

Queen Bee: Jodie Mack in Locarno

An interview with the American director about her feature debut, "The Grand Bizarre," a film of bombastic pleasures and much more.

Christopher Small 13 AUG 2018



“All this yellow and black makes me think of bumble bees,” says Jodie Mack as she clambers up onto a chair in the Piazza Grande in Locarno. “Not leopards.” At the premiere of her new movie, *The Grand Bizarre*, Mack coaxed a world-weary festival audience into singing

happy birthday to her mother as she stood, conductor-like, in front of the screen recording us on her cell phone. No small feat to wheedle that response out of such a tired group of people.

What's great about Jodie Mack movies—not simply Jodie Mack herself—is an all-encompassing exuberance and an overwhelming generosity of spirit. Moment to moment, her movies contain more bombastic pleasure than just about anybody currently working in American cinema. Her art, for the most part, is a breathless reconfiguration of tablecloths, towels, dresses, and other everyday fabrics, into abstracted intersections of colliding colors and patterns. Meanwhile, what's great about *The Grand Bizarre* is all that and more. In it, Mack is playfully butting up against the boundaries of her own cinema; the movie is constantly re-inventing the rules for how you should perceive it, for how you might adjust to its utterly unique rhythms. It's Jodie Mack's everything movie. One senses a willingness to pursue whatever tangents may crop up in the process of discovering the film in the editing and, I suppose in a very different way, in the shooting.

For all this, the movie remains remarkably light and energetic. Our conversation, which took place in Locarno after the premiere of *The Grand Bizarre*, details the many inventive ways Mack imagined this would-be improvisatory opus. It should be no surprise, knowing Mack's method, that much of what plays as spontaneous in the cinema in fact is grounded in the strictest calculation, even when she's editing in camera, as was the case with some of her other films. There's nothing better than a movie that demands of you only your eagerness to traverse a multifaceted world of light, color, and sound along with it. Acute as the movie's implications are, it's also just a total breeze to watch it unravel on-screen. To see the world as Jodie does is to see it as an insect might as she flutters from the bosom of one flower to another.

NOTEBOOK: Last night, somebody asking a question after the film used the word "generous" in describing it. It's like you as a filmmaker are so enthusiastic to share with us, the audience, these colors, these fabrics, all this—whatever! First and foremost, it is not the ideas that make an impact.

JODIE MACK: Sure. I think that you're hitting the nail on the head about the problems of perceiving this type of work. This type of work always has ideas. But, because of the nature of a craft vs. art-based argument, or the idea of utilitarian objects and things like that, the idea of spectacle is going to take over and prevent people from accessing those ideas. And, it was actually a surprise for me to hear somebody call this particular film "generous," because I really struggled with the strategies I was going to employ for conveying information. I see language as a big opportunity and a big roadblock in cinema, of course, because you can't expect anybody to know what you mean without words. And without words, you are just leaving it open to interpretation. But the strategies for using words—voiceover, written text, interview, et cetera—are so limited. I feel that the film is not generous in some ways, because it is not telling people what to think, telling people what it is, telling people where it is, or addressing these direct connections that I see. It was a real process in this film. At one point, there were a lot of words.

NOTEBOOK: You mean there was voiceover?

MACK: There was rapping and singing and autotune and all sorts of things that were playing along with tropes of pop music. Ultimately, I just decided there was too much going on. There were a lot of questions about

whether the film would be a performance, like some of my other films. But it was a process of building up to cut it away at a certain point. We expect films to teach, but we should allow films to learn—if that makes sense. I became dedicated to allowing this film to learn as it goes along and allowing it to explore, throwing out many of the things I really wanted the audience to comprehend in pursuit of allowing them to bring to the film what they want.

NOTEBOOK: That is generous!

MACK: Maybe. I saw somebody the other day and they told me, “You’re asking a lot from the audience.” That’s the thing. It’s going to be different for every person. Ultimately, in this case I figured that if you removed the words, then you’d find the poetry. Potentially, it is generous. I have no perspective on the film. I didn’t watch it at any of the screenings here, either. I probably should have, just to see if the audience laughed. We walked in at the end and heard the laughter at the sneeze.



Photo by Christopher Small

NOTEBOOK: In the film, the aural and the visual are mostly running on separate tracks, sometimes they cross, sometimes they are separate.

