

Film

Reviews

## Wondrous Animations Made of Quilts, Glass, and Found Objects

Jodie Mack uses materials like no other animator. Now, many of her films are available to the public for the first time.



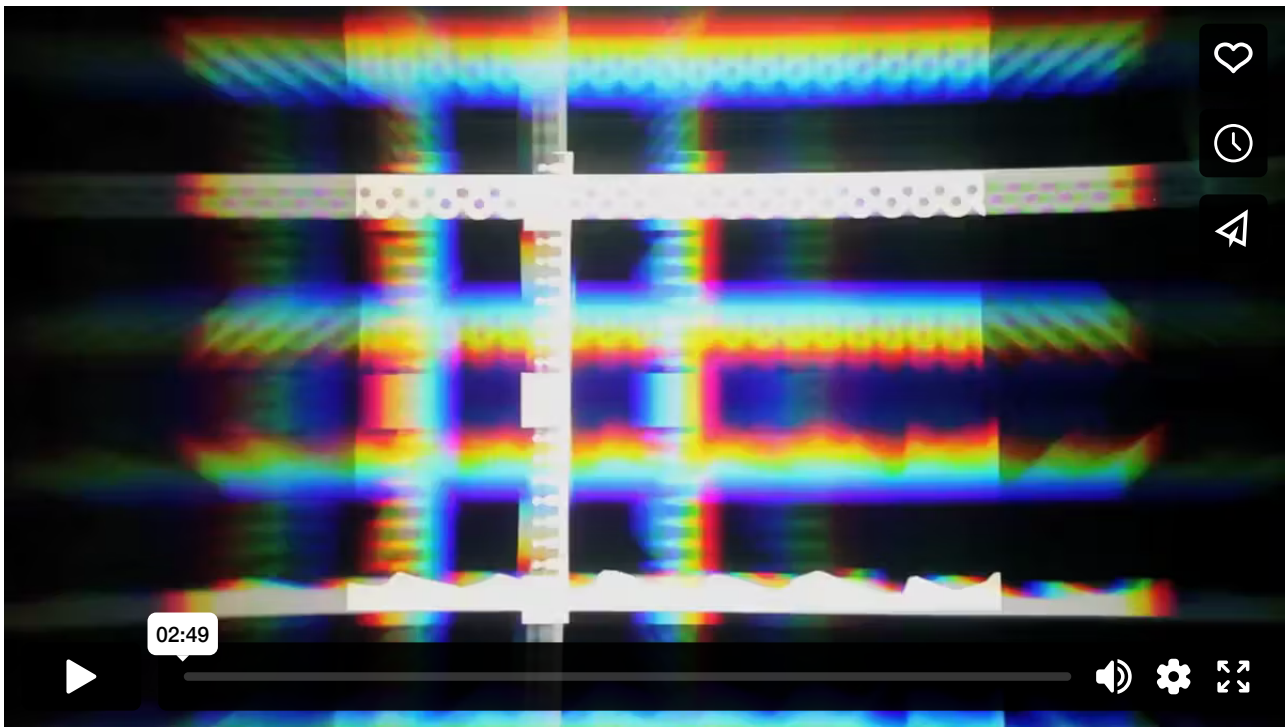
Nadine Smith January 24, 2020

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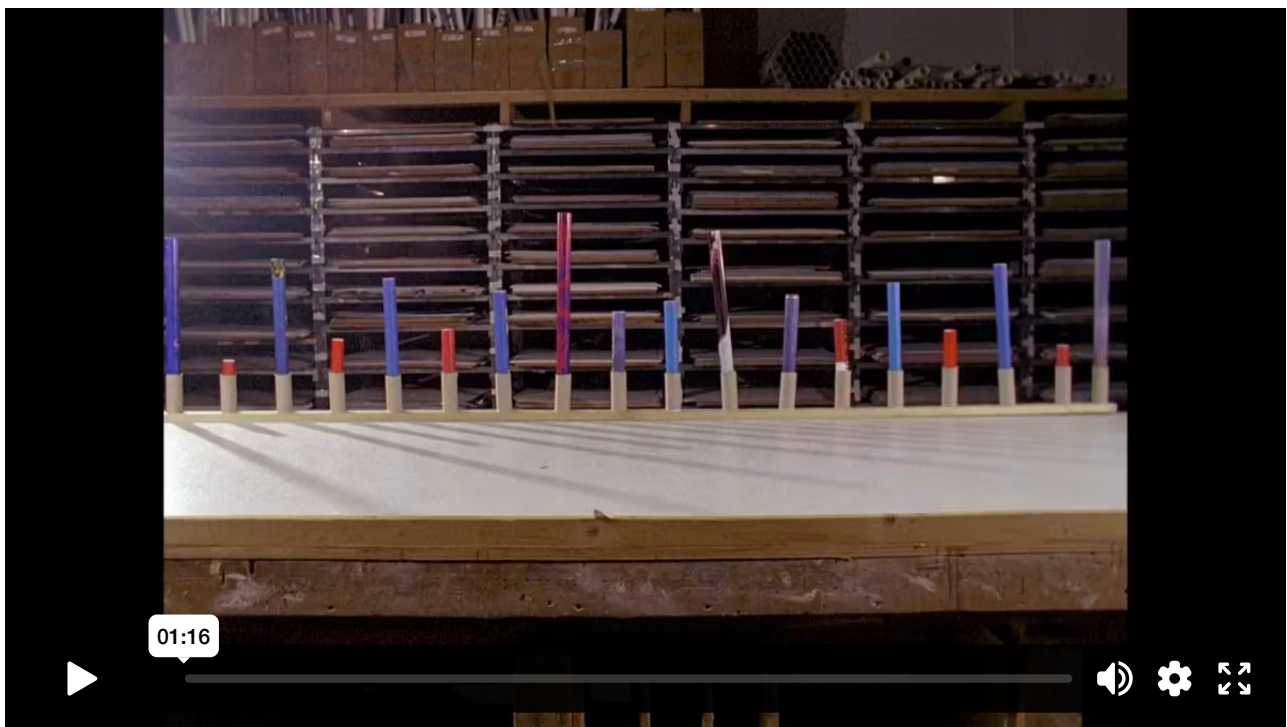


From ***Wasteland No. 1: Ardent, Verdant***

Animation is all about the material. The form's historically hand-drawn and meticulously assembled components remind audience and animators alike that what we're watching — a film strip, a reel of videotape, a disc — is a physical object, not just an illusion. When you hold something human-made in your hands, you're aware of its history, in touch with the worker who brought it into being. Animation has a similar effect because as a mode of filmmaking, it's about creating reality, not capturing it. The brush strokes, ink lines, and sculpted clay remind us that the labor of human hands is what projects a fantasy on the wall.



That emphasis on materiality might be inherent to animation, but it's particularly essential to the work of Jodie Mack, one of the most exciting filmmakers of the last decade. In 2016, I was officially initiated into the circle of Mack fanatics after seeing a live performance of her 16mm touring roadshow *Let Your Light Shine* at that year's Big Ears Festival in Knoxville. The 3D film that lends the program its name is only three minutes long, but it's one of the most compelling arguments for extra-dimensional filmmaking I've ever seen, a throbbing display of colored patterns of light that bleeds into the blackness of a theater and dances in the air like a psychedelic laser show.



