

Edge of Frame

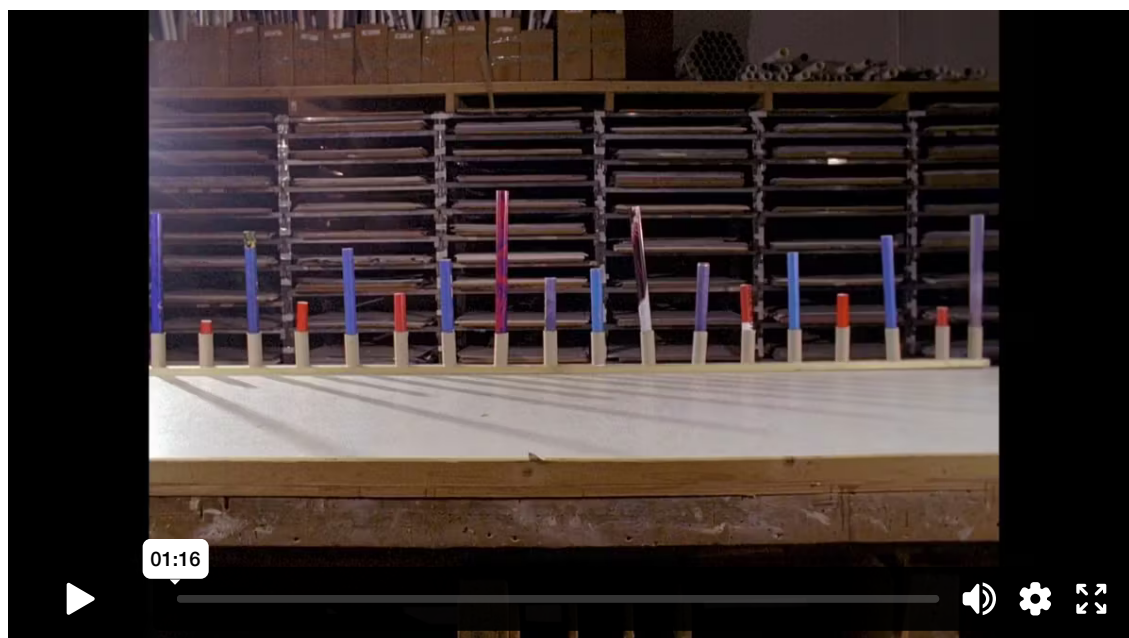
A blog about experimental animation

Jodie Mack

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By Edwin Rostron

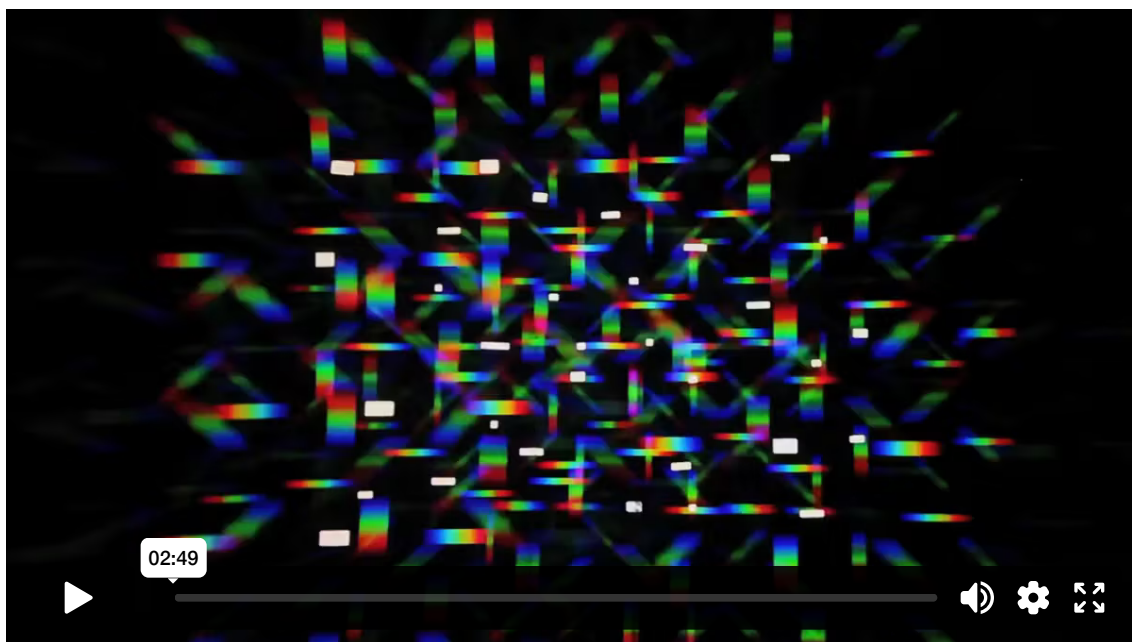
Jodie Mack's films are filled with a vibrant, kinetic energy and an exuberant beauty. They delight in the colours, forms, patterns and textures of found objects and materials, carefully selected and shown to us anew. Collecting and reframing cultural detritus such as wallpaper, lace, junk mail, tie-dye shirts, rock posters and holographic prints, Jodie draws on the formal techniques and structures of abstract animation to explore the tension between form and meaning. Whilst frequently focusing on inanimate objects, there is also a real warmth and wit to her work, marking it out from much other abstract film.



