

## Past // Images :: Future // Remains

### An Interview with Louise Bourque

Todd Fraser and Clint Enns

This interview is a collaboration between Louise Bourque, Todd Fraser, and Clint Enns. The initial set of questions, contributed by Fraser and Enns, were posed to Bourque over Skype and have been edited into their current conversational form by Enns and Bourque.

**TFCE:** Tell us about where your film education started and when you began using alternative approaches to moving-image production.

**LB:** In the 80s, while studying journalism at Université de Moncton, I took a course on silent cinema that introduced me to avant-garde and European arthouse cinema. The course was taught by Père Maurice Chamard, a passionate Catholic priest with the soul of a poet.

Before I went to Concordia University in 1987, I had never even used a 35mm still camera. In my second year, while studying under the guidance of Marielle Nitoslawka, I made *Jolicoeur Touriste* (1989). It was at that time I began to use experimental techniques and to develop technical skills. Not only did Nitoslawka introduce me to a wide range of experimental films and video art, she encouraged a hands-on approach to learning and helped me to develop my own voice. By my third year, I had started to teach the optical printing workshops.

In 1990, I moved to the United States to study at the Art Institute of Chicago. My thesis film was *Just Words* (1991), which I had started while studying at Concordia; however, most of the time was spent working on *The People in the House* (1994), which used fairly traditional production methods and involved a large crew that included many experimental filmmakers, like Deborah Stratman (art direction), Allen Ross (cinematography), and Zack

Stiglicz (narrator reading from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

**TFCE:** *The People in the House* has a short companion film, a behind-the-scenes look at the shooting of the film. Is this where some of your source material was taken from for *Remains* (2011)?

**LB:** I have only recently released this companion piece. It is a short, 16mm film shot behind the scenes on the last day of our shoot. Since we didn't have much film left in the camera, we simply shot off the roll. I labelled the roll "People Shoot 'Home Movies,'" which eventually became the title of the film. I recently returned to this roll searching for images of Allen Ross, who was murdered after this film was made. Allen was an amazing cinematographer.

*Remains* was made using outtakes from *The People in the House*, not this footage.

**TFCE:** It seems inconceivable that you weren't introduced to moving-image cameras earlier, given the presence of home movies in your work. One gets the impression that your father was a shutterbug. Can you talk about your use of home movies?

**LB:** My father's home-moviemaking period was from 1955 until 1966 (I was born in 1963). My dad turned to photography later in life. He was also an accomplished painter with his own distinctive style and had a unique way of seeing the world. For example, my dad didn't believe children should learn to read and write before kindergarten, as he saw this as a time to develop their senses and to engage with nature. He encouraged us to see the world through our own eyes. Though he was a psychiatrist, he was always artistically inclined and it made sense that he made art later in his life.

I did not just inherit home movies, I inherited *beautiful* home movies. My father shot on regular 8mm Kodachrome film. In spite of my dad being self-taught, most of the images were in focus, and well exposed (despite the camera not having an internal light metre). His footage included closeups, sophisticated camera movement, and even impressive establishing shots. In the early 90s, I had a lot of this footage transferred to 16mm.

My first formal use of this archive was in *Just Words*. I had seen Patricia MacGeachy perform Beckett's *Not I* (1972) on stage, and was inspired to combine images from the play with images of my mother (who had recently passed away). The play features a disembodied Mouth delivering the internal monologue of a third-person self: She, a self as other. Before her death, my mother lost her sight and then fell silent.

**TFCE:** What was the influence of Anthony Page's *Not I* (1977) on *Just Words*? How does your work differ from the play?

**LB:** When I made *Just Words*, I was unaware of this film. I am now aware of it, but I have never seen it and have intentionally avoided it. I thought that filming the Mouth in closeup was transgressive given Beckett's stage direction. We also applied makeup to the teeth of the Mouth, making them look decayed; as if they were coming from the grave. By incorporating images of my mother, I transformed Beckett's text into something more personal. The She, the I. Beckett was meticulous by nature and given that he passed away while we were filming *Just Words*, I am unsure if he would be turning in his grave or granting his permission.

After working with images of the Mouth and images of my mother, I wanted to add an extra dimension to the work by including another voice. Beckett's text makes use of the ellipsis with sentences interrupted and returned to later, lending itself to the use of two voices. The sync-sound text was delivered with a quick tempo (although slowed down once my mother turns away from the camera) and the voiceover text was delivered slowly, making it sombre.

