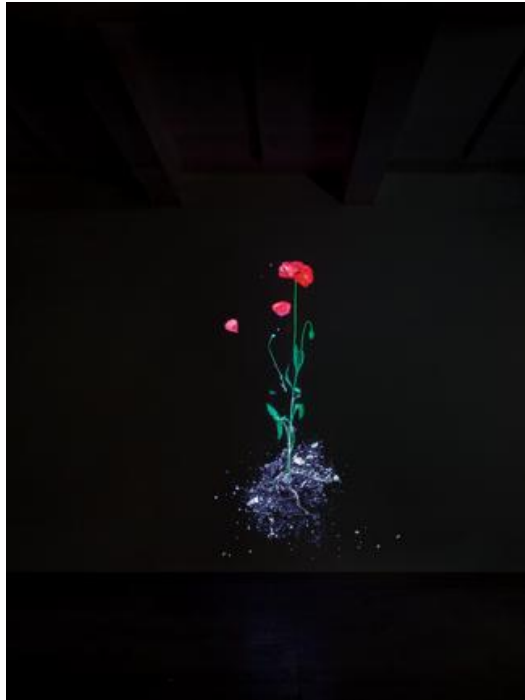


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# Art in America

*James Coleman*  
NEW YORK,  
*at Marian Goodman*

by Austin Considine (April 2017)



James Coleman: *Still Life*, 2013–16, digital projection; at Marian Goodman.

James Coleman's exhibition of several new digital videos, projections, and films from the 1970s offered a profound meditation on the act of seeing. While many art objects demand to be *looked at*—which is to say, contemplated at a distance—the Irish artist's works force the viewer to consider the role of unconscious activities in constructing meaning.

It is easy to forget how much mental processing underlies the act of seeing. Scientists have long recognized that what we experience consciously as a seamless visual field is, in fact, a convincing synthesis of information filled with blind spots, colorless patches, distortions,

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and micro-blackouts—all stitched together by our brains. The conscious perception of an image is further shaped by unconscious desires and socially mediated expectations.

Sometimes the right prompting can bring these unconscious processes to light. Of Coleman's two new works on view, the more provocative was *Still Life* (2013–16). Projected in a darkened gallery, the silent digital video depicts an unearthed poppy plant. Its roots are exposed and caked with dirt, and two of its vibrant pink petals are torn away, while the others seem to float in a dimensionless black void. At first, the projection appears motionless, as if it were a photographic still. But knowing it's a video loop changes one's experience of seeing it. The viewer peers more closely, searching for movement, for patterns. Only after several minutes of seeming stasis does one begin to feel sure: yes, that thin filament of root has twitched. Meanwhile, we imagine narcotic chemicals coursing unseen through the poppy's veins.

*D 11* (1998–2002) is another silent video loop of what appears to be a static image. Is it a close-up of an X-ray? A detail of a blurry black-and-white photo? Staring at the expressionistic swirl of black, gray, and white, viewers become alert to movements that may or may not be happening and grow suspicious of their own perceptions.

In a separate gallery was a recent untitled video installation (2011–15). The video is a fragmented and looped projection of a spinning carnival ride in motion. The ride seems to freeze and restart because the video repeats the same three clips, each lasting less than a second, according to an indecipherable pattern. The result is a dynamic riot of abstract color in which the occasional face or foot is glimpsed. An audio track—a repeating sample of a short, unidentifiable sound—is synchronized to the rhythm of the cuts.

Coleman has experimented with tensions between still and moving images for decades, and several of his early color films (all circa 1970) were projected in another room. A different film played each week for the run of the exhibition. *Work Apron* consists of a fixed view of a woman's apron draped across the wrought-iron railing of a balcony. As the projection rolls, the apron billows from a gentle breeze; nothing else happens.

The film is dull and repetitive at first, but it soon invites the mind to fill in the blanks. Who fills the apron when the breeze does not? What is her life like? By slowing down and focusing on a single image, the imagination, with little prompting, goes to work. One is reminded that even form—to say nothing of meaning—is not conferred from artist to viewer but is mutually constructed.