Trailer for Dusty Stacks of Mom: The Poster Project (2013) by Jodie Mack

Each of her films are evidently personal and heartfelt, none more so than **Dusty Stacks of Mom**, an animated musical documentary about her family's poster and postcard wholesale business. Shot on 16mm, it interweaves personal filmmaking, abstract animation and rock opera, and features a soundtrack of wonderful songs written and performed by Jodie herself. The film was shown widely at festivals and screenings around the world, with Jodie performing the soundtrack alongside it live. Her many other short films are vivid, dazzling, thought-provoking and hypnotic. They transform abandoned or overlooked materials and make kaleidoscopic, transcendent visions out of them. The films of Jodie Mack are some of the most inspiring works of film art being made today.

Jodie's work has screened at the Images Festival, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Rotterdam Film Festival, Edinburgh International Film Festival, and Views From the Avant Garde at the New York Film Festival. She has presented solo programs of her work at venues such as the Anthology Film Archives, Los Angeles Filmforum, REDCAT, and the BFI London Film Festival. She teaches animation at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and is a curator at Dartmouth's EYEWASH: Experimental Films and Videos.



Let Your Light Shine (2013) by Jodie Mack

**NOTE: this is only an approximation made by attaching prismatic glasses to iPhone and taping from a screen. The piece is black and white designed for viewers to wear prismatic glasses.*

EoF: Can you tell me a bit about your background and how you got into filmmaking?

JM: Sure! Well, one thing incredibly important to note, at least in my mind, is that I was born in London and lived there until I was 8 – so early on I watched all sorts of visually interesting things like the animated [Channel 4 logo](#) and the amazing show [Button Moon](#). I also adored British puppetry, pantomime, and theatrical traditions. After moving to the United States in 1991, I became heavily involved in music and musical theatre, going on to attend a rigorous program for the theatrical arts from age 13-17. Now, when you're studying theatre, people think you want to be an actress. So you hear how hard it will be to "make it". I didn't particularly like acting anyway, so in college I majored in something much more financially stable and viable than acting – academic film studies. Ha! This was mostly writing about cinema, classic things: national cinemas, gaze theory, etc. But, right before graduating I took some Art history courses in video art as well as a course in Avant-Garde Film. And, then finally, I enrolled in a video production class and became interested in making experimental films when the professor, [Roger Beebe](#), assigned a cameraless film project.



Persian Pickles (2012) by Jodie Mack

EoF: Many of your works could be described as ‘abstract animation’ however the abstract forms are usually simultaneously recognisable objects with their own context and history. Can you describe what it is about the materials you choose that interests you, and how this relates to the way you work with them within the films?

