

3 jam jars

Les Coleman: 'February'

John Bevis

"The trouble with showing my work is that people always want to play around with it."

There's something irredeemably tempting in the works that make up *February* by Les Coleman, showing at Coracle Press, constructions and assemblages whose raw components work by being manipulated: beakers, glass jars, blackboard chalks or, most puckish of all, ping-pong balls.

Titles often hold the key to these works' meaning or purpose, expressed through an irrefutable semantic logic. A jar full of broken glass, for example, may carry little weight empirically, but the caption delivers the resolution: *3 jam jars*. Two broken, one intact. Obvious? Perhaps, until we piece together a background in which Coleman took to smashing jam jars with a hammer, for no purpose, and was surprised by the happy accident of the fragments of two jars filling the third as if to precise weights-and-measures guidelines.

Nearby, we surmise a more scientific purpose in a work consisting of two glass beakers each containing a ping-pong ball. One beaker is full to the brim with water, on whose meniscus the ball floats, while the other, we discern, is not empty but full of air, the gravity of the ball anchoring it to the floor of the glass. *Air and water* (p.2) are at once the least, and most, important elements of the work.

Text moves centre-stage in a number of pieces: one photograph, for example, shows a fern leaf whose two sides have been labelled selectively *Back / front* with stencil spray-paint, in what might be a comment on the banality that any human understanding of the physical world rests on the need to name. In a similar vein, *Next Week* is no more than a list of the names of the seven days.



Air and water, February; Coracle Press, London, February 1978.



But what to make of a photographic work showing a pale, waxy *Hand* that might be human or mannequin, stretched out as if begging for money or checking for rain? It could be, alternatively, the tongue-in-cheek response to a request to ‘lend a hand’. If the obvious reference is unwritten—“*Ceci n’est pas une main*”—the image remains ghostly and unsettling.

We are used to the adage that conceptualism is all about the ideas, and the materials that express them mere carriers. But the stuff of Coleman’s work, much of it not so much ‘found’ as bought, is everyday household items that could be had from any local branch of Woolworths. These utilitarian balls, glasses and chinks may be anti-glamour, but they are hardly pro-egalitarian; their applications are universal, and they seem to stand for themselves alone as archetypes, stage-props where a beaker is “a beaker, any beaker”, as Tommy Cooper would have it.

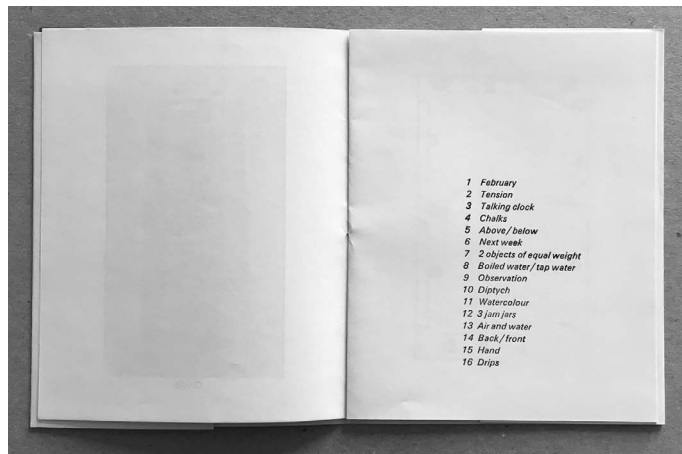
Some of these themes are wrapped up in the portmanteau title, *February*. It embraces the dates of the show, from the first to the last day of the month; that in turn begets the image of the relevant tear-



off leaf from a cheap month-to-view calendar, which hangs on the gallery wall and fronts the catalogue cover, and is itself item number one in the catalogue's list of works.

Watercolour is a shelf of six jars—jam jars, naturally—filled with water dyed in various colours, almost but not quite a rainbow spectrum. Coleman must have known that inevitably this would turn thoughts to Michael Craig-Martin's own glass-on-a shelf offering, *An Oak Tree*. And if we apply Craig-Martin's polemic, that a glass of water is a tree, then surely Coleman's technicolour galley is a watercolour painting, if not all watercolour painting? But at the same time Coleman offers us the agnostic formula of the work's own making: water + colour = watercolour. Cleverly, *Watercolour* can satisfy Craig-Martin's congregation as much as those sceptical of truth in art grounded in shamanism.

