

EXTRACT #7 (CHRIS POWER)

The woman?

We only see her from behind really. Jeans, trainers, her own shoulder length hair a little unkempt. She wears a soft thin grey jumper. She walks into a darkened space in which three projectors had been stacked one on top of the other and are casting circles of light on a blank wall: red, yellow, blue, white; the patterns change from time to time but she isn't really paying attention, it is the sound that holds her. A woman's clipped, deadpan voice introduces each subject before the recording plays. In between each one comes a screech of noise. Words played on a short loop, perhaps an old recording. Another voice can be heard through a tangle of digital scratches and thumps. Then the woman's deadpan speaks: "Recordings of the Dead: The Voice of James Joyce", she continues, but this fragment is so deteriorated it is impossible to tell what Joyce is saying. Although the woman doesn't believe for a moment in the ability to record the dead, the work makes her feel distinctly uneasy. The other exhibits don't do much to improve her mood. She walks through a room in which cacophonous music is playing while five screens – each washed in a different colour – play sequences from different films. Each film seems to focus on a girl or woman with some sort of telekinetic power. Wine glasses slide across tables, cutlery hovers in mid-air. Hurrying away from the noise she enters a dim space where a network of small speakers attach to thin threads hang from the ceiling. The room is suffused with a purple light, and the dangling speakers are like the tentacles of a jellyfish. She

wanders through the wires, holds a speaker to her ear like a shell. She hears a sharp blip, like the Quindar tone from the Apollo missions. Then a man starts speaking about having supposedly seen a flying saucer. There is another sharp tone and another woman begins saying something. She drops the speaker and picks another, then another. Each headphone contains testimonies by people who claim to have seen a UFO. They all speak very matter-of-factly about it. She wonders what it is like to be convinced of something no one else can possibly believe, but to still feel the compulsion to tell people about it. Wasn't it better to keep things like that to oneself? Involved with her thoughts, she finds that she has wandered into an empty room. She thinks she must have wandered out of the room completely, but just as she was turning to leave one wall erupts into a smear of colour. As it does so an unmistakable voice rings out. Shrill, taunting. A figure of horror from her childhood: a Mr Punch. She makes out the curved chin and flopping penis of a nose, blurry and slowed down on the film that plays on the wall. A second wall leaps into life, then a third, and finally she is surrounded. He dances before a noose. He beats his wife with his club. The sound of impact is incredibly loud: a scouring frequency like metal shards ripping through her eardrums. It is as if the artist has peered into her subconscious and plucked this orgy of violence from it, like a snail from its shell. She was terrified of Punch and Judy shows as a child. Whenever she saw one she had bad dreams for the next few nights.

What was it about them that upset her?

Somehow it is not just the violence. It is not the thought that it might be real. In fact, if anything it is the opposite: it is the unreality of it. The thought that behind the candy-striped curtain a man is standing there, in a narrow wooden box, sweating in the heat of an English market square, his hands working furiously as the cruelty and carnage piled up on stage. And as he is doing all this, in his T-shirt and jeans, he is straining his voice into that grating, revolting pinch-nosed screech, spouting nonsense. It seems pathetic to her, and disturbing in a way she couldn't understand as a child, but which now strikes her as the same pitiful estate of any ventriloquist who has to bring life to a lifeless object: if they are going to be any good at it they have to believe – even if it's only for the short time their hand is thrust up a puppet's skirts – that the thing is really alive. And if it is really alive for them, and the character is, like Punch, a maniac, what is going on in that little box as they screech and scrape, as Punch strikes Judy with that truncheon? As Punch beats her again and again and the colours of his jester's motley bleed across the wall. The whole thing is made with a low-quality film that only adds to the disquiet it provokes in her. Punch's laughter rings out, distant and echoing, then too close to the ear, confiding, whispering, conspiring. She holds her hands to her ears. The words "Oh yes he is!" fill the room, suddenly booming as if spoken by a host. She waits for the inevitable reply, bracing herself as though for the swing of an axe. Then it comes: "Oh no he isn't", the crowd cry, the shout accompanied by another blow that cannons off the walls of the room where she stands, fixed, at the centre. Her hands

still clenched to her head as Punch looms in the darkness, his black eyebrows and rosy cheeks rising towards her, his incessant grin flashing, closing, flashing as he beats Judy again and again. Beats her to death, back to life, to death, to life, to death again.

She leaves the room.