JM: Your question brings up an interesting point and one of the central questions of my own trajectory. In college, when studying experimental film, our Roger gave us an “abstraction” assignment first thing – to easily shed all of the narrative expectations from the young twenty-somethings. And, then as soon as we all started jiving on this abstraction thing, he started asking

questions about the relevance of the abstract tradition. Like, how is this relevant today? What does this mean? How is this more than wallpaper? My answers would fluctuate back and forth because, on one hand, making abstract film is a political gesture in itself because it resists the dominant mode of cinema. Yet, at this point, decades beyond laser light show emporiums, rave backdrops, screensavers, and animated wallpaper playing on loop at H&M, abstract animation does actually exist within the general public's visual vernacular. Yet, even so, a purely abstract film seems unpalatable to most. But, the form can do wonders to sell a pair of shoes or car or whatnot! When I began to notice this tension and how the same motifs of abstract animation and painting also ran through popular modes of advertising and graphic design, I began to use "representational" or "real" objects in my films to subtly prod at this discrepancy. I began a new mantra, not medium is the message" but instead "the material is the message". Because, at the end of the day, nothing is purely abstract, so any material you choose to work with will reveal its own story if you work it through in film.

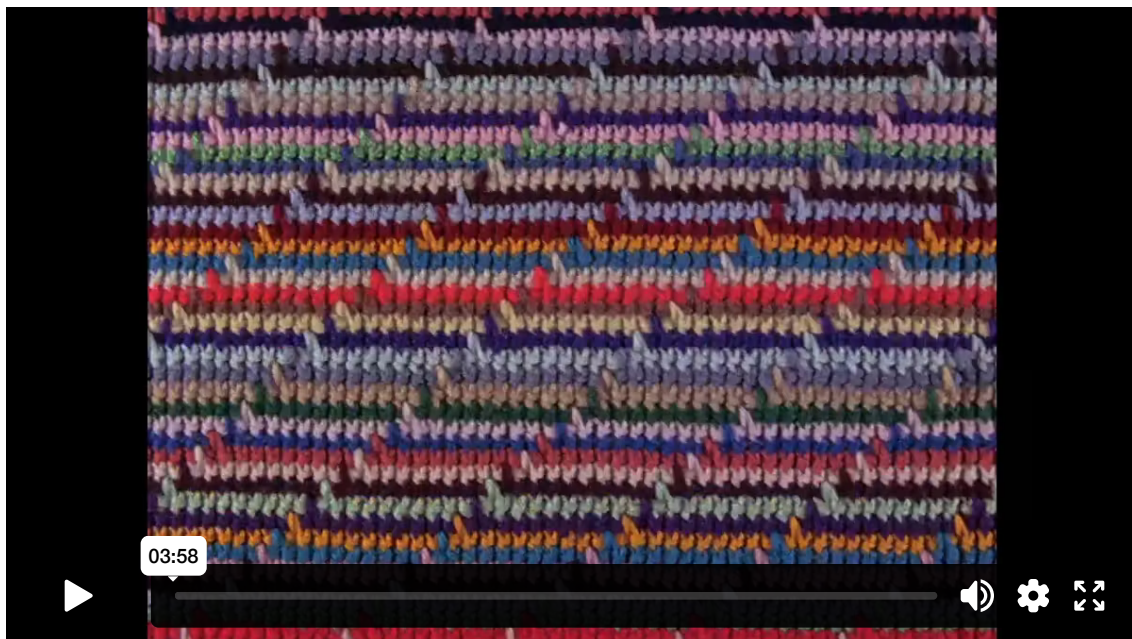


Posthaste Perennial Pattern (2010) by Jodie Mack

EoF: The idea of the catalogue or collection is central to a number of your films. What is it about this idea that inspires or interests you as a filmmaker?

