



## Traces Naomi Bishops & Richard Raber

Moving pictures can still do what they were invented to do a hundred years ago. Move.

Phil Winter, in Wim Wender's *Lisbon Story*

For many people, Super 8 film has become synonymous with what they understand to be 'memory'. Saturated colours seep into one another, the film's graininess quivering and accumulating like dust on every frame. Movement shifts and changes speed, and details of light, colour and texture, like memory itself, are fleeting and ill defined. It is these distinct qualities that imbue Super 8 with its timeless charm, and it is this charm that makes Super 8 the perfect apparatus for signifying memory. At a slender 8mm in width, this tiny memory strip stutters through a camera burning everyday life onto the emulsion at 24 frames per second. Through projections in living rooms and bedrooms all over the world, these abundant quotidian moments are harvested, processed and preserved only then to be stored away in dark, enclosed places – pantries, garages, wardrobes – for eventual retrieval and remembering in a distant future.

Naomi Bishops and Richard Raber's *Traces* signifies an arrival at one such 'distant future'.

Originally commissioned by ACMI in 2001, *Traces* began as a nationwide call by Bishops and Raber for Super 8 home movie footage. Once compiled, this rich archive of amateur observations was then carefully re-edited to provide remarkable and poignant insights into the original footage, its memorial inhabitants and, of course, into other lost and forgotten eras. With a large portion of the material originating from the 1950s and 1960s it is almost as though the artists stumbled upon a fossilised burial ground of memories, and with their tiny brushes dusted off these random recollections and recreated them in a new, considered and poetic form.

On encountering Bishops and Raber's *Traces*, the viewer is confronted by a silent, vertical wall of flickering suggestions of nostalgia and memory. Three plasma screens, each playing separate looped sequences – endless cycles of slow moments and gestures remembered and replayed – are stacked upon one another, quietly dappling the darkened space with private Super 8 histories. Nearby, off to one side and flickering in peripheral consciousness in a spatial version of that tip-of-the-tongue experience we all know so well, another screen floats high above the grounded concerns of everyday life. The entire configuration lingers lightly



Stills from **Traces** 2002

Super 8 and 8mm film displayed as 3-channel DVD on plasma  
screens and 2-channel DVD projection; silent

Courtesy: the artists and contributors of the Super 8 footage

but portentously like an enormous thought bubble filled with the most exquisite little epiphanies.

Silently, because it is without an explicit narrative, *Traces* presents its viewers with a sophisticated wash of colour and form. Bishops and Raber have choreographed distinct and evocative vignettes using movement, light and pace. Divested of any original sound, these vignettes appear and dissolve like nameless portraits from an unknown past or the tail end of an echo. The viewers know something significant has occurred, but like memory itself, they are left only with the traces and the urge to reconstruct.

Traditionally home movies have been pre-occupied with recording life's 'happier' moments: a child's first steps, weddings, holidays, parties and reunions. The intention is to avoid remembering life's darker moments; loss, grief, regret and longing. And yet these accidental moments lurk, like covert agents, on the edges of a frame, appearing in a smile or the simplest of gestures, with little respect for the original documenter's intent. What makes *Traces* so compelling is its ability to reveal the moments that sabotage the lingering smiles of the Super 8 personae.



In their approach to the large and diverse volume of donated material, Bishops and Raber have worked like detectives, combing through hours of footage looking for tiny clues: silent exchanges, glances, anything which might at first seem unremarkable, but upon closer inspection reveals the secret histories of an individual, situation, time or place. It is through *Traces* that viewers sense the whispers, glances, thoughts and voices that have been dormant for decades and are betrayed by these stolen moments of struggle, discontent, isolation, longing. As the everyday dramas of *Traces* unroll, watchers can experience a stranger's memory, while at the same time igniting their own.

Accidental and moving, this work feels like memory – tiny fissures that when prised open reveal synapses of beauty, fragility, sadness, banality and disquiet. Its structure is driven by the movement of almost-familiar images, and its meaning gleaned from their collision. Or more simply, as Douglas Sirk suggests 'motion is emotion'.

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