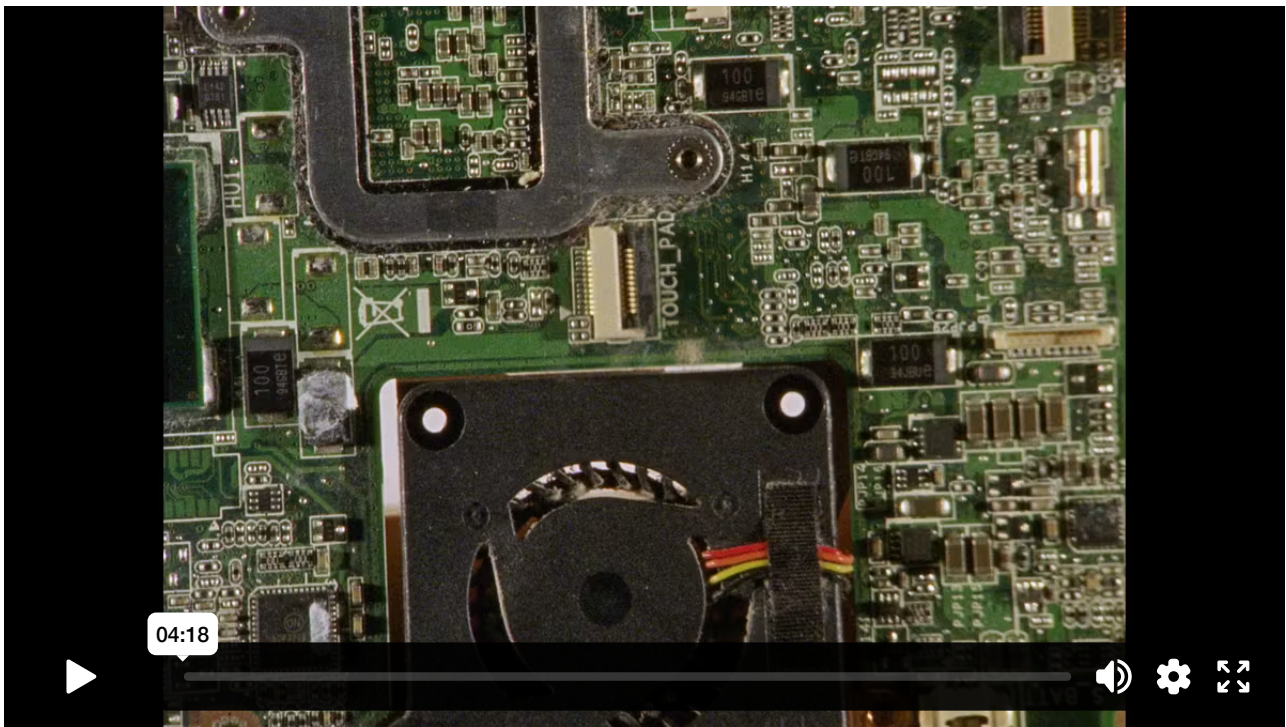
But the show's main attraction was *Dusty Stacks of Mom: The Poster Project*, a stop-motion documentary about the wholesale poster warehouse Mack's mother owned and operated, set to the tune of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* with rewritten lyrics that Mack performed live. It's mind-blowing, a tender and trippy family portrait that also offers an astute political analysis of our changing image economy. The three other shorts in the program — *New Fancy Foils*, *Undertone Overture*, and *Glistening Thrills* — are now widely available for the first time, part of **a smattering of work from 2012 to 2017 that Mack has made public on Vimeo.**