JM: Well, undoubtedly, my parent's poster business certainly played a huge role in my fascination with inventory, primarily because I worked doing data entry and inventory for them through most of my teenage years. And, in the past five or six years, I've made friends with a tremendous amount of archivists. I started making friends with such folks at the same time as moving cities, so I began taking inventory of my personal belongings under the camera in films like *Rad Plaid* (2010), *Posthaste Perennial Pattern* (2010), and the *Unsubscribe Series* (2010). From there, I became

really interested in the idea of incomplete archives and also “temporal archives” (a recording of a collection played out stroboscopically in real time but also on the filmstrip as sculptural/scroll like object). There’s something about it that suggests the impossibility of perfection in memory or the time-based representation of simultaneity that I find really fascinating. Once I’d shot my way through my own objects, I began seeking out collections (at a costume shop, for example, which produced films like *Point de Gaze* (2012), *Persian Pickles* (2012), or *Razzle Dazzle* (2014). After that, people began sending me their own collections of nothing because they knew I’m a material hoarder. So, for example, my film *New Fancy Foils* (2013) is made from an incomplete catalog of foil papers sent to me by the wonderful animator and person [George Griffin](#) who thought I could do something with them.

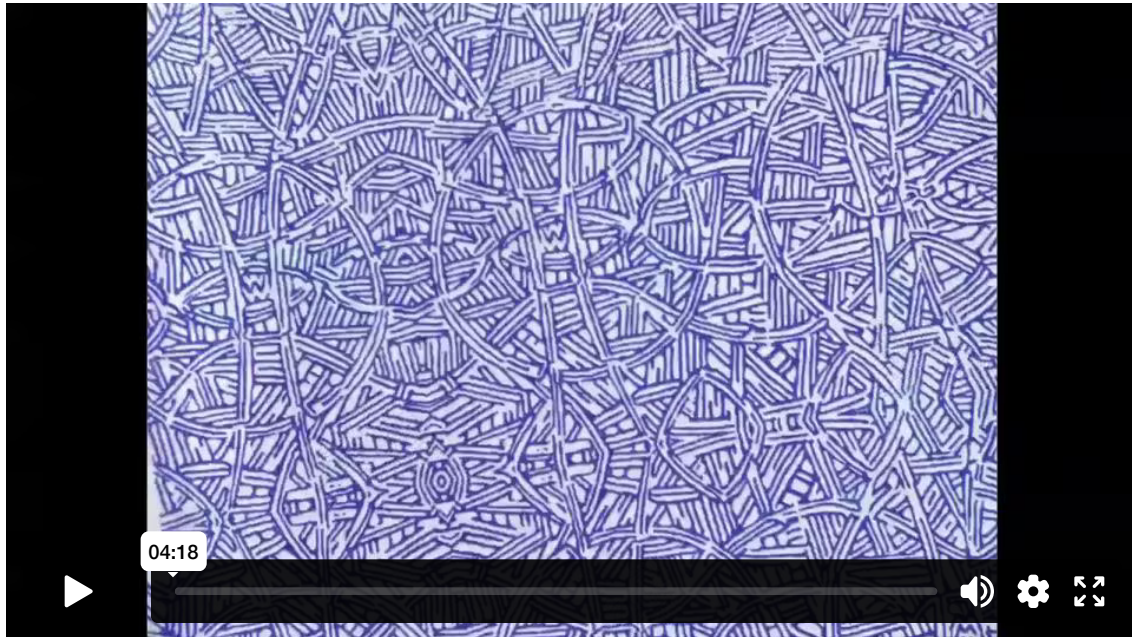


Blanket Statement #2: All or Nothing (2013) by Jodie Mack

EoF: Someone (maybe you?) wrote that “*these works question the role of abstract animation in a post-psychedelic climate*”. Can you explain what ‘the psychedelic’ means to you?

JM: I wrote that, yes. In this case, I’m referring to “psychedelic” as not only a mindset but a cultural appropriation of the visual activity associated with the late 60s/early 70s (a time not only tied to visual experimentation but also drugs and protest). This, to me, is where the “trippy” stigma of abstract animation was born. If I have one pet peeve, it’s when people describe films as “trippy”, Ugh! It makes my blood curdle! I used the quote you mention to describe my group of films headed under the “Let Your Light Shine” which tackled head on the economic realities of what it meant to make abstract animation in a world where visual experimentation has been codified alongside the lava lamp/smiley face/hippie Halloween costume product design of gift-shop

capitalism. You can't show an abstract film to a non-abstract film audience without this word coming up, without getting comments afterwards about how they needed acid to watch it or whatnot. So, basically, I feel that this type of animation has been grouped along with this product packaging, and it's almost impossible to work within this tradition without acknowledging that. So, within that program, I attempted to join the ideas of merchandising/concert culture, tensions between high and low art, and the stigmas of the abstract image.



