

MATERIAL GIRL

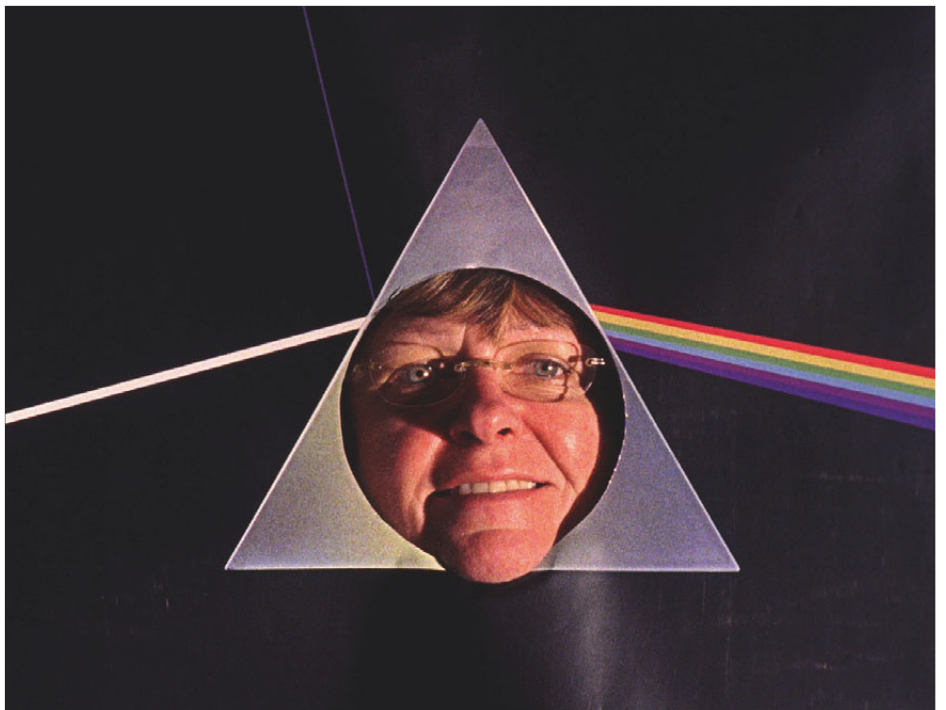
In her short, structurally rigorous, always playful films, Jodie Mack approaches something like – why not say it? – perfection

By Nick Pinkerton

Jodie Mack's *Wasteland No. 1: Ardent, Verdant*, one of the handful of new films I saw last year that I'm tempted to call perfect, is a four-minute cascade of cinema, another of Mack's revivifications of the structuralist flicker-film tradition in the crackling, brilliant style that she's made her own. It is divided between two categories of images, these mostly seen in rapid succession for only a fraction of a second. The first are circuit boards which, shot head-on on an animation stand, acquire the appearance of orderly industrial farms seen from on high – most linger only long enough to register as individually varied units within a sequence, though others are held to be seen caressed by shadows from a moving light source, like a sun passing quickly overhead through time-lapse photography. The second are still images of ravishingly oversaturated poppy fields, introduced in a group, then shuffled in with the circuitry, becoming a dervish dance of flashing green and red.

Setting aside what precisely Mack is after here – something to do with the addictive qualities of technology, perhaps, or a staged confrontation between a natural environment that seems artificial and an artificial one that seems organic – this sprightly shining 16mm bauble offers a jolt of pure, pleasurable pizzazz. It is the latest in Mack's ongoing cycle of 'material studies', animations averaging between three and ten minutes in length, composed of sequenced inventories of fabric designs or other mass-produced ornament grouped by type, which take on kinetic qualities through stuttering staccato editing. *Unsubscribe #1: Special Offer Inside* (2010) is a riotous, TV static-like dance made of the granular patterns inside junk mail security envelopes; *Persian Pickles* (2012) sits and watches paisley teardrops fall; *Point de Gaze* (2012) wriggles through a writhing wilderness of lacework; *Undertone Overture* (2013) moves from grand finale bombast to a pacific plash through a vocabulary entirely of tie-dye splorches; *Razzle Dazzle* (2014) is a glittering Ali Baba treasure trove of rhinestones, sequins, paillettes, and every possible manifestation of the bedazzler's art.

Shot frame-by-frame in-camera on a 16mm Bolex and, for all the finished product's fleetness, clearly the result of a hugely time-consuming process, Mack's material studies are resolutely handmade tributes to mechanically reproduced multiples, deep digs through sedimentary layers of consumer culture's detritus. This is just one of the paradoxes embodied by Mack's cinema, defined by the rarely paired qualities of structuralist rigour and over-brimming vigour. In a glitter-bomb explosion of filmmaking activity the London-born, Florida-raised Mack, who took an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007 and now teaches animation at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, has in the course of a decade established herself among



See Jodie play: Jodie Mack's mother channels Pink Floyd in *Dusty Stacks of Mom* (2013)

the leading lights of the American experimental cinema through a body of work that variously suggests affinities with the visual music films of Oskar Fischinger and Len Lye, crêpe paper-craft table aesthetics by way of the De Stijlists, Louis Comfort Tiffany, and the psychedelic liquid light shows of bygone Soft Machine concerts or their afterlife in the laser-strafed planetarium.

Those last-named references come to the fore in *Dusty Stacks of Mom: the Poster Project* (2013), a 41-minute musical home-movie extravaganza set on the warehouse grounds of the nearly defunct family business, a mail-order distributor of posters and assorted entertainment industry-related print product. The original lo-fi rock opera score, performed live by Mack at several touring screenings, is a rejigging of Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* with lyrics that comment on the

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Yard Work Is Hard Work (2008)

founding fortunes of the mom-and-pop shop and the abandonment of analogue ephemera; Mack's mother stars alongside a supporting cast of her overstock inventory, unsold serialised images of Tony Montana and hoary old hair-metal acts and *Tiger Beat* teen dreams that form kaleidoscopic patterns worthy of Busby Berkeley.

Dusty Stacks of Mom isn't the first of Mack's films to bob along propelled by a pop pulse – she's a former musical-theatre student whose unreconstructed past shows through in the proud sentimental streak of her work, coexisting peacefully with a meticulous intelligence brought to bear on the economics behind her aesthetic of glut. *Yard Work Is Hard Work* (2008), made during Mack's time at the Art Institute, tells through song a story of young love souring into grudging cohabitation and unhappiness sublimated into home improvement projects, the melancholy melodrama enacted by an all magazine-and-catalogue clipping cast. (A sung line from the film might describe Mack's practice: "This is labour intensive!")

Following Mack's output from here to *Dusty Stacks of Mom*, with the acres of fabric in-between and beyond, one can trace a persistent set of preoccupations. Among those she has singled out are "the role of decoration in daily life", and the parallels between bespoke, specialised avant-garde practices and the abstract art hidden in plain sight within impersonal domestic designs. She has for some years now been at work on a globe-trotting first feature presenting material in Guangzhou, Oaxaca and other far-flung locales, tracing the migratory patterns of patterns. The result promises to be the most ambitious manifestation to date of Mack's obsessive, ebullient project, profound in its study of surfaces, which she has described with her own spin on Marshall McLuhan: "The material is the message." ☺