**TFCE:** Your work is personal yet deals with themes that are universal. Can you talk about how you navigate this line?

**LB:** In order to make my work universal, I make a point of avoiding anecdotal details specific to my personal circumstances. Although my home movies are personal, I treat them as "images" when selecting them. For example, while the house in *Imprint* (1997) is my family home, it is treated as a "house," which takes on further meaning given the traditional "patriarchal family" standing in front of it. In general, I select images for their visceral a/effect. When working within more traditional production methods my work disregards plot and character development in favour of oneiric tableaux acted out by archetypal figures. For instance, *The People in the House* uses family members as archetypes.

Images and sound can have an emotional impact without the audience necessarily being able to identify their exact source. Emotional complexity is conveyed through the juxtaposition of contrasting elements.

**TFCE:** Can you discuss the chemical treatments in *Imprint*? It seems like there are different kinds of tinting, toning, transfers, bleaching, emulsion lifting, hole punching—what was the genesis of this project and your exploration of the different techniques? The film seems to exist in the space between memory, nightmare, and nostalgia. What are the connections between these processes and these emotions?

**LB:** The project started out as an exploration of different forms of celluloid

manipulation. I had received an Exploration Grant from the Canada Council for the Arts to experiment with different techniques, and *Imprint* came out of these experiments. The source footage was a short sequence of home movies copied multiple times. The film is about transformation, not necessarily about disintegration or distress. Imprints that form memories and imprints marking the surface of the film. Literally, moving beyond the emulsion as a way of moving past, or behind, the surface of the image.

Through my manipulations, I make the home-movie images my own, reclaiming them. I see the images as beautiful, although I am destroying them. For instance, at one point I rip the image apart before re-assembling it. At another, I add tissue paper to the surface of the image. I am using three types of processes: additive, subtractive, and chemical. Some are organic, others are photochemical. I tried to think about ideas these material processes can convey. For example, I intentionally scratched out the windows of the house as a way to look inside. This had a secondary effect that was unexpected: it made the house look like it was on fire. I was not just exploring the technical aspects, but their meaning and evocative power when applied to select images; that is, how the form and graphical elements created the content.

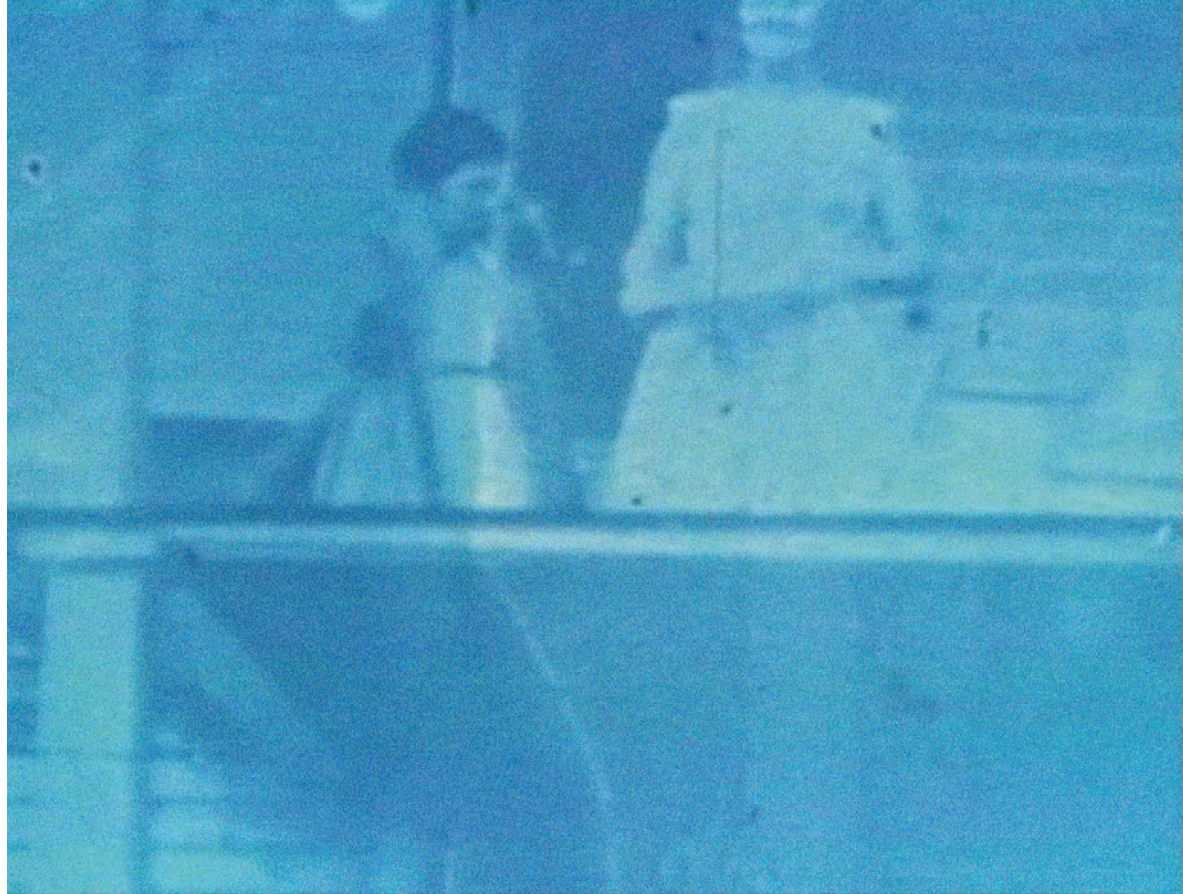
On a side note, while I was working on *Imprint*, I had the chance to visit Craig Baldwin in San Francisco. I asked him if he had any found footage of houses in distress in his collection—as source material for *Imprint*. I didn't end up using Craig's footage because the content of the images already conveyed distress and hence manipulating them would be redundant. However, these images became the foundation for *Going Back Home* (2000). Thanks, Craig.