Unsubscribe #1: Special Offer Inside (2010) by Jodie Mack

EoF: There is something about the way you incorporate materials of the real, everyday world (their specificity of texture and surface as well as their history and context) that gives the films so much more depth and resonance than much modern CG ‘visual music’ type work, which for all its aspirations often just seems flat and hollow (to me at least). Do you have any thoughts on modern abstract animation in general and the significance of the materials / processes employed?

JM: Well, I'd say that perhaps one of the factors that results in the "flat and hollow" appearance of contemporary CG visual music has to do with the fact that these pieces are made using the same aesthetics as advertising and modern cartoons. It seems like some of the canonical mid-century visual music works from the 50s through 70s actually innovated with the film technology (Whitneys, Vanderbeek, Schwartz, etc.) whereas now it would be practically impossible to innovate technically with CG because of the resources required. And, if anything, we don't want it to look more slick, we want to degrade the image and give it some life! The down and dirty, gritty and experimental work made with computers comes mostly from the "new media" community. This work actually goes beyond the limited choices of colors and lines set forth by the Adobe Suite and tackles digital

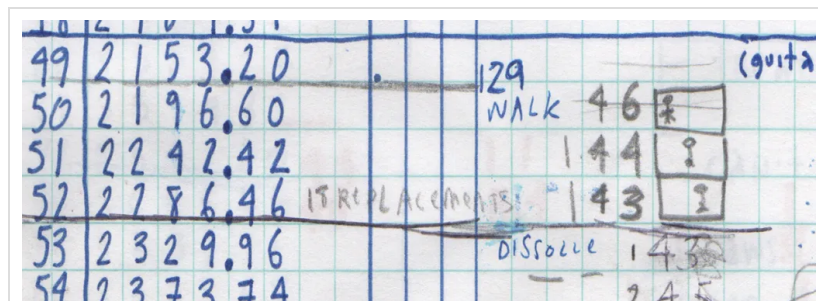
media as a material. Another problem potentially plaguing contemporary visual music comes along with the fact that everything's too easy; software can sync animation to music so simply, so rarely to we see the painstaking efforts of combining image and sound with the meticulous rigor of someone like Fischinger, for example. It's all itunes music visualizer synchronization; it's not special! My favorite type of new work in visual music combines the possibilities of real art supplies and computer realities. [Mirai Mizue](#) is a great example of a major innovator in this respect.



Video documenting No Kill Shelter (2013) an exhibition by Jodie Mack

EoF: Do you tend to start making films before you have worked them out in advance? Do you shoot footage to see where it will take you or do you generally plan out ideas first?

JM: This definitely depends on the type of film I am making, though it's probably safe to say I've never worked out something absolutely 100% before starting. I make the most developed storyboards when working for other people so they understand what I'm going to do, ha! With my shorter material studies, I generally take some time to assess my collection and the relationships between the objects + possibilities for animation before starting. Then, I generally scribble down a ton of numbers in my notebook serving as an x-sheet only I can understand.