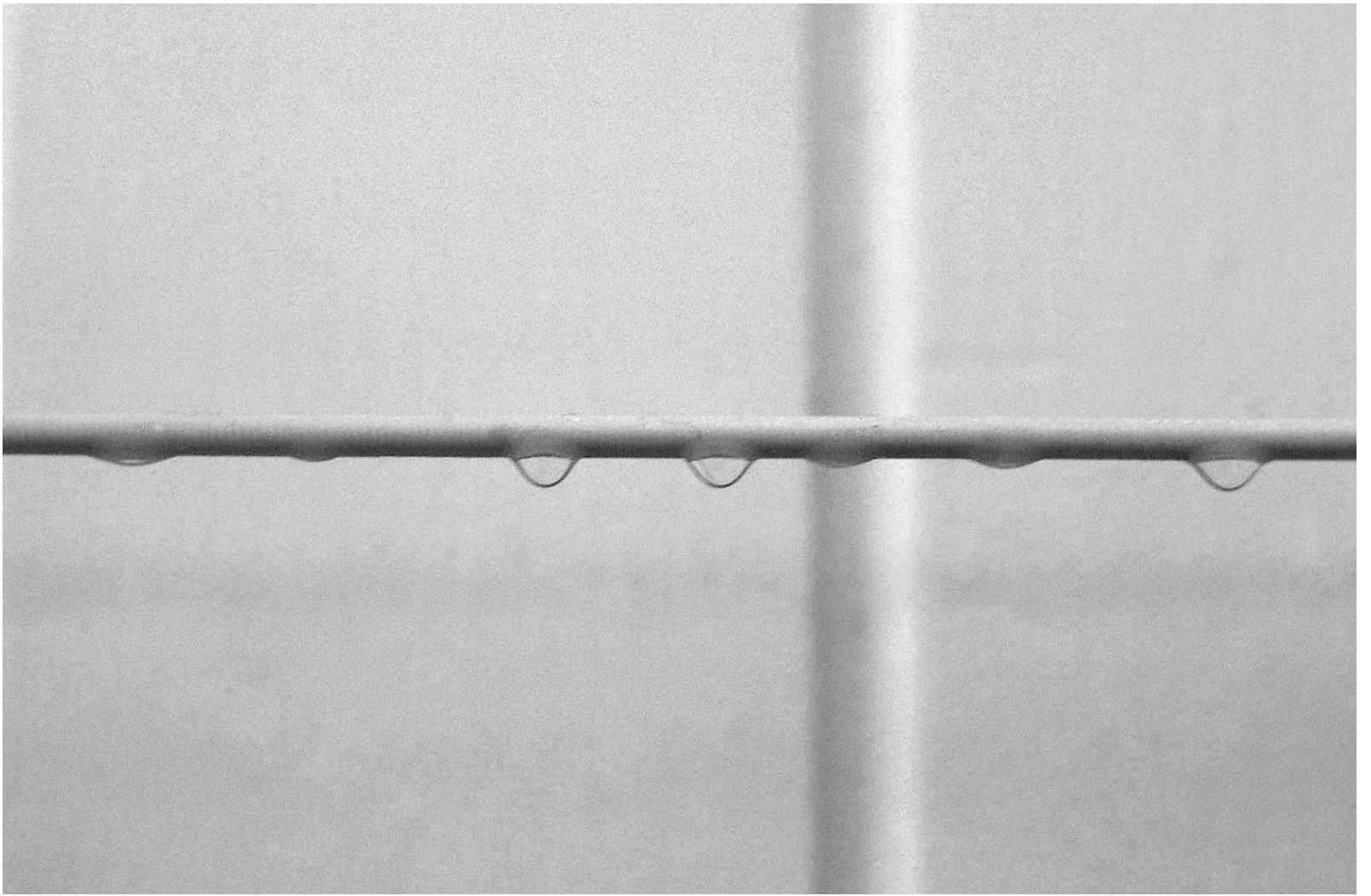
But the piece attracting most attention is a length of sprung curtain wire, attached to the wall at either end with hooks and eyelets. *Drips* (p.4) is, paradoxically, the work in this show least likely to be castigated as a one-liner. For what appear to be droplets