MACK: The soundtrack was a huge pursuit and, again, was this opportunity to choose to convey information or not to convey information. Of course, a lot of my early education in experimental film had to do with the genre of visual music, which almost immediately brought up the notion of the dead end of visual music or the impossibility of visual music, strictly in relation to the development of technology and how these correspondences between images and sound could become automated. You never want the sound to overpower the image or steal its thunder. At one point, I thought the film should be completely silent, but the sonic element of what I was hearing around the world and how it was all centralized around a 4/4 time signature had to be there. The electronic music genre on every radio station in every country was really important

to me. But then that type of music is overpowering and was dominating a lot of the images. It became important to me to fuse elements of the music with diegetic sound. In the first song, for example, musical elements of the film come from car horns and airport sounds and water, things like that—things seen on screen. Of course, as we move on, the "narrator" doesn't necessarily make syntax, doesn't speak. But there are all these phonemes speaking to this theoretical, unreliable narrator who doesn't have anything to say. After all the songs were complete, they were just living in electronic music space. In fact, that is sort of a spaceless entity, right? There's no implication of an ambient space outside. So it became important to try and put the songs into space. I went out to a bunch of different locations and played/recorded the songs from different kinds of speakers and then cut them into the image track, so it was like the songs were playing from the radio in different spaces, playing over the world. That's how pop music travels. There was going to be a big Drake element in the film that went away because I found his presence to be so overpowering.

NOTEBOOK: The world over.

MACK: The world over. Just, like: arriving in Mumbai airport, we've got Drake. Arriving in Indonesia, we've got Drake. Or, a nineteen-year-old is walking me up a mountain talking about Ice Cube. All this stuff. Thinking about how these pop songs permeate other cultures in time. People telling me they really like a song from five years ago. Also, the cross-cultural relationship, so for example there's this Major Lazer song—what's it called? *Lean On*. If you were to see the video in a Western context, you would probably call it super problematic because they are appropriating all these sonic and visual elements from Indian culture. But I was in India a

few years after it came out, and everyone loved the song. People were showing me that they had learned all the dance moves from the song to perform from their wedding and stuff like that. So there's a real issue of context and power, an issue of reflexive appropriation. So the soundtrack evolved in multiple ways and, of course, I decided to use the sound of animation—the sound of the last eight minutes of the film being shot. I'm just animating, exactly that scene. It's an eight-minute scene so I'm probably only animating the first hundred frames or something in the soundtrack, but I felt like I needed to find moments of pause and moments of reflection. I was also really interested in the idea of sub-bass. Again, being a thing of new technologies, new fidelities available through different developments of sound technology. But also in the sub-bass' relationship to war technology, for example sonic warfare. The sounds of rumbling bombs, the sounds of sirens, and how the sub-bass is really at once quite violent and unifying. It's what makes everybody dance. You're taking war noise and using it as a party favor. So these are the things I was thinking of, but again I didn't want to talk about it. Now you're hearing *this*, and we should think about *this*, and what is *this* relationship. Ultimately, the different songs have different functions. There's urban sound, rural sound, diegetic sound from the spaces working within the songs, phonemes, the overlap of those things, and then these moments between the songs with diegetic sound. They are often using action movie sound effects to really amplify the notion of the impossibility of animation and documentary. I think it's quite a paradox and an oxymoron to say you have an animated documentary, because animation is so contrived. But to me, that speaks to the genre of documentary. It's kind of impossible to reach an idea of truth. The only truth I know is a balance of opposites, not an issue of facts.



Photo by Jodie Mack.

NOTEBOOK: It took you five years to make the movie and you were fixed on making it almost exactly an hour long. What was that like?