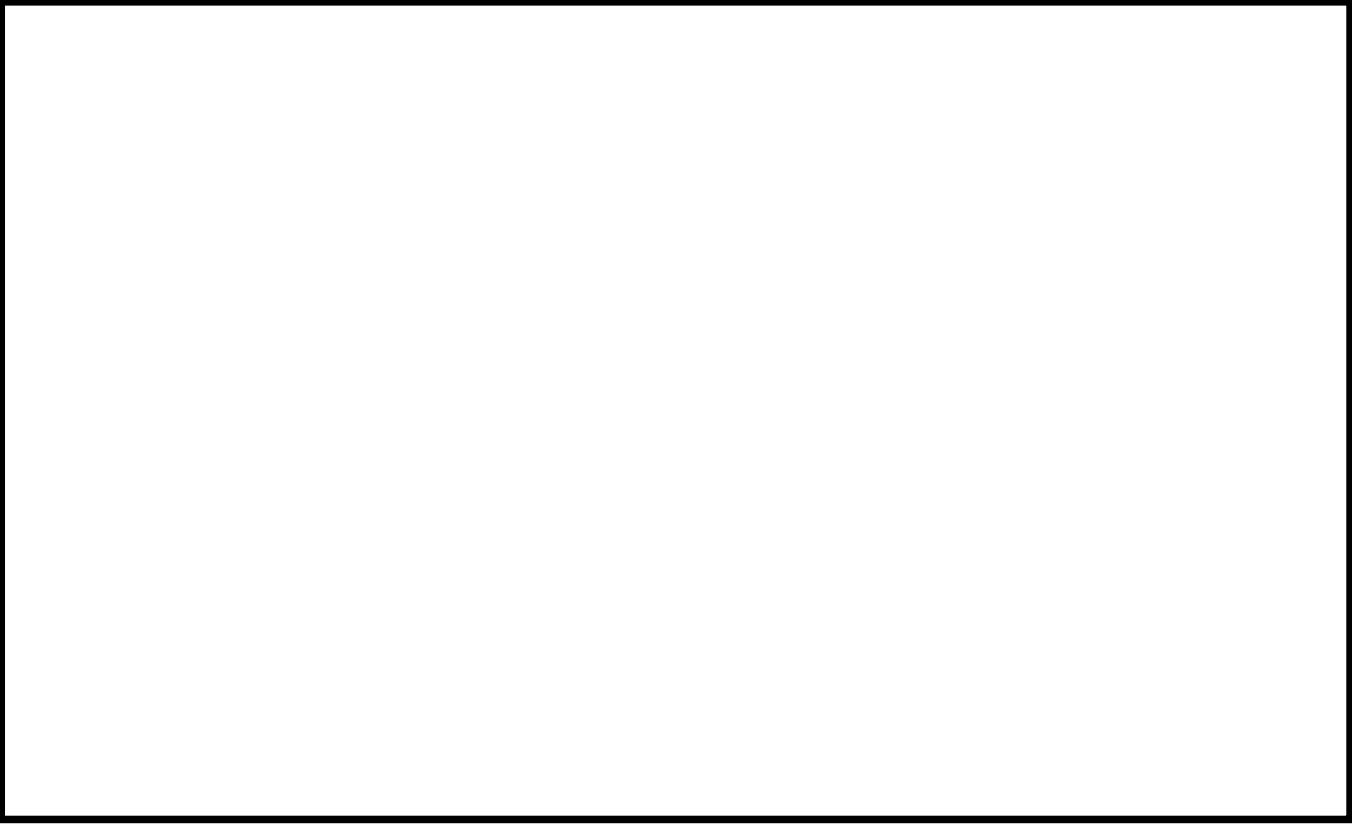




Yard Work is Hard Work (2008) by Jodie Mack

EoF: You have also made a few longer films. How did these works come about? Would you make a long one without narrative? How do you see these longer works relating to the shorter ones?

JM: Well, yes, amongst my thirty-or –so films, I have two longer films (and one in the oven)! The first longer piece I made is called *Yard Work is Hard Work* (2008). It was my thesis film in graduate school, and it's an original musical that I wrote, performed for, and animated from discarded magazines and household objects. It's twenty-eight minutes. Mostly, I made it as a test to expand my range, which is very important to me. The next larger piece I made was the forty-one minute *Dusty Stacks of Mom: The Poster Project* (2013), and while it's informative, it's certainly not quite narrative. So, yes I would consider making one without a narrative! In both cases thus far, I see my longer films providing summation and context for many of the shorter films. In *Yard Work is Hard Work*, for example, I tested the boundaries of popular narrative while also making visual connections between musical theatre staging, classic Hollywood staging, and abstract animation. *Dusty Stacks of Mom* contextualizes many truths surrounding image economics and hopefully, through its placement in the LYS program, asks the audience to confront their narrative expectations and prejudices against abstract work.



