
Does the Remembering Ever Stop? Hayley Jane Dawson

Commissioned by Kaya Fraser to accompany her exhibition
Give us a Smile, 10 August – 29 September 2024

*'Stuff is as much a matter of death as it is of life'*¹

Most of us, at some point in our lives, have held an object that is imbued with deep meaning. This might be a teddy bear we have had since birth, or a well-worn old t-shirt. Indeed many people will find even greater solace in items that once belonged to a now deceased loved one: a piece of jewellery, or a family photo album. In Kaya Fraser's *Give us a Smile*, it is an inherited camcorder and the video footage recorded by the artist's late stepfather that have very clearly brought comfort to the whole family. This archival footage gives us intimate access to special holidays, the family home, and even gives the exhibition its title through Steve's catchphrase, 'give us a smile!' Kaya's decision to continue the documentation of family life and the objects within it since his loss, creates a eulogy of sorts for her stepfather. While it speaks to the sombre grief of losing someone, the resulting video

installation is also a site of hope and renewal.

Through his recordings, Kaya's stepfather captured the ordinary beauty of life he saw around him. With the introduction of accessible moving image technology we gained the opportunity to document our own lives, homes and interests. Instead of being placed in front of the camera often merely as subjects of derision or sympathy, we've now secured the chance to represent ourselves. Often working-class people choose to capture the interiors of their homes. We are notoriously house proud, seeing cleanliness as something we will be judged on by others. So it naturally follows that we want to show off our neat, well decorated homes for posterity and perhaps even take the photos with us to the homes of others to share how well we are doing.

Working-class people treat their possessions in particular ways. We display them in order to tell our stories

and speak of our experiences. We also use them as items to speak of how well-travelled or well-read we are. Indeed, many working-class homes have often been referred to as the housewife's art gallery, to reflect the way the women of the house choose to display their trinkets with pride. Fireplaces, dressers, and cabinets would be filled with precious items gifted or bought. While galleries have rarely documented the lives of ordinary working-class people, we have become our own curators and museum guides. It is our mothers, our grandfathers, our aunts and uncles who undertake the role of family archivist. Ornaments will be cleaned and polished, clocks wound to the exact time, photographs dated and filed chronologically in albums, or displayed in specially chosen frames on shelves or the mantelpiece.

Speaking of the mantelpiece, this has often become a focus for the everyday display of working-class life. Particular ornaments, crockery,

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toys and even ashes can take pride of place for all who enter to see and admire. Some even have whole rooms that remain untouched, frozen in time and dedicated to a loved one. My own granda sat in a part of the living room affectionately known as ‘mum’s corner’, where my late gran had her favourite chair. It always had a vase of fresh flowers and a picture of the two of them, which he could look at in his more profound moments of grief.

As working-class people, when we lose a loved one, we might not stand to inherit property or money. We will likely, however, be left with things, objects, stuff. It is this stuff, in lieu of any financial provision, that helps us adjust to the loss of a loved one. Simply being able to hold a piece of clothing that smells of them, or a trinket they treasured, allows us to process our grief. We possess and revere items not for their monetary value but more often than not for their sentimental attachment. When we simply have to get up and get on with life, despite heartbreaking loss, because there are children to look after and no money to

fall back on, having small collections or items that remind us of that person can be what literally gets us through that day, and the next, and the next again. They are a way to channel our emotions when we are relied upon to be the strong, brave person. These items are priceless, eventually becoming a substitute for and a move towards, the letting go of grief and the holding on to remembering.

¹ Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.145.

NB: The title of this essay originates from a chapter within Annette Kuhn’s *Family Secrets*, titled ‘Does the Remembering Never Stop?’

About the Writer

Hayley Jane Dawson is a Glaswegian artist and writer. Their practice is interdisciplinary, and their writing has been published by *Nothing Personal* magazine and *Pilot Press*. Dawson has been commissioned by both Glasgow Zine Library and Lunchtime to make pamphlets of their writing and drawings. Their work has also been shown at Generator Projects and Tate St.Ives.

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