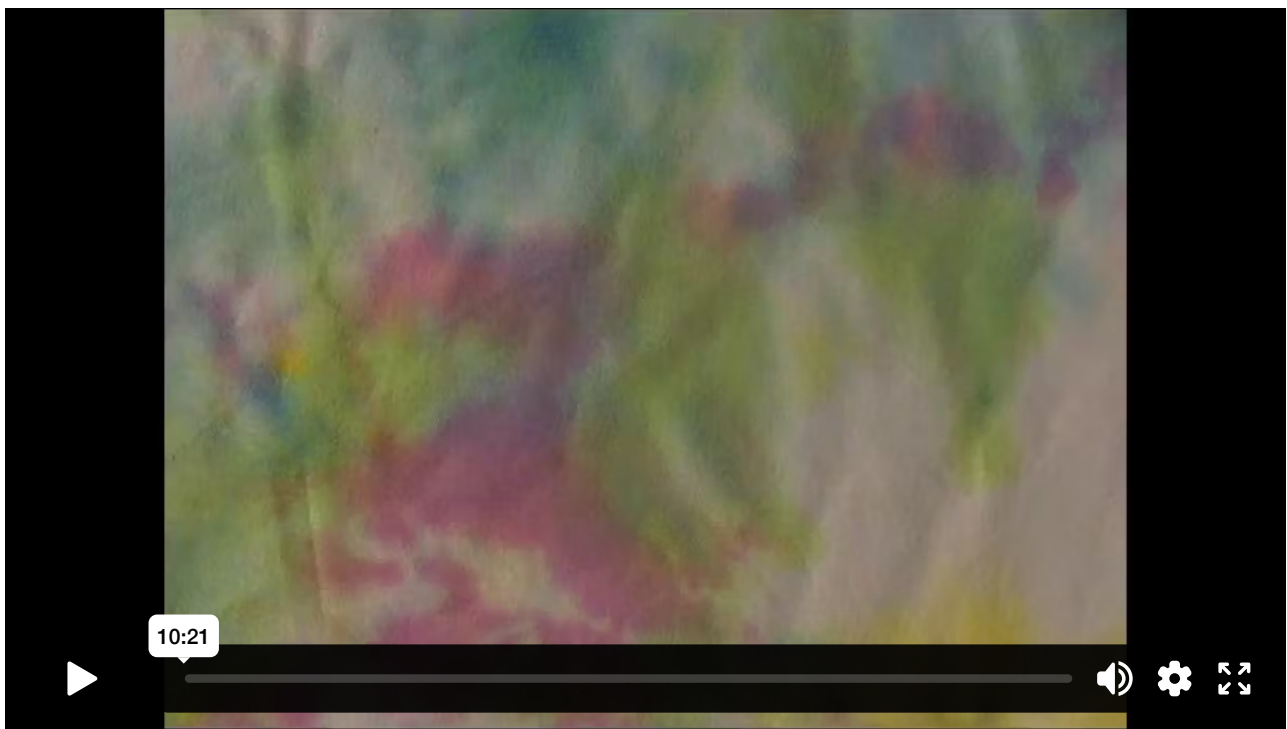
The earliest of these films are frenetic patchworks of found objects and recovered materials — patterns, textures, and geometric constellations from bygone eras of graphic design. Scavenging is a crucial part of Mack’s practice as a filmmaker. To create her images, she photographs, scans, and captures old quilts and afghans (*Blanket Statement #1* and *#2*), tie-dye T-shirts (*Undertone Overtone*), discarded color sample booklets (*New Fancy Foils*), and gaudy fabrics (*Razzle Dazzle*). Every frame is a discrete image of some old thing that was discarded by its owner in a past life, but is given new meaning by its placement in Mack’s work. The structure of these earlier shorts is fairly simple, with each image linked together like a paper chain. Mack’s sense of montage is downright musical. Each frame begins as a still image, like a single swatch of cloth, but through rhythm and tempo, Mack weaves individual threads into a greater whole.



The newer shorts are more expansive in scope, but the material interest is still the same. Photographed on 16mm, *Something Between Us* and *Glistening Thrills* move her style from the second dimension to the third, incorporating more light and motion. *Glistening Thrills* captures hanging mobiles made out of reflective and holographic bags from a gift shop as they twirl their way to ecstasy. In *Something Between Us*, costume jewelry, glass baubles, and other thrift store trinkets are transformed into portals to another world, reflective mediums for blissfully psychedelic prisms of light that swell into a kaleidoscopic cacophony. These two shorts suggest that Mack's work is maybe better classified as *expanded* cinema rather than avant-garde, in that she expands not only the potential of the medium, but also the possibilities of our own perception.



The most recent film of this group might appear a return to the second-dimensional form of her earlier work, but *Wasteland No. 1: Ardent, Verdant* is truly multi-dimensional in the breadth of its ideas. Mack's films have always zoomed in on the handmade, but here she complicates our assumptions about what that means. The reverent gaze once reserved for textiles is here applied to microchips, the silicon nodes and semiconductors becoming like the threads and patterns in an intricate tapestry. Mack juxtaposes technology with nature, flipping back and forth between computer processors and fields of flowers. The pairing suggests a polarized binary, but the images of nature she's chosen are as artificial as the microchips are handmade. Every picture of a stunning vista or pastoral scene was sourced from the internet, and each one is oversaturated with unnatural shades of color.



Alongside her recent feature *The Grand Bizarre*, *Wasteland No. 1* makes explicit a political tendency that's always been bubbling in Mack's films. The sheer amount of images in every movie she makes is a testament not only to the work that filmmaking requires, but the labor power lurking inside every commodity within our grasp, from the scraps of paper we discard to the heirloom quilts we pass down through our families. Capital wants us to see only the finished product, but Mack reveals the sweat and effort it takes to produce even one trinket.