MACK: Yeah. [*sigh*] It's a super dark place to be at the bottom of this seemingly unending hill of labor that needs to take place—both physical and intellectual labor—which is something that really speaks to the idea of textiles: the physical making of them and the intellectual understanding of them, the historicizing of them. But, the first three years were all about building, and the expansion happened through the experience. First, it was only going to be about textiles, then the language came in, then the idea of rhythm came in. Then, I had a bunch of elements and sat on them for a while. I really felt quite lost. With all the turmoil going on

in America right now, for a moment I thought the film could never be finished. At a certain point, I realized that maybe this film had already been done for two years and that maybe I needed to get on with it and move on. I was really just searching and building. I shot six hours of footage because I was just like: “Which angle should I take of this, I need to get factories, I need to get them being sold, I need them in an art context, I need to get the plans,” and this, that, and the other. Ultimately, it was important to go through all these stages to know how to whittle down—kind of like a marble sculpture! As I was cutting everything out of the work print a few weeks ago, I was asking myself, “Why didn’t I use this shot or that shot?” It was a great exercise for me because I only really employ editing when making longer projects. All my shorter projects are shot in camera. Editing is so magical and all of a sudden I realized I had so much power, winding through these old workprints realizing that I used *that* shot no matter if it had a hair in the gate or whatever because it was important, because the car was driving from left to right and it was morning. We needed that because that’s where we were in the day and in the travel—picking things because of their function. Through looking at the footage that I had, I realized that I was working with certain kinds of sonic and visual motifs. I realized that I wanted to edit the film like a pattern. In some ways, the film is editing as a textile in which each new idea constitutes a different row of imagery as we move along, with the beginning and end serving as the tassels on the textile.

NOTEBOOK: Why were you traveling? Was it for the film?

MACK: Actually, this film started because I was touring internationally from 2013-2016 with this program I made called *Let Your Light Shine*. All of a sudden, I had lots of

international invitations to go and perform with this work. But I'm also quite a restless animated soul, so I had to bring my camera. I couldn't sit still any longer. The film started out in Oaxaca, Mexico. I was there doing a screening and someone said, "You should go meet my friend. He's from a weaving village. You've already made twelve films with textiles. Check these out." Shot that stuff, sat on that for a minute, was invited to China. The ideas totally expanded. From there, was invited to Poland. After working on it for about two years, I stopped taking invitations to perform with my earlier works because it was starting to interfere and for the first time started traveling for the film. I sought out India, for example. Just based on the textile and cinema history of the nation. Was there for seven weeks, bumping around the whole—well, not the whole country because it's a huge, deep complex network of cultures and fabric traditions but did what I could. And then kept on moving from there. Turkey, Greece, Israel, Morocco, Indonesia, et cetera. It started out through filmmaking and a lot of the connections that were made even with textile makers were through film people. A lot of it was funded by doing lectures at film schools and things like that. It's really an ever-expanding network.

NOTEBOOK: The thought of taking a Bolex through airport security so many times was filling me with anxiety.

MACK: Yeah, actually, I took this trip to Indonesia with a friend in February and I think that we counted that by the time we came home we had asked them not to x-Ray the film like 32 times or something like that, just on one trip. They didn't x-ray on that particular trip. I think I maybe received a few x-rays on one of the trips, two of the trips. Nothing catastrophic. It's a super crazy idea to go out with a Bolex camera, shooting stop-motion in foreign

places. Not knowing if the film will come out, not having an opportunity to re-shoot anything, knowing that you could lose or ruin the materials at any moment.

NOTEBOOK: There are shots in the films where the fabrics appear up against the windows in moving trains, in the rear view mirrors of cars. What was that process like?

MACK: It was totally insane. I was a real spectacle in public, a lot of the time. As a result, I did some of the best teaching of my life. Speaking to people—kids skipping school, people on the train—“What are you doing?” I had some clips on my phone on hand because I knew people would ask. I had film strips in my back pocket so that I could show them what was going on. We’d get into deep conversations about experimental film vs. mainstream cinema and what it does to the ideology of our society, to religion, to the place of women, to education. These things would just come up really quickly. I was really lucky. I never felt unsafe and was rarely told no. Get on the train, ask them if it’s okay, they say it’s okay, do it. All the rear-view mirrors shots are shot in cabs.

NOTEBOOK: You were hanging out of the window?

MACK: There’s a camera in the backseat of the car, and the mirrors are angled. There’s another person in the car clicking the camera and I’m holding these things up in each frame. We had to meet these cab drivers who really didn’t share a common language with us. We told them that we wanted to move the mirrors and that they wouldn’t be able to use them. “Would it be ok for you to use one mirror instead of three? Is it safe? Can you do it? We want to go to the port, we want to do this, we show them that it’s going to look like this. We’re going to make

magic together.” Showed up at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul and said, “I’m doing this, I’m really excited about it. You want to make magic together?” That was the question I kept asking everybody.

