

Penny McCann: Within the Unsaid

A Response to Land Lines (of time and place) in no particular order
by Cecilia Araneda

It's been more than once that I've stood next to Penny McCann as she's been working on a film. We've often shot films standing right beside each other, at the exact same moment and in the exact same place, at times even sharing equipment; we've hand-processed our films together in the same darkrooms on several occasions; and have together engaged in other bits of filmmaking mechanisms that happen in in-between moments. This has been happening for over a decade now, and yet only now have I realized that we've never really talked to each other about the films we were making in those moments, even as we were making them together. In this way, it is within not the said, but rather the unsaid, where insight into McCann's work resides.

McCann is - as I am - part of the Film Farm family tree, and this is perhaps a good starting point to examine how this unsaid begins. The Film Farm is a filmmaking retreat led by Toronto experimental filmmaker and York University film professor Philip Hoffman. While the focus is analogue practices such as processing and printing film by hand, Hoffman makes one request of the participants: that you come without a preconceived idea of what you will make. This process - or more precisely *the process* - is in direct opposition to the conceptual art methodologies that have dominated modern art for decades. There, the ideas driving the work are often more important than the work itself. With the process, however, it is only through the making of the work that meaning can be found.

The process can also seem to be in direct opposition to the very ideas underpinning experimental analogue filmmaking, which uses specific mechanical technical processes to drive output. However, pathways that deviate from impetus - the unplanned; the supposed accidents and mistakes - all become part of the working methodology, feeding into an emerging understanding of meaning within art production. That the process permits less than a total mastery of technological tools generally the domain of technical experts in filmmaking, also permits an expansion of the often-narrow experimental

filmmaking lexicon. McCann, herself, has referenced an early attraction to imperfect technology workflows and output in an interview with Peter Sandmark in 2017, in *Influx: Journal of Media Art*, in speaking about a camera she used for an early analogue film, *Marshlands*: “[It] didn’t work correctly and the gate kept stuttering, so I just referred to it as my dream camera... You can’t duplicate that kind of effect - it was beautiful, very beautiful. I’m always looking for things that evoke this conscious space in my head.”

Not everybody who attends the Film Farm finds the process comfortable; but for those who do, it often permanently alters their working methodology in a radical manner. Those who do enter the process often use the rich landscape that surrounds the literal farm that is the site of the retreat as a space to explore movement and journeys - physical, imagined or remembered. The result can be deeply personal and visually poetic films that take us on journeys through nooks and crannies within our minds. Scholar and past Film Farm instructor Karyn Sandlos in her remarks at the TIFF Film Farm retrospective in 2019, described the process as “getting a bit closer to what’s hard,” enabling us to consider “how we can be with our losses for a little while.”

It is here where McCann’s body of work situates itself: before the Film Farm, and after. *Land Lines* is then a body of work that is the culmination of an art flow McCann first began over a decade ago, in 2008, when she first attended the Film Farm, even though she had commenced working in analogue filmmaking techniques many years before. Using the process as a pathway, McCann describes her work as “moving through a landscape forever disappearing from view, evoking the continual loss of the present.” McCann’s work frequently includes mediators of movement: a train, a camper bus, a car, a plane, and frequently territorial structures. At other times, forces of nature become the activators of movement. Movement, for McCann, is an analogue of time and what is in the process of disappearing. Conversely, the expectation of movement within its absence becomes a threshold, an understanding of what has disappeared.

It is more than nostalgia that McCann conveys, but also an examination of how our very sense of identity itself can only come through the reflection of moments past and not through their experience in the direct present. The image we see on screen is always immediately familiar - at eye level, echoing our own sight as we work our way through commonplace landscapes. And yet, McCann intervenes with our sense of the familiar with her use of hand-crafted analogue filmmaking approaches, including hand processing and hand colouring, desaturating it, purposefully setting it back into a kind of suspension that we immediately associate with the dream state of processing memories.

Most notably to me within McCann's single channel work is the complete absence of narration. This invariably becomes another manifestation of the unsaid. This aesthetic extrapolates itself naturally with *Land Lines*, which is crafted as a symphony of images in motion, the movement within each responding harmonically to that of the others. McCann offers the evocation of meaning, but stops short of conducting the journey; instead, she relies on carefully constructed imagery to trigger memory and associations in the audience, prompting each to create their own personal film journey, each inevitably different from the other.

In its totality, *Land Lines* is a grouping of work that evokes a line in the sand for McCann as an artist, as the endpoint of a multi-year process examination. This sense is heightened by the new pandemic era that surrounds us, which posits new questions about art production and overlays new meaning onto art as society is necessarily engaged in rapid new paradigm building. In this context, *Land Lines* is already a past before us, a time we can never return to.