

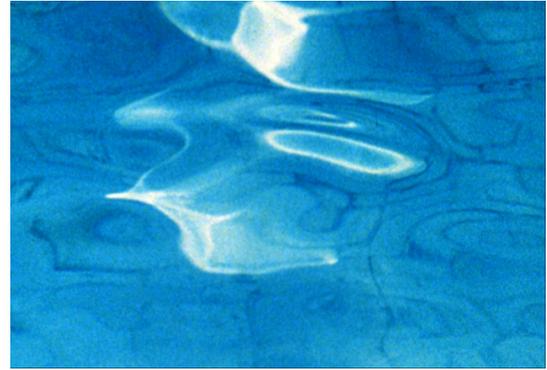
*Ellie Epp*

Ellie Epp's films contain a wonderful economy of means, but a brilliant energy of ideas. Each film contains only a handful of shots: *Trapline*, at the longest, has twelve; *current* only has two. And the body of film work, with the four only clocking in at a combined 39 minutes (the length of a perfect LP), again attests to a concentration of ideas, a honing of vision that started with her first film, back in 1976.

*Trapline's* twelve shots were all filmed in an indoor swimming pool in London. Inspired, in part, by the films she saw at the London Film Congress of 1972, the film looks obliquely at some of the concerns of the structural/material films of that period but reinvests them with a personal, philosophical vision. There is a sense of a reduction of elements—the film uses water to focus our attention on light—but the film allows for the natural world to enliven these elements into a rich interplay of ideas.

The setting of an indoor swimming pool provides a perfect foil for the perceptual interplay that Epp subtly puts in place. The building contains a natural element and yet protects swimmers from the elements, allowing them to exercise in all kinds of inclement weather. But the building itself, as a container, is not the prime focus. Rather, many of the shots are aimed down at the water, requesting that we interpret our surroundings through this elemental form.

The first three shots reveal a gradual movement towards a naturalized abstraction, as the elemental movement of water disrupts the visual forms of the pool's architecture. The first shot is a series of diagonals created by lane markers painted on the pool's floor. Over the course of the length of the shot, the wake of off-screen swimmers send perpendicular waves that interfere with the linearity of the image. The second shot treats the reflection of the pool's skylight in a similar way, where the sharp lines of the window frames are seen through the undulation of



*trapline*

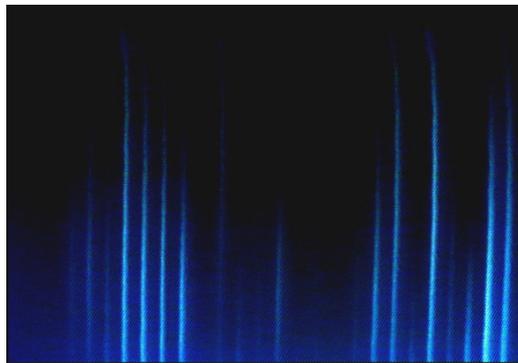
the pool's surface before three circular ripples, formed by single drops of water, further counteracting the composition of the image. The water in the third shot completely agitates the solid elements in the frames, as the rigid grid of the brick bottom of the pool undulates through the perceptual chaos that the surface wave patterns create.

Four boys swim through the fourth shot, finally revealing the human element that until this point has only been understood as an audible presence on the soundtrack. This shot serves both as a breather, a moment of recognition and a reminder of

the film's sense of play before we move from liquid to light.

In the next few shots, light becomes the dominant element, as the fifth shot catches the reflection of a large window off the surface of the pool. Vague human forms walking on the pool deck bend the light into anthropomorphic forms, but the mixture of light and water creates a visual interplay that at once hints at the image (the window frame) and quickly disintegrates. The next shot finally abstracts to the glance and dance of light on the surface of the water. At this moment, Epp foregrounds the cinema as a light medium, reducing the image to the basic element, light waves caressing the object.

Epp directs our attention away from the pool and at the skylight above it. At first, it seems that the structure of the space reasserts itself, but over the course of the shot, the sun, perhaps emerging from behind a cloud, brightens the image and dissolves the solidity of the metal frames. With this the film both reasserts the presence of natural cycles against the rigid structure of a building and rearticulates how



*current*

even the solid image is made up of particles that can quickly dematerialize.

With that revelation, it is safe to return to this solid image, imbued with a new thesis on its immaterial qualities. The three final shots return us to physical form and to human presence: changing rooms, a stairwell and three boys lounging in a cubbyhole. What has gone before still imprints itself on these images, both in the sense of their obvious physical location and in the way the water reflects in the mirrors of the changing room and splashes



*trapline*

against the stairwell. The water is now in a peripheral space not unlike the way the sounds and impact of the swimmers articulated the peripheries in the shots that came before. In the final shot, the soundtrack completely fades away and the three boys, returned to physical form, quietly rest in the silence of the formed image.

Despite its deceptive economy, *Trapline* demarcates a series of thoughts on reflection, refraction, presence and perception. Light either reflects off surfaces or allows us to look through them, but

it constantly takes on an active presence. In a lovely, nondogmatic way, we are introduced again to the wonders of watching cinema, not just through an assertion of the beautiful image, but also through an exploration of the image's constituent elements.

--Chris Kennedy

*Filmography*

*trapline*, 16mm, 1976, Canada, 18 min.

*current*, 16mm, 1986, Canada, 3 min.

*notes in origin*, 16mm, 1987, Canada, 15 min.

*bright and dark*, 16mm, 1996, Canada/USA, 3 min.

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**EMS**