**TFCE:** *Fissures* (1999), by comparison, is quite technically focused—perhaps because it was done with limited resources: a flashlight contact-printing system and short lengths of film. What is the original footage? How much of your films are shaped/determined by your access to materials, tools, and resources?

**LB:** For *Imprint*, no lab would handle my original since it was on the verge of falling apart. I was teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts [SMFA] in Boston, which had its own 16mm contact printer. I did the contact printing with Joachim Knill, who introduced me to toning and other photochemical processes. In an effort to explore various toning techniques, I made black and white prints of some of my home-movie collection (which became the source material for *Fissures*) and of the footage Craig gave me for *Going Back Home*.

I was teaching at SMFA and had access to equipment, facilities, and other resources. It wasn't about limited resources, but an economy of means. Throughout my practice, I have taken advantage of the resources available to









me and have not hesitated to seek out equipment when required to capture a certain vision.

**TFCE:** To what degree are *Remains* and *Self Portrait Post Mortem* (2002) determined by chance operations?

**LB:** There are chance operations throughout my work, but it is about finding the balance between control and “disorder.” While I take meticulous notes in order to reproduce specific results, I am always seeking beautiful accidents. You get better results when you only leave one or two elements to chance while the other variables involved are restrained. You set up conditions for the element of chance to yield interesting results. It is a process of searching with some idea of what you are looking for.

Once you choose to include an image in your work, it is no longer random; it is a deliberate decision. However, it is also important to trust in process, to follow your intuition, and to be attentive to what is happening. While making work, I try to put my ego aside and to be totally in the moment.

My two buried films, *Remains* and *Self Portrait Post Mortem*, along with *Jours en fleurs* (2003), are collaborations with nature.

**TFCE:** Why was it important to have these burials occur at your childhood home in Edmundston?

**LB:** I buried outtakes from *Jolicoeur Touriste*, *Just Words*, and *The People in the House*—my first three films. I had heard Michele Fleming talk about burying films and wanted to try it. Logistically speaking, it was the only yard I had access to. Beyond that, the yard adjoining ours was previously a cemetery, so I felt that this was conceptually playful. Moreover, all of these films dealt with family, so I thought that burying them in my ancestral home was also compelling.

Since I was relocating to the United States, I felt the need to leave something behind. To let something take root. Also, I was attached to the outtakes and didn’t want to simply discard them. They became my buried treasure. Five years later, I had to dig up my entire yard since the rock I used as a marker had been unknowingly moved by my father. Although they didn’t help with the digging, my whole family was involved in helping me to find these images. To my surprise, in the first roll I found, there was an image of me that I didn’t know existed. This was the source material for *Self Portrait Post Mortem*.

**TFCE:** Do you feel a strong connection or an affinity to the arts community in Atlantic Canada? Have you had many encounters with other arts and filmmaking groups in the Maritimes? For instance, have you worked with

Struts Gallery & Faucet Media Arts Centre, Festival international du cinéma francophone en Acadie [FICFA], the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative, or Galerie Sans Nom?