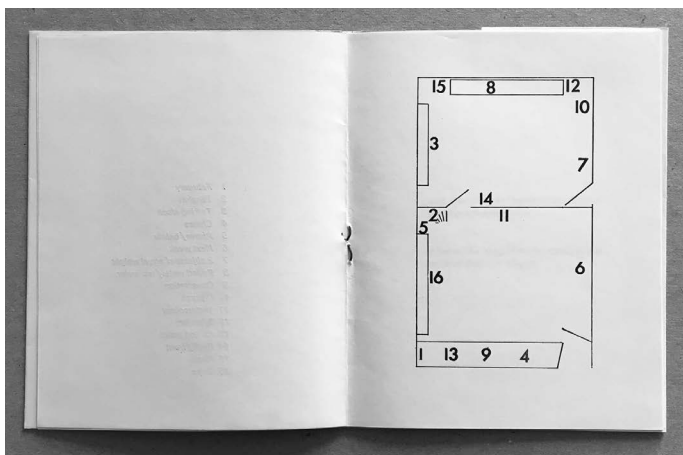


of water, rain or condensation perhaps, about to coalesce and fall from the wire, are on closer inspection glycerine drips. A thoroughly persuasive *trompe l'oeil*, the work successfully mixes Coleman's penchant for familiar hardware with the mystery of *Hand* to make something inexplicably contemplative, almost mesmeric. It celebrates a moment so slight and delicate, so easily missed or taken for granted, as to shake us from complacency to wonder.

The director of Coracle Press, Simon Cutts, is quoted as writing "...it is a fact that art finally does not reside on the mantelpiece or on the wall, but in the articulation of all the choices... towards a whole". That the disparate parts of this show respond as an identity is due in no small part to the collaboration between artist and space. Shoehorned into a Georgian terrace, the Coracle Press gallery fills the split-level front and back rooms of a converted hat shop, whose dolls' house like proportions could have been made to measure for Coleman's non-toys. A gallon or two of white emulsion defines not

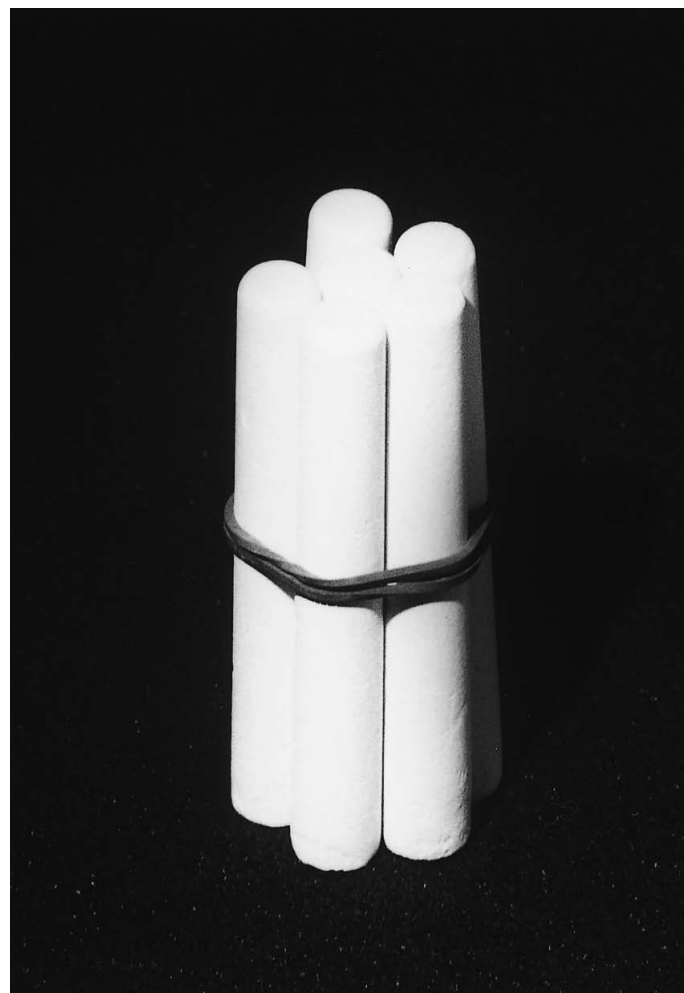
Above / p.5: 'February', twelve-page exhibition catalogue, letterpress.





only walls clad in wooden tongue-and-groove, but the numerous nooks and crannies of alcoves, ledges and recesses, while tiny interior peephole windows hint at spaces beyond. This is more than backdrop; works that might have suffered the indignity of plinth-display in Cork Street are here rewarded with a quasi-domestic context closer to the spirit of Jim Ede's *Kettle's Yard*.

An adapted and illustrated version of 'Review: Les Coleman 'February', Coracle Press, 1-28 February 1978' written for *Art Monthly*, 'The Missing Issue', published online in April 2017: "Readers who have accessed *AM*'s back catalogue online may have noticed that something is missing from the year 1978... only nine issues were published that year instead of ten. The missing magazine is for the month of April, which would have been issue 16. Instead, the number was carried over seamlessly to the May issue... to celebrate forty years of continuous publication, *AM* invited readers to help create a virtual issue for April 1978 to complete the set."—artmonthly.co.uk/Art-Monthly-Missing-Issue.pdf



Chalks