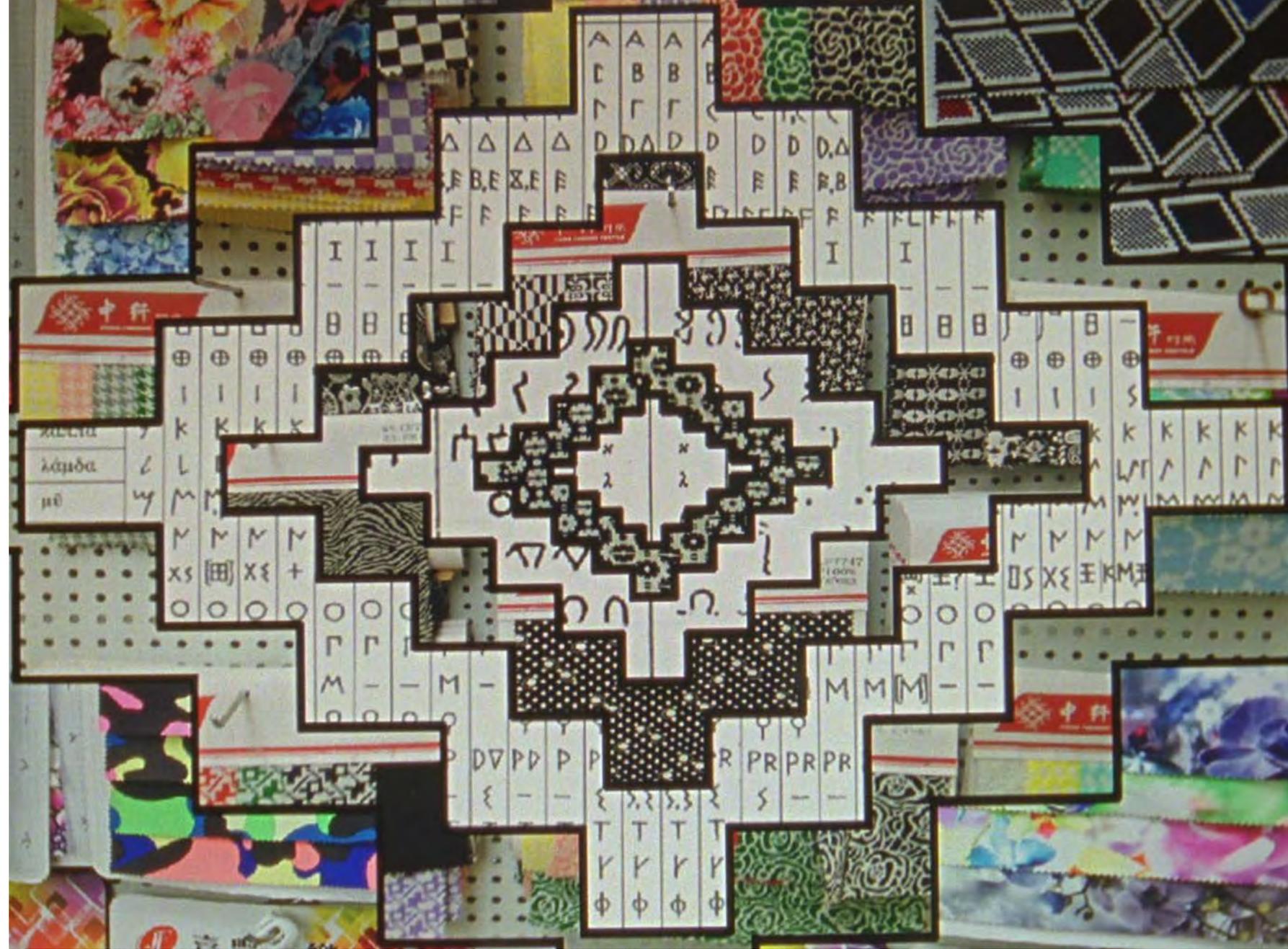


## JODIE MACK'S *THE GRAND BIZARRE*

New York Film Festival Projections Series  
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Jodie Mack has been making 16mm, stop-motion animated short films for over a decade, honing and refining a style drawn from the history of avant-garde animation into her own distinct practice. Taking influence from the hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage and the kinetic animation of Len Lye, Mack works in painstakingly choreographed 16mm and commits to an aesthetic of hyperactivity. Defined by rapid movement and vibrant patterns synchronized to beat-heavy music, Mack's films are controlled cacophonies of light, color, texture, and sound. Her first feature, *The Grand Bizarre*, made its US debut at the 56th annual New York Film Festival in the Projections series. The 2018 Projections program showcased 60 shorts and seven features from established filmmakers and unknowns alike in the Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center over the first weekend of October. Mack's film was a standout, blending formal pyrotechnics with an insightful probing of questions equally pertinent to both art and commerce in an increasingly interconnected world.