**LB:** When I was in high school, I took a poetry workshop with Acadian poet Gérald Leblanc. I remember the title of one of the poems I wrote, “Le fumeur de haschich” [“The Hash Smoker”]. He invited me to join the Association des écrivains acadiens [the Association of Acadian Writers]. It was there that I first met other poets, including Herménégilde Chiasson, Rose Després, Raymond LeBlanc, and Guy Arsenault. More than twenty-five years later I collaborated with Herménégilde on a work for a group exhibition of contemporary art at the Acadian Worldwide Congress, a project initiated by Galerie Colline (a contemporary art gallery in Edmundston).

After high school I moved to Montreal to attend Cégep du Vieux Montréal. Later, I moved to Moncton and quickly became involved in the visual art scene. At the time, Moncton was a hotbed for poetry and contemporary art. I wrote for *Le Front* [Université de Moncton’s student newspaper], and I worked for Radio Canada Atlantique and Galerie Sans Nom. It was also in Moncton that I met Jean-Pierre Morin, who worked with me on *Jolicoeur Touriste*. He was the lead singer of Syntax Error, a seminal Moncton punk band that would project super 8 during their shows. He also introduced me to experimental film. Jean-Pierre and I met artist and poet Daniel Dugas and we later collaborated with him on a video poem based on writing by Gérald Leblanc.

My first retrospective was in Halifax at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in 2002, organized by Gerda Cammaer. After returning to Edmundston in 2012, I had a major retrospective organized by Huguette Desjardins (my visual arts teacher in high school) through the Association culturelle du Haut-Saint-Jean. My work was shown over the course of five days at various locations throughout Vallée du Haut-Saint-Jean. It included installations at libraries and churches, an artist talk, in addition to a screening at Cinéma V where the films were shown in 35mm. During the event, *Just Words* was shown at a literary club in Saint-Léonard where I was pleasantly surprised that people recognized my family from the home movies (my family briefly lived there). One of the women shared that my father was the doctor who delivered her.

In the summer of 2012, I took part in Ok.Quoi?! Contemporary Arts Festival put on by Struts Gallery, where I showed *Going Back Home Again* (2005), a 16mm installation version of *Going Back Home* at the Sackville Music Hall. The installation was the film shown looped and projected onto a postcard-size screen. Later that year, I had a retrospective at FICFA in Moncton. Amanda



Dawn Christie, who was the director at Galerie Sans Nom, organized a retrospective of my work after being approached by Images Festival in Toronto. Amanda went out of her way to transport a portable 35mm projector from the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative in Halifax. I was extremely grateful for this, as it is always my preference to show my work on film whenever possible.

**TFCE:** How do you decide the titles of your works?

**LB:** Sometimes I have a title before the film is made. Other times, it depends on the processes involved. For instance, for *Bye Bye Now* (2021) I knew the concept and title before I started the film. For *Auto Portrait / Self Portrait Post Partum* (2013), the title came early on. Once I knew I was going to film myself and knew I was going to explore the concept of separation, I chose a title that referenced *Self Portrait Post Mortem*, the only other work in which I appear.

For *Jours en fleurs*, I knew I wanted to explore the concept of fertility. At the time, I felt my biological clock ticking. The title is related to the Acadian expression equivalent to “visit from Aunt Flo,” namely “être dans ses fleurs [to be in your flowers].” The Acadian expression is poetic; however, it avoids explicitly mentioning blood. This subject matter is still taboo. The source footage was of springtime blooms. These images were incubated in my blood for nine months.

**TFCE:** Who does your sound design?

**LB:** I do my own sound design, but often collaborate with others. The sound for *Jolicoeur Touriste* was done in collaboration with filmmaker Jean-Pierre Morin, who did the narration (he read a text from Frances Frost’s children’s book from 1953, *Rocket Away!*). He suggested a composition by XTC as the underlying soundtrack, which we slowed down to fit the duration of the film.

I worked with Mark Bain on a few films; most notably I used excerpts from Mark’s composition “StartEndTime” in *L’éclat du mal / The Bleeding Heart of It* (2005). Mark’s piece uses sound of the ground vibrations produced by the collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001. The first line of the voiceover says, “there’s a war going on.”

