

# STRAND

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## '3 & 4 Will. IV c.73' Review - ICA March 3, 2020 | Miranda Yates

A blank surface, seemingly innocuous items, and a barrage of information is what you're faced with at the Institute of Contemporary Arts' new exhibition by Cameron Rowland. The title even fits with it - what can you garner from '3 & 4 Will. IV c.73'? The information booklet you're given upon arrival replaces placards or explanatory texts printed on the gallery walls; a rather clinical and cavernous space opens up before you. If you're not interested in putting a little bit of time into reading the introductory essay (yes, essay) by Rowland himself, then the exhibition will make little sense, or at least will have a diminished impact on you. The monochrome booklet mirrors the monochrome exhibition. And yet, if you dive in, and give it a chance, you won't come away feeling as empty as the space suggests.

Rowland proffers a damning critique of property gained through slavery, and how it has been preserved by the abolition movement. It is addressed in an introductory essay, with impressive research and meticulous referencing, using works of key writers and thinkers, including Saidiya Hartman, and covers a lot of ground. Discussing the intricacies of statutes and laws related to slavery, and the economic benefits of abolition to English companies for example, addresses this harrowing and upsetting topic with the appropriate respectful solemnity. The detached style of writing lends itself very well to the emptiness of the exhibition itself. Offering very little sense of the artist responsible for the exhibition, Rowland forces the viewer to become as engaged with the work as we might normally expect the artist to be. We become the researcher, the critic, the devoted artist trying to construct an exhibition. With the description of the pieces not put forth as an optional extra, but as an integral part of the art instead, each viewer will feel as they are indeed in the artist's shoes. You feel as though you have acquired all the knowledge that Rowland has researched, creating a sense of connection to, and protection over, the pieces.

This realisation came to me when entering the second part of the exhibition in the Upper Gallery. On the map you can see that exhibits line the room and stairwell, but all that is there are the existing parts of the building: mahogany doors and handrails. Feeling a part of the exhibition, as though partially responsible for it just by viewing it (and being invited in by Rowland's essay and booklet) means the doors are jarring. How can the exhibits already be there, and be present in other exhibitions at the ICA? How incongruous the doors and handrails feel to the viewer highlights just how attached you become to the exhibits - these doors aren't the artist's, and yet they contribute to the exhibition. You feel an affinity with Rowland's motives and practice, and the fact the doors aren't imported into the gallery by him makes you realise just how connected you feel to the other pieces he displays in the exhibition.

That's also what makes this exhibition so refreshing - Rowland is unafraid of critiquing institutions within the art world. His discussion of the mahogany used in 12 Carlton House Terrace is once more detached, using the building title rather than the name of the ICA. In an art world of attempted transgression and a constant desire to explore what art means, the ICA is a shining example of true progression, allowing a critique of its location and history within an exhibition.

Rowland spans history throughout the gallery, refuting a chronological or linear account of the tales and histories he is reflecting. Perhaps the most affecting piece is the most obvious exhibit as you walk into the gallery. Faced with a seemingly empty room, white walls, grey floors, a confrontingly vast expanse, the first thing you'll spot is the pile of brass manillas on the floor. Entitled *Pacotille* (2020), the collection of manillas with glass beads strikes an emotional chord without even reading the accompanying description. It seems like a remnant left behind, a forgotten symbol, it draws the viewer in. Rowland's description of the history of the trade of European goods for enslaved people reflects this sense of the forgotten. Shedding light and putting to the forefront a seemingly innocuous item that in reality symbolises the horrific exchange of an item for people bears the name that when translated from French means 'rubbish'. It is stark, simplistic, and profound. As one of the first exhibits in '3 & 4 Will. IV c.73' it sets a precedent for the specificity of all the other works throughout the rest of the gallery. Like his essay and accompanying notes, Rowland's pieces are meticulous and specific, including copies of the mortgages for the mahogany in 12 Carlton House Terrace, and a framed copy of the Probation Order Under 18 U.S.C. § 3607 form, highlighting the staggering 3,789,800 people on probation in the United States in 2016.

In all, Cameron Rowland's exhibition on the surface is a dense and inaccessible venture, an example of how vague modern art can be. However, unlike anything else I have ever personally encountered in a gallery, it's use of space and emptiness only adds to the prominence and effects of the artwork displayed. The emptiness, the quiet, the space, is art itself, showing the huge gaps in the public's understanding of the long-lasting effects of slavery within institutions and countries today. In this exhibition at the ICA, Rowland tries to rectify this.