The Future is Bright (2011) by Jodie Mack

EoF: Music and singing play a significant role in these films. How did the musical element of your work evolve? You have performed soundtracks live with your films. Is this performative aspect a recent development, and is it something you think will continue to be a part of your work?

JM: Well, as I mentioned before, I have lots of formative training in performance and music. I felt like I abandoned performance right after high school, but it's really just engrained into my personality, for better or for worse. So, with *Yard Work is Hard Work*, it was really just an attempt at re-gaining skills in such things as well as a reason to work with words, which I love. And, of course, being interested in the history of visual music, I'm really just obsessed with understanding time on a microscopic level. When you get down to the components of making a soundtrack, you're basically doing animation but with sound instead of images; it's really tedious. *Dusty Stacks* was a whole different process. I started out making it as a non-performance piece, then someone suggested I perform it live. I did it. I realized it was way harder than I thought to sit there and sing the entire *Dark Side of the Moon* in front of a theatre, yet it was much more special than just letting it play out from the speakers. Then, all of a sudden, a year had passed and I'd performed the show over 60 times all over the world!!! It gave me a new confidence. Like, ok, if this teaching/animation thing doesn't work out, I can definitely land a gig in Vegas as a lounge singer doing covers or something. I'm not a polished performer by any means, but I do have chutzpah! So, right now, in my current piece, I'm really trying to decide the best thing to do with the performance element because the whole touring thing brings new and different challenges to a piece once it's finished. Well, it isn't really finished! It requires your energy over and over again for quite a long time. That said, however, I believe it provides a special experience for the audience

and ties the cinema back to its roots in theatre somehow...

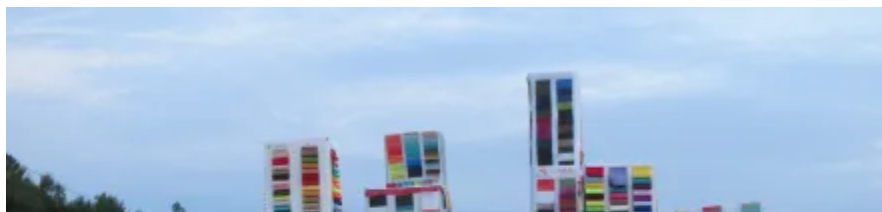


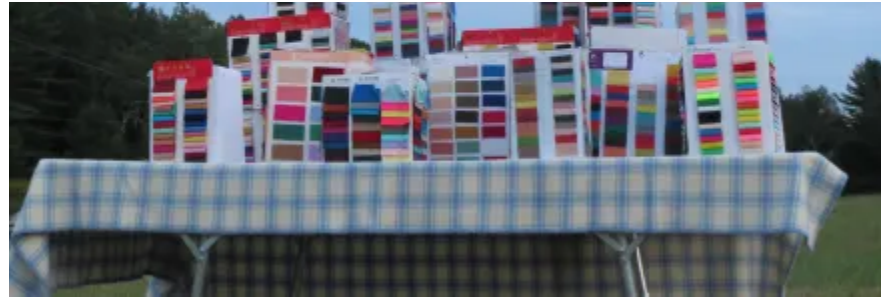
Unsubscribe #2: All Eyes on the Silver Screen (2010) by Jodie Mack

EoF: Do you feel part of a wider filmmaking / artistic community? Are there any key organisations, individuals or events that have shaped your work and/or the way you navigate your artistic career?

JM: Absolutely, and I feel this network grows and grows with each year and new project. There are so many wonderful people about there making films and screenings for the cause. It's humbling to meet them and watch their efforts flourishing. It's important to mention, again, that there's absolutely no way I would have started making films without the presence of Roger Beebe in my life; he opened the door and pushed me over the threshold with his encouragement! Next up, though I never met her, would be the life and work of [Helen Hill](#) – this inspiration is double sided because through Helen's life and work she brought me inspiration and hope, but the story of her death grounded me right back to the harsh realities of real life. Later, people like [Shellie Fleming](#) reinforced these polar and parallel lessons with her profound influence and eventual death after two battles with cancer. [Naomi Uman](#) has been a major influence, friend, and gigantic force ever since I met her in 2005. More recently people like [Lewis Klahr](#), Mark McElhatten, and Kate McKay have all provide many rays of sunshine and wisdom over the year. As far as organizations are concerned, I definitely need to credit the Florida Experimental Film and Video Festival, Echo Park Film Center, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. These are all places where I worked and studied that provided formative examples into the small-batch pleasures of experimental filmmaking, DIY exhibition, and education.