I often re-purpose and manipulate sound. For instance, in *L’éclat du mal / The Bleeding Heart of It* I use the sound of a flag blowing in the wind, which, in combination with the sounds of birds, sonically resembles the flapping of wings. In building the sound design, sometimes there are only one or two tracks. For instance, *Fissures* and *Imprint* only use one track. In *Fissures*, I manipulated the sound of a machine sourced from the BBC sound effects library. In *Imprint*, I used Enrico Caruso’s “A Dream” played on a portable, hand-cranked gramophone. While editing the film, I was listening to the

record and was so absorbed that when the record came to an end, it just kept skipping. I knew I had to use this sound.

In contrast, *Jours en fleurs* has sixteen tracks of sound. For that film, I wanted to assign a sound to each of the visual micro-events as they occur in the film. For instance, when a sprocket hole is shown on screen, there is an accompanying sound. When other visual elements occur, they have their own sounds.

For the underlying soundtrack of *Auto Portrait / Self Portrait Post Partum*, I worked with Joshua Bonnetta to record, once again, a gramophone. He used a contact mic to record the gramophone, which I was manipulating. The record playing was Doris Day's "Would I Love You." An un-manipulated, instrumental version is played at the end of the film over the credits. The film also incorporates excerpts from other sentimental pop songs in an attempt to deconstruct conventional representations of love.

**TFCE:** Can you talk about your collaborations with Joe Gibbons and Tony Conrad? Namely, *The Producer* (2005), *Rooftop Song* (2005), and *Down and Out in Buffalo* (2005). *The Producer* was shown at the 2006 Whitney Biennial. Are the other films considered finished? Have they been shown?

**LB:** Joe and Tony were really close friends and collaborators. In 2005, Joe and I spent some time in Buffalo at the Lenox Hotel, where we shot several films including *The Producer*, *Rooftop Song*, and *Down and Out in Buffalo*. *Down and Out in Buffalo* has been shown in Boston. *Rooftop Song* has never been presented. The soundtrack is the same one that I used for *Remains*; my vocalizations with Joe's effects. *Rooftop Song* was shot by Joe. I act in it and Tony is in the background performing as a lurker. *Down and Out in Buffalo* was also shot by Joe, and features Tony and me at an empty bar. The work explores the aesthetics of boredom and unspecified malaise. As an aside, Tony, Joe, and I had gone to record sound under Niagara Falls, which was a great experience. This sound was supposed to be for *a little prayer (H-E-L-P)* (2011); however, it was lost.

Joe and I helped each other on many works over the years, whether it was on their concepts, grant proposals, or more technical aspects like camera, editing, and sound. For instance, Joe was the co-editor of *Auto Portrait / Self Portrait Post Partum* and I helped with his film *Confessions of a Sociopath* (2001). Also, we both worked with editor Dan Van Roekel who co-edited *Jours en fleurs* and *Confessions*.

**TFCE:** Your co-editor, Guillaume Vallée, mentioned a "film puzzle" while discussing *Bye Bye Now*. What is it? Is *Bye Bye Now* considered a finished film?

**LB:** The "film puzzle" consists of my rejects, material that was too dark to use

in *Fissures*. When I did a Banff Centre residency in 2014, I used toner to reveal the latent images and, at the time, the film was so brittle it broke into tiny little pieces. I decided to re-build the film using tape. It took me about six months to complete. Once it was re-assembled I shot the film at different speeds off a Steenbeck, similar to the way I shot *Self Portrait Post Mortem* and *Jours en fleurs*. I used some of this footage for the prologue to *Bye Bye Now*.

*Bye Bye Now* is a nearly finished work, and was presented at Montréal International Festival of Films on Art [FIFA] in 2019. At this point, I am not totally satisfied with it and think that the sound design needs some work. This became especially apparent after seeing/hearing it at FIFA.

**TFCE:** Are you currently working on any new artworks?

**LB:** I have a lot of material that I have generated over the years, mainly for specific projects that have been put on hold for one reason or another. This material will become the basis of future projects. I also have a longer piece that I have been working on since 2004, tentatively titled *A Secret Place to Hide (entre chien et loup or the incredible true life story of Jeanette l'invisible)*. The work blends autobiographical elements with fiction and is about the inner life of a woman who is coming to terms with childhood trauma. The film proceeds with the associative logic of memories and dreams, and uses a spiral-like narrative structure. In other words, it doesn't use a traditional narrative structure and incorporates many experimental techniques.

When my father was dying, I collected his gauze bandages. I wanted to hold on to something that was so close, so intimately connected to him. I want to use the texture of the gauze as layers, and the blood that was on the bandages to transform images. I am making the film for my dad and as an homage to his legacy.