

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

20

COMMENTARIES

Corin Sworn

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Often using objects as starting points to reflect on the act of storytelling, Corin Sworn's work offers a meditation on memory, the past, and perception. Despite much of her work being grounded in cultural and literary references, it has a certain evasiveness as it gently toys with the viewer's interpretation.

The premise of Sworn's film *The Foxes* (2013) is fairly straightforward: she visits the village of Huasicancha in Peru with her father, Gavin Smith, where his first anthropological study about the community's guerilla-like land retrieval tactics had taken place in 1973. Sworn takes as source material a rediscovered collection of her father's slides from his fieldwork.

Determining how *The Foxes* is supposed to be read by the viewer is less evident than establishing what it is not about (peasant resistance, a father-daughter relationship, revisiting a now-emotionally distant place). The film is composed of shots of the slides, Sworn's father's comments about the images and footage from the trip. The viewer follows Smith on-camera and Sworn off-camera as they try to piece together the information inside the images. Only through Smith's recollection of his past and the community members' comments do the slides begin to generate meaning for the viewer.

At one point in the film, it can be understood that Smith has misremembered something. Later, a slide comes on screen and he can be heard saying "I have no idea what that is." These instances accentuate the viewer's budding doubts as to the infallibility of the double-voiced narration. The film thus plays with ideas such as the unreliability of memory and the questionable trustworthiness of an artwork—and by extension, the artist.

The project—with an accumulation of slides at its centre—also speaks of photographs, their indexical quality and their story-telling capacity. But photography is not a reliable tool for communicating absolute truth. Here, the slides from 1973 teeter between being anthropological, documentary, or diaristic; they became part of a family's history and now they belong to the art world.

How can we understand these objects? The film has been edited since its first presentation as part of Scotland + Venice in 2013. Seeing it in The Common Guild is akin to misremembering it, as memories of it are hazed by new images. Like in Venice, elements from the narrative seem reflected in the gallery. Echoing the shots of tiled floors in Peru, the ceramic tiles tightly patterned together on a low plinth in Venice are here laid directly on the Victorian townhouse's floorboards in a much more relaxed manner, the pattern incomplete and flowing, sunlight moving on its surface. Viewing the tiles is like viewing the film: the whole installation feels unfixd and unselfconsciously so. Smith's slides also reappear as images Sworn has tried to recreate, as if trying to understand her father's experience. Sworn positions her own pictures on top of his in a red, green, and blue-layered arrangement. The colours reference the RGB colour model used in video or digital photography; but really the layered photographs speak of the passage of time and the difficulty of unpicking images.

Melanie Letore participated in the Scotland + Venice 2013 Professional Development scheme as a student at the Glasgow School of Art, one of five academic institutional partners.