

TEXTILES ANIMATE THE TRUTH

Experimental animator Jodie Mack has an obsession with materials and images with an organic, light-weight quality. Which is handy given that her form – stop-motion – is historically more about creating reality than capturing it. She mainly works with material offcuts ranging from textiles to paper. Her films take those materials on sweeping trips across the globe as she transforms the patterns of everyday life into exquisite films that comment on contemporary complexities like globalisation, manufacturing, distribution and commerce.





Jodie Mack

She continues: “When you go into something as nuanced and long as the history of textiles, it’s hard to pinpoint certain origins. It’s like trying to pinpoint the genesis of the phoneme ‘ah’ or ‘oh,’ because everyone’s got the components and systems and rearrangement, so no one’s got copyright on a line or shape. It’s this fluctuation between utility and decoration. So for example, the diamond starlet could have many meanings across various textile cultures where these forms speak to the people that know its language. But when you put things into a global, imperialised market and they end up at T.J. Maxx, then the utility and decoration no longer have any significance to its new consumer.”

However complex it may be to articulate, that’s the essence of Mack’s technique; she selects a symbol or design, then blazes past so many of its iterations that the infinite meanings stack up into meaninglessness. *The Grand Bizarre* riffs its way through multiple variations on this sociopolitical theme, whether it’s the patterns on the flowy pants exported from the Tibet area (“Everyone’s getting them from the same place and sewing their names on them!”) or paper sheets printed with language guides. The most memorable, direct segment launches a slideshow barrage of Chinese character tattoos on white bodies’ lower backs, making the critiques all but explicit. No corner of authenticity can exist for long before it’s stripped of everything that makes it regionally distinct, if that ‘authenticity’ was even real in the first place outside of the Western imagination. “When I started getting these international invitations to film festivals, everyone was like, ‘Wow! It’s so cool to be able to see all these places!’” Mack says. “And I’d tell them, ‘But did you know that so-and-so has an Olive Garden? I just saw them building it!’”

In her short-form pieces, she singles out and dissects visual conceits with more concentrated specificity, as in her shiny film ‘Razzle Dazzle’ or her paisley film ‘Persian Pickles’. In the latter case, she can clearly see how the proliferation of this amoeba-looking blob heralded a new era of incoherence through free appropriation. “The paisley forms show up in a lot of places, all the way back to Iranian motifs, Irish quilting, and then they show up in the American counterculture, as the unofficial Beat fabric,” she explains. “Looking back, we can see that that was the beginning of the end. We had all these artists like, ‘I’m anti-Vietnam, and I’m going to charge Eastern spirituality in my religion and make experimental animations about mandalas, and I’m going to use gamelan in my synthesiser music, and I’ll wear paisley.’”

Far from tut-tutting the ignorance of others, she’s quick to implicate herself and her position in the culture-degrading machine. A London-born expat, she aspires to the perspective of a tourist when abroad, frequenting the parts of each city that cater most to visitors from the States. She takes more interest in an outsider’s constructed impression of a country than some impossible truth about its national character. “All of a sudden, there’s this generic American fashion marketing template known as ‘Southwestern,’” she says. “It was big at Ralph Lauren and elsewhere. I call it ‘Southwestern’ because I went to my friend’s mother’s place of employment, which was kind of an embroidery factory, where they embroider the Holiday Inn logo onto polo shirts and stuff like that, people’s businesses. And they have these clip-art CDs, from which they can embroider this diamond I’ve been seeing everywhere, among other designs. It’s all on a CD that’s just labelled ‘Southwestern’.”

Ultimately, the overarching project in her canon is to upend standardisation, to push back against the numbing sameness encouraged by commerce that turns a beautiful tapestry or hand-woven apparel into a lifeless thing. She incorporates that feeling of being stifled into her work as well, cutting ‘The Grand Bizarre’ at exactly one hour, due to that unit of time being the largest 16-millimetre reel one can buy. “It’s all about the grid,” she says, “the grid of time, the grid of space, and the grid of pitch. The colonisers tell you twelve tones are in an octave, just twelve, that that’s how reality works. There’s an obsession with measurement, and with the power of regulation coming from that measurement.”

From her younger days, entranced by the efficient repetition of the poster factory owned and operated by her mother, Mack has found profundity in the inanimate. It can come from scraps of fabric in the trash, magazines left at her house by friends, the striped garments in her own wardrobe; detritus is her medium. From a simple cotton floral-print shirt, she can unspool a miniature thesis on the perverseness of using mechanical technology to brand a natural object onto processed plant matter. She seeks out the ugly, nagging implications covered by the vivid colours, pleasing designs, and visions of faraway places. “In Romanticism, there was a concept I call ‘nature-plus’, where a painter of a nature scene might leave out the brown leaves or the mosquitoes, an idealised vision of nature through art,” she says. “This was upset in many ways by the invention of photography. My films are a part of that.” <

Images from the filming of *The Grand Bizarre*, 2018. The film is “a postcard from an imploded society”, bringing mundane objects to life; ‘place’ is interpreted through materials, transcribing an experience of pattern, labour, and alien[-]nation[s]. © Jodie Mack

For centuries, men have killed and died for cloth. The earliest conquistadors scoured the planet for textiles and dyes to bring back to consumers at home in Europe, the distinctive styles and colours evoking far-off lands while conveying class and wealth. Fashion hyper-jumped forward and left an economy of violence and subjugation in its wake, but this large-scale conflict isn’t limited to the remote past. According to stop-motion animator and experimental video artist Jodie Mack, it’s not even over.

“The brightest fabrics with the most colourful dyes are usually the most toxic,” she says over Zoom from the venerable MacDowell artist’s residency in Peterborough, New Hampshire. “The trajectory of accessibility and technology has a relationship to homogeneity and a lack of nuance, which we can see in the way the swastika, the yin-yang, the ankh have been replicated... In terms of

their translation, it’s like we’re using Google Translate as opposed to a human translator. There’s no understanding of idiom.”

Across her dozens of short films and culminating feature debut ‘The Grand Bizarre’, she’s explored the myriad pressures arising from the global marketplace of stuff and still lingering in today’s world. Her work is a hyper-stimulating banquet for the senses, combining an aesthetic of rapid-fire psychedelia with music of her own composition in a swirl of iconography and referents that wouldn’t look out of place on the TV at a house party. All the while, these textural, sensuous marvels interrogate a capitalist reality easily taken for granted, and resist conclusive answers. To focus on textiles, a recurring motif in her catalogue (though she mentions that she’s currently in the thick of a “plant phase”), is to confront a dense pack of topics –

the specter of colonialism, cultural interchange, how mass reproduction warps identity, the organic’s mutation into the synthetic. Each film contains a semester’s worth of curricula imparted not through turgid language, but rather in a kaleidoscopic geyser of imagery.

With an academic-minded curiosity giving away her side gig as an associate professor at Dartmouth College, Mack singles out one such teachable lesson from ‘The Grand Bizarre’. Shot on the fly as she toured her shorts through festivals and museums from America to Asia, she noticed that a diamond-shape she refers to as the film’s ‘starlet’ kept reappearing. “The materials find me,” she says. “The diamond was on a suitcase, printed in vinyl, at a T.J. Maxx. That store was a point of entry into a lot of the important textile traditions, as were other big-box stores like Target and Walmart.”