As her longest work to date, *The Grand Bizarre* expands some of Mack's enduring motifs—textiles, technology, language—to a global scale. Before the screening Mack introduced the film as “the enduring resilience of pattern and movement against the homogenizing forces of global commerce,” a credo which could very well summarize Mack's oeuvre as a whole. Living up to its title, *The Grand Bizarre* is a symphony of specificity, a dense deluge of images and music that overwhelms with its scale and the sheer amount of effort it clearly took to make. The film charts the journey of a gang of brightly-colored textiles around the world—twisting, squeezing, expanding, shrinking, brought to jittery life by Mack's restless energy. Beginning in overflowing suitcases, the textiles travel by plane, boat, car, sometimes stopping in villages or cities, but always moving forward in spasmodic bursts. Borrowing



Jodie Mack, *The Grand Bizarre*, frame enlargement, All images courtesy the artist.

filmic language from sources ranging from travelogues to anthropological and educational films, the only consistent visual factor is movement: each shot is brimming with shimmering stop-motion flux, either between whole frames (as with the classic Mack montage of close-up textures, flashing through textile patterns, pages of language textbooks, and computer chips in endless permutations) or a small part of it (as in the mesmerizing shots of cycling textiles reflected in car mirrors). Likewise, the soundtrack pulses and hums with music that transforms

found sounds into urgent beats. Moving effortlessly between repetition and variety, the film maintains a whip-quick energy for its entire 61-minute runtime, never overstaying its welcome.

Textiles are highly charged theoretical objects, a favorite topic of academic disciplines from anthropology to art history, but Mack forgoes the temptation to make any of these resonances verbally explicit. Acknowledging that the film went through a number of different versions, including voiceover-heavy and more narrative routes, Mack wisely settled on the form

of a musical. This wordlessness allows the montage to drive an associative approach to meaning, pushing form to the point that it becomes its own content. There's certainly a lot baked into the film about vernacular language and commerce, culture and labor and globalization, but it's all conveyed through visuals—and aided affectively by the score. Touches like a Skype jingle-sampling beat help to situate the film in a time and place, and guide the viewer's emotional connection to the oft-hectic visual palette.

Shown on a 16mm print, *The Grand Bizarre* is, by design, woven together like the textiles it depicts: composed of tens of thousands of still frames, perfectly stitched together in time to the music to become a tapestry both ornate and

overwhelming. The one piece of the film that seems out of place, interestingly enough, is the very beginning—a preface consisting of a burning pile of cardboard, a bright orange conflagration on a dark night. Responding to an audience query, Mack explained that the footage originated from an abandoned idea from the film, a miniature replica city, which she spent countless hours crafting and animating before deciding to scrap it. The fire is her burning the remains of the city, and in its meaninglessness and disconnection from the rest of the tightly crafted film, the clip introduces a certain underlying tension around the limits of sequence. The bonfire, a funeral image, suggests a wake for the other possible films that *The Grand Bizarre* could have been or contained, a specter that hangs over the rest of the proceedings



Jodie Mack, *The Grand Bizarre* (2018), frame enlargement.

as a reminder of what has been left out, what choices must necessarily be excised to bring any artistic work to completion. In an interesting temporal twist, the preface (as illuminated by the post-film Q&A) undercuts the perfectly crafted stitching of the film's colorful frames, and instead emphasizes the gaps.

Mack noted that the film's 61-minute runtime was chosen partially because it is the longest that will fit on a single 16mm reel. Mack's commitment to an increasingly rare format seems inextricably tied to the project's stance against the homogenizing monoculture: it provokes thoughts of an imaginary journey taken by the canister of *The Grand Bizarre* itself, traveling from Locarno, to Toronto, to New York, continuing the journey of the cloth protagonists held within it. There was another way in

which the screening at Projections offered a reminder of both the materiality of film and the site-specific potentialities of exhibition. At one jarring moment in the middle the screening, the percussive score dropped out, leaving the images twirling forward, naked of their auditory accompaniment. Without missing a beat, Mack, seated in the audience, improvised an acapella rendition of the soundtrack's bleeps and bloops until the issue was fixed. It was an unpredictable but apt illustration of Mack's style, handmade until the very end.

VINCENT WARNE