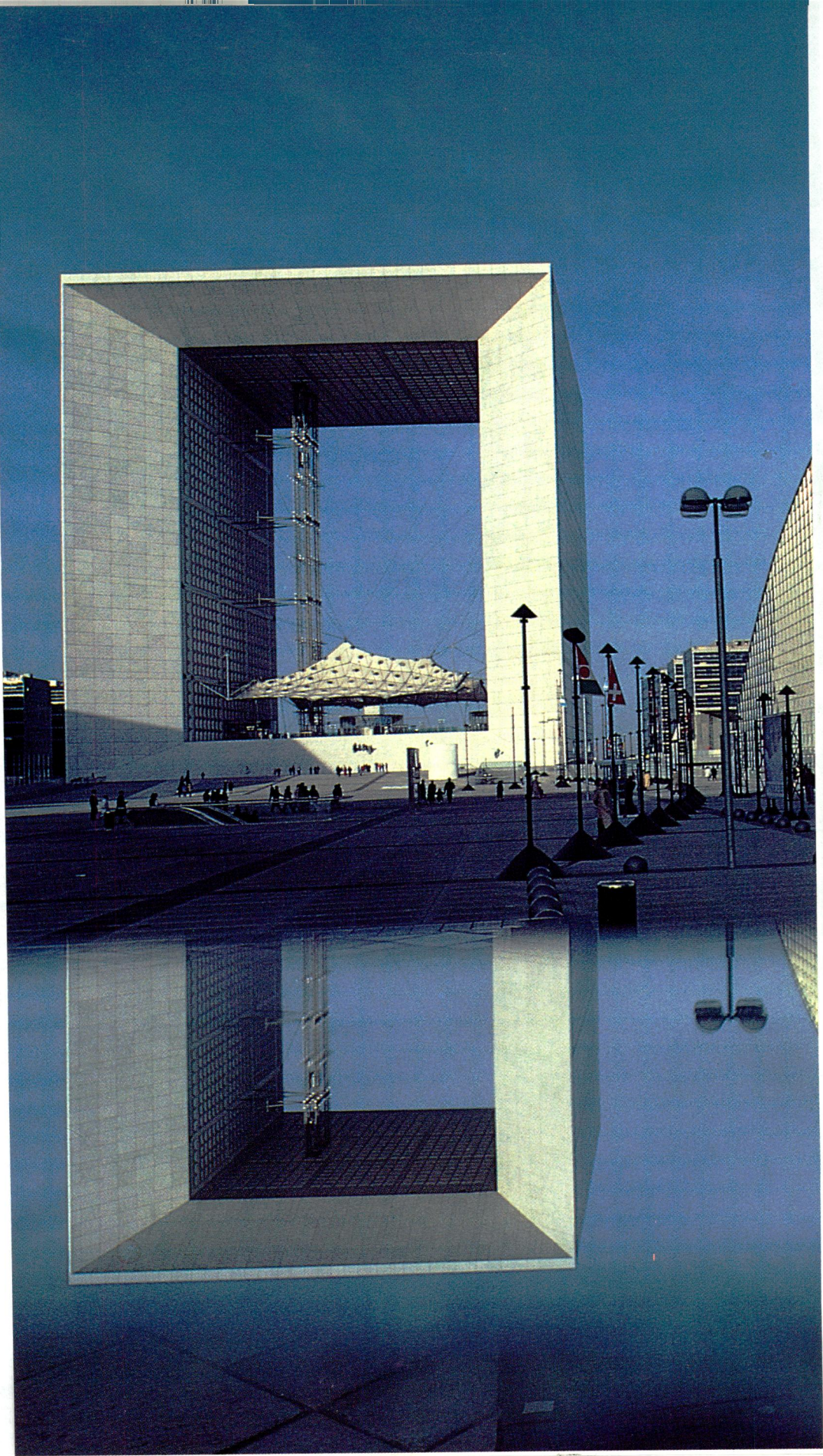


Illustration No.12    La Grande Arche.



me out of my isolation in West Cork and back to Dublin to return to art college and finish my degree.

I began using my body as being the measure in my work again. At my height of four foot I am screened as a person with a disability. At six foot I am at eye level with the 'Norm' and the 'Norm' says I can take part in society. At four foot I am irrelevant, invisible. At six foot I am at eye level and accepted.

Once I elevated myself to the eye level of a six foot person I did not see myself as being accepted nor did I want that association but instead I could overthrow the stereotype by standing on my 'standing box'. By eye-balling society I am in the position to question the so-called values of society. I have broken down the barrier which had kept me silent.

By using a model whose stature is at the other extreme to mine I composed a number of photographs that illustrated my idea and showed the significance of the box. The photographs ranged from both of us standing at either end of the frame staring at each other with no expression on our faces, to both of us in the centre of the frame at arms length pointing at each other, accusing each other of being wrong. The project stretched further to the issue of sexuality, this time using a female model where both of us stand naked and where I can only have sex when standing on the box.

I found the work of performance artists Ulay and Marina Abramovic very influential to me, in particular their piece, 'Nightsea Crossing' <sup>1</sup> (See illustration No.13). The performance involved both of them sitting at either end of a table looking at each other, motionless for several hours. The work was based on the desire to express what they called "The impossibility of escaping from one another".

At the work in progress show last January I did four performances of the 'Standing Box' (See illustration No. 14). At a different location each day in NCAD (the exhibition space, the library, the men's toilet and in a queue for the canteen) I stood still for an hour on the box.