Production stills from a new work in progress by Jodie Mack (2015)

EoF: What are the current / future projects you are involved in?

JM: I'm currently in the midst of three separate phases (beginning, middle, end) of three separate projects. I'm finishing the sound and final edit for a new film *Something Between Us*, which will premiere in October. It's a study of light and costume jewellery shot in London, New Hampshire, and Australia. Funny enough, it's not animated at all; instead it's sort of carefully choreographed in live action and through a series of in-camera special effects. I'm in the middle (or beginning/middle) of a new large scale project, a travelogue in hip-hop documenting my trips to Oaxaca and China, drawing parallels between the development of fabric production alongside the dissemination of language and the spread of global culture. I'm exploring how visual abstractions function as part of complex visual systems and how does the dilution of ornamental design relates to dislocation[s] of language. I'm simultaneously reading, writing, shooting, and making music for this project. I think it will take about two to three years before it's finished. I'm also just starting a new music video for my dear friend Kent Lambert and his band [ROOMMATE](#) that I hope to finish by the end of 2015.

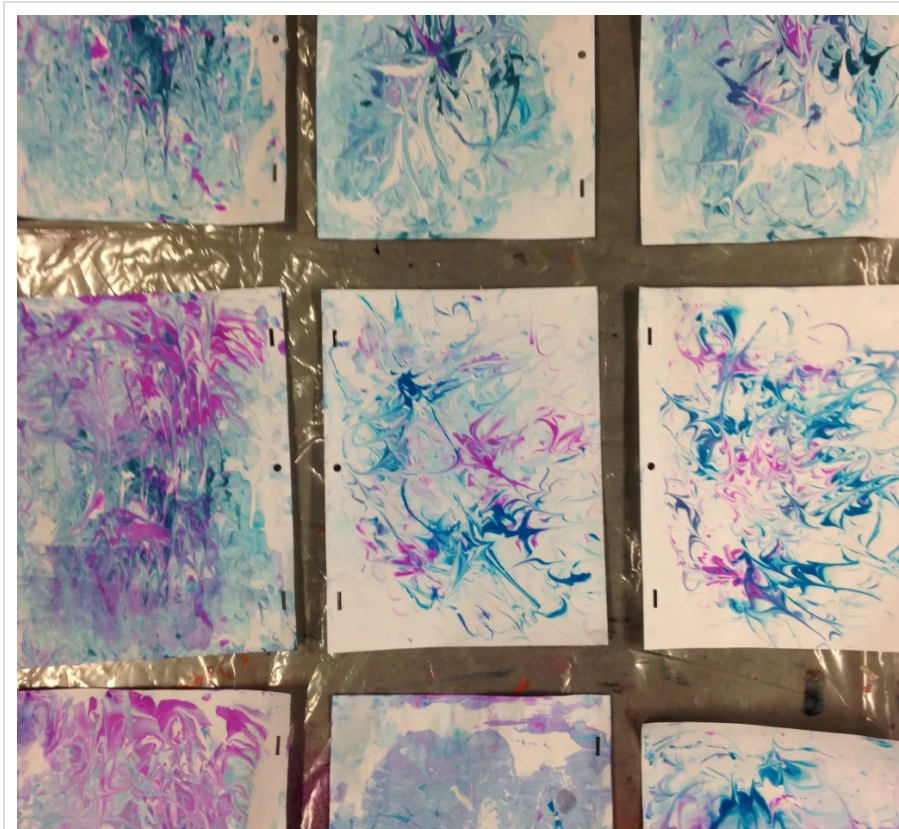




Image documenting production of a new music video by Jodie Mack (2015)

Jodie Mack's website [here](#)

Jodie Mack on Vimeo [here](#)

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1 THOUGHT ON “JODIE MACK”

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