

cinema scope

EXPANDING THE FRAME ON INTERNATIONAL CINEMA

This pattern, #399, is restricted
from use in the candy box
trade for the year 1965

JODIE MACK
JOANNA HOGG
LOIS PATIÑO
ROBERT BEAVERS
DAVID RIMMER
JERRY LEWIS
ALEKSEI GERMAN

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FIVE FILMS BY JODIE MACK

BY PHIL COLDIRON

Six years ago, writing in these pages on the films of Michael Robinson, Michael Sicinski raised a crucial question, one for which he offered Robinson's work as a possible answer, and one which, it seems to me, has only grown in urgency in the frequently disastrous years since: "How can experimental cinema retain its connection to history, remaining cognizant of the various crises of representation, without lapsing into nihilism?" When a filmmaker chooses to toil in the small corner of cinema that's taken a concern with the image itself as one of its foundations (please feel free to interpret that in any way you choose), how does she navigate the often contradictory demands of financing (a particular problem in the US, where arts funding dwindles by the second), production (the shuttering of film production plants and processing houses hitting medium-specific experimentalists hardest of all), and exhibition (this one has been a mess for decades, though today

it's perhaps the least dire situation of the three), while simultaneously breaking new ground (it's called the avant garde for a reason) and avoiding the myriad traps presented by history. Here history means not only the history of experimental film, or even the history of all of cinema, but the entirety of the historical conversation surrounding the social role of the image as such, one which Godard has followed all the way to Moses up on Mount Sinai, and which we might go ahead and trace back quite a bit further into the past than even that. Up against this much, it's not hard to imagine nihilism as an appealing option. And watching most of what makes it to screen in the world of experimental film and video these days, it's hard not to conclude that a sort of nihilism located in the comforting blankness of the well-composed image or the cleverly empty concept is largely what the cinematic avant garde has gone for in our recessionist times.

Of course, all is not lost. All of the established directors mentioned by Sicinski as forerunners to Robinson with their "willingness to engage in rather direct, even sweeping emotional effects"—Nathaniel Dorsky, Ken Jacobs, Jeanne Liotta, David

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of perceptual swelling occurs where the paper itself becomes overwhelming; if *New Fancy Foils* remains less cosmic than *Undertone Overture* as an effect of its more harshly geometric patterns and more solidly coloured frames, it nonetheless arrives at a similarly psychedelic state, one in which the objects is freed by the frame and the cut to express all of itself.

Dusty Stacks of Mom: The Poster Project

Mack's second "big" film after 2008's *Yard Work Is Hard Work*, a 28-minute cut-out collage musical about the terrors of settling down into domestic life, *Dusty Stacks of Mom* is not only her longest work at 41 minutes, it also significantly expands her formal scope by bringing in both location shooting and on-screener human performance. The performer here is Mack's own mother, whose failing rock-poster shop serves as both the film's location and subject, as Mack eulogizes the family business via a running commentary in the form of a rewritten version of *Dark Side of the Moon*, which the director herself performs live during screenings (Mack had previously experimented with live audio accompaniment in *Rad Plaid*, which is designed for audience interaction, with the crowd shouting "rad" and "plaid" based on whether a vertical or horizontal pattern is on screen). *Dusty Stacks*, with its clear narrative line, pop culture hook, and obvious sense of familial warmth, was something of a crossover hit at Views, but even as it sees Mack further refining her tremendous talents in the field of stop-motion animation, I must confess that this strikes me as the least substantial of the five films here. Abstraction, so crucial a part of her best work, is largely kept to a minimum, with the result that even as Mack inventively cuts up and contrasts images, there's rarely a sense that any truly new dimension to them as been brought out by the process of Mack's cinema. Still, if something this good is the least exciting out of five films one makes in a year...

Glistening Thrills

Following on the clearly legible arc of a family business traced by *Dusty Stacks*, Mack ditches narrative for pure motion in *Glistening Thrills*, a triptych comprised of three perspectives on holographic whatsits shimmering in the dark. The first sees sparkling abstractions fall (and occasionally move horizontally) through absolute dark, the second views mobiles against a forest backdrop, and the third returns to the style of *Undertone Overture* and *New Fancy Foils*, as frame-filling geometric shapes whizz and rotate and flash, the sparkling movements in all three sections playing out in a curiously tense relationship with the long, sad notes of Elliot Cole's bowed vibraphone soundtrack. Conceptually, it seems as close as Mack could come to making something like the mood pieces so common across the experimental arts today, but the mood it creates is nearly impossible to place, as it flits between manic and calm, aggressive and inviting, all held together by the unique reds and greens of cheap holographic print. This strategy of bringing rough juxtapositions between disparate, individually gor-

geous sections together under the umbrella of a sustained interest in forgotten signifiers of novelty puts *Glistening Thrills* closer to the recent work of experimental musician Oneohtrix Point Never than anything in the world of cinema.

Let Your Light Shine

The big rock-show finale, the encore where the lasers and fire cannons and army of back-up dancers are paraded out and everyone takes the biggest solo out of the night, comes, fittingly for a filmmaker so concerned with uncovering the myriad possibilities lurking in even the most mundane objects, in the form of a simple white-on-black animation, less than three minutes of squiggles and lines which Mack turns into the ultimate head trip with nothing more than a pair of cheap paper glasses. Called by Mack a "spectacle for prismatic spectacles," *Let Your Light Shine* uses these cheap novelty glasses—nothing more than prismatic film that breaks light up into the colours of the visible spectrum—to create what is, very simply, the most immersive film I've ever experienced. Mack's animation here is a fine piece of visual music in itself, but taken in through prismatic lenses, it expands, rhizome-like, into a throb of colored lines emanating from this single source—a throb which, thanks to the nature of the glasses, seems to play out just centimetres from one's own eyes. This perceptual unmooring is the clearest example of the psychedelic capacity of Mack's cinema, but even more fascinatingly, she once again locates new awareness of the openness of the world in a very simple material fact: the 16mm film itself, this set of white marking on a black frame. Here again, the nature of the glasses is put to use, as the prismatic frame creates a semi-opaque effect, one in which the frame-as-cinema screen is doubled, seeming to play out at once both *on* the glasses (i.e., one sees "on" the glasses both the white-on-black animations and the prismatic expansions) and *through* the glasses, the screen itself still clearly visible however many feet away from the viewer in the space of the theatre. This creates a double awareness, one in which the fact of the immaterial "film" which exists only in the viewer's specific perception is folded into the fact of the objective object of the 16mm film (a fact which, of course, is complicated by our knowledge of this material object, the 16mm film called *Let Your Light Shine*, being accessible only through the immaterial process of light being projected onto a screen). The object, the thing which might be owned or saddled with associations—a roll of 16mm film, a tie-dye shirt, a wallpaper catalogue, a dime-store holographic print—passes through Mack's cinema and comes out the other side inextricable from its immaterial double. In fact, it seems to me that it would be closer to the truth for Mack to refer to the film as an "anti-spectacle for prismatic spectacles," for spectacle is always first and foremost an expression of accumulation (of money, of property, of power), and the lesson to be learned from Mack's films—one possible answer to the questions posed earlier about the location of art in the world—is that art exists as that which liquidates accumulation, the process through which objects are purged of their baggage and allowed to stand for themselves.