However, the problem about the box was that it didn't present me with a solution. Certainly it pointed out the discriminative side of our culture, the lack of awareness and improper judgement that surrounds me but at the same time I wanted to point out these issues without having to climb on a two foot high box.

It is impossible for anyone to escape from my presence or existence. Therefore I must have control of the viewers presence in my surroundings. through a formal means of presenting myself I can express the contents of instantaneity, immediacy and simple wholeness, the content of being life-size, the ratio one to one, which is the ratio of pure factuality, of differentness of identity, I can work without the box. By recognizing



Illustration No.13 Mariana and Ulay Abramovic, "Nightsea Crossing".





Illustration No.14      Corban Walker, "Standing Box".



these contents of my consciousness of myself has acquired the consciousness of the viewer.

Then the consciousness viewer sees in the work is not only a reflection of his/her own consciousness but also a reflection of whoever else is present. Consciousness surrounds the exposed viewer.

It is the consciousness of myself and of the society that is the core of my work. And it is at this point I am brought to the conclusion of my dissertation in an examination of how people and artists with disabilities deal with society.

#### Footnotes

- 1 Ulay and Marina Abramovic performed 'Nightsea Crossing' at Documenta 7 in Kassel, Germany in 1982, for twenty one days.

## Conclusion

This thesis is my contribution to a debate which is far from being concluded. My intention is to give the reader the opportunity to learn about the realities which I and many other people with disabilities encounter in our dealings with society. After reading through this dissertation I hope the reader will better understand the particular realities and concerns of artists with disabilities.

Finally, to breakdown the structure of society is the only way to find the nucleus of all the problems of that society. On the one hand we have to respect absolutely the rights of a specific community to organise its own way of life, without divorcing them from the wider community. This in effect is an appeal to give full play to cultural difference, whatever the implications, simply because enough people are willing to affirm the importance of what is different.

On the other hand there is a despair with the enormity of the challenge encompassing such diversity, and neither position really deals with the fundamental issues. One effect insists that it is impossible to evaluate different traditions. The other hopes that the claims of other traditions may dissolve into a greater whole. They are effectively mirror images of each other.

We may not be able to find, indeed we should not seek to find, a single way of life which would satisfy us all. That does not mean that we cannot agree on common ends: the construction of what can best be described as a community of communities to achieve unity without denying difference. In few places is this objective more crucial to the individual than in the communicative world of art.

## Appendix A

### A Pair of Legs

We used to hunt in packs in cafes on O'Connell St.  
 Fortes, Cafollas, The Carlton Cinema...  
 On the Prowl for "mots", "dames", "birds", "pieces of fluff".

"Jaysus, look at that pair of legs" -  
 The opening words of the the book of Drumcondra.  
 "Jaysus, look at that pair of legs".

That a pair of legs might not be a pair of legs  
 Was not something we gave any thought to:  
 The aim was to hijack a pair of legs for yourself

To drive down the Dual Carriageway to Bray  
 In a stolen sports-car with a pair of legs beside you,  
 A pair of legs in black panties.

Preferably a pair of legs in a cross-your-heart bra,  
 And crash the car on the seafront at Bray;  
 Or be the gang-leader of the gang of gangs

And lay your hands on the most luscious dame in Dublin  
 Lift her up and fling her through the front window of the cafe:  
 A pair of legs jutting out of broken glass.

A pair of legs is such a bouquet of fragility,  
 Even a man's legs are tulips whose stalks  
 Are shredded so easily, so vulnerable in daylight.

A pair of legs in a pair of hands;  
 A pair of legs in the sky;  
 A pair of legs under a weeping willow.

Paul Durcan

## Appendix B

### from **Snakes and Ladders**

I would become a famed boxer and in Donnybrook Bus Garage,  
I would fight for the Bantam Weight Championship of the World  
And with the blood from cuts drenching down into my eyes.

And my hair matted with sweat and gore  
All Kleenex and Tampax.  
I would pulp my Filipino opponent's face.

The President of Ireland would send me a telegram  
And the Archbishop of Dublin would invite me to tea:  
I would be a 20th century Irish success story.

Except that when the woman I wanted to be my fair bride  
Proclaimed, "under no circumstances will I be your fairy bride",  
My professor of dogmatic theology flipped his lid.

"A throw of dice will never abolish chance"  
She advised me out of the cafe-corner of her eye  
But the President and the Archbishop bade me pay no heed.

That she was a mere woman, and that she'd been in France  
25 years later, 25 years too late, I see -  
"A throw of the dice will never abolish chance".

Paul Durcan

## Appendix C

from **Stories of a body**

I'm no longer the baby you tried to mould  
The child of your medical reports  
condemned to a back room  
I have stepped out of your limited vision  
and forged my own  
I've left behind my shame and your guilt  
and when I sign up for a new G.P.  
and I stand in front of him for a routine check up  
I hear again your collective guilt  
"We in the medical profession have a lot to answer for  
thalidomide, such a tragedy, you must feel angry towards us."  
And this time I am no longer ten years old,  
naked and goosebumped  
and I can tell you  
not to try and off load  
and dump your guilt on me  
That as my G.P. I insist  
that you don't regard me  
as some kind of personal failure,  
that I am not part of  
and cannot absolve you from  
your collective medical guilt.

The process that I went through  
was vicious and indifferent  
to my feelings and sensitivities as a child.

Mary Duffy



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An interview with Mary Duffy

Conducted on 25th November 1991