NOTEBOOK: People were like...

MACK: They were like, "yeah, I want to make magic together!" Great—let’s do it. There were offers for them to use the footage for their business: make a commercial, do whatever you want with it, you can upload it wherever you want. A lot of people didn’t want that in the end. The textile makers specifically had a real common understanding with me. They saw me as a textile maker in some ways, because of the labor that goes into our work, because of the incrementalization of weaving and loom work with the stop-motion techniques that I was using. I have to say, I got really, really, really lucky. I don’t know if it’s because I’m a tiny, white, cartoon character-esque person. Or because the world is a lot less cruel than the media leads us to believe. Or if there’s a power relationship as a tourist. Or what? The camera, too—a Bolex—is a great way to get people to take mercy on you. They are excited about it, their grandfather had one—things like that. I had a charmed experience all the way with the camera in public spaces.

NOTEBOOK: I’m fascinated by the people moving through the spaces in these stop motion sequences.

MACK: To me, that is one of the most interesting elements of this type of production. Of course, you could go out and people would want to cross in front of you and they’d say, “I’ll just wait.” And I’d say, “No, just go.” And then I’d just shoot them, knowing they’d be a blur. That was the whole beauty of it: things going on around it. That type of footage became much more assaultive

and aggressive to me than the crazy flicker film parts. There is so much going on and you have a little frame within a frame of a flicker film occurring. But then all this action going on behind you: cars, people, trees, birds, cats, dogs, monkey, whatever. It's almost like when you look at the full-frame stroboscopic stuff: that's the rest. There's only one thing to concentrate on, there. It felt like a breakthrough for me visually, to make that type of stuff seem serene. Ultimately, it just became important to extract the life of the environment around the textiles as well.

NOTEBOOK: There's a scene that goes from the way water is swirling around some rocks and the way patterns on fabrics swirl in stop-motion. It's complementary and a strange contrast.

MACK: Well, one of the things that interests me as an artist and an animator and a human in general is the lengths to which humans go to recreate reality. I always feel like art has an inferiority complex to nature. Nothing can be more awesome than nature. In one respect, it's like, why try to compete with that? We create these complex systems to divide time, or to divide space, or make maps. Especially in the case of animation, to make things in 3D. Make this huge system of creation for drawing reality, pulling from stories that are borrowed from theatre and literature and religion. Repeating certain strategies through different technologies. It was important for me to draw a parallel between natural phenomena and these synthetic materials. A lot of the crunched up, screwed up fabric began to represent the water. A lot of different things began to represent the horizon, rocks, mountains, things like that. When you get into how these patterns and the textiles function in certain ways at times, it was all about nature. "This diamond is actually a mountain reflected in the lake, and

this squiggle is actually a wave.” I wanted to have moments reflecting upon those sorts of parallels.

NOTEBOOK: Perhaps I was wrong to characterize them as a contrast. You said it was an animated documentary. Even the stop motion frames, shot on celluloid, document the animation. Like old cell-animated cartoons, in which you can see a hair, a finger smudge.

MACK: I totally agree that, while it’s not present on-screen, you could argue that this is a documentary about me making the movie. It’s a behind-the-scenes, or something like that. There are definitely elements of this. Whatever my ideas were about these patterns, between textiles and music, it really came to be about the alienation of labor for me. What it meant to experience place through the lens of a filmmaking experience. What it means for people to have to work and to not be able to do whatever they want. These Marxist ideas for how there would be varying types of alienation for the laborer: from themselves, because they can’t spend their time how they want; from the people they know, because they can’t spend their time with them; from the product they are creating or selling because usually someone else is making the money from it, et cetera. To me, it became more about that. Alien nations and alienation, and what that means in terms of an individualistic identity vs. a dualistic identity.

NOTEBOOK: You don’t really show these people and yet you show the objects they’re creating. There’s also this parallel history of people who have made these things who are invisible.

MACK: Exactly. Invisible labor is what it’s all about. What you encounter with the textiles is like, here are two textiles. This one took five years to make with a family of

fourteen and this one was made by printing out the pattern from a computer because they stole the design and this, that, and the other. I have them both in my hands, and I can't tell the difference between them. There's all this invisible labor involved in all the products that we're consuming all the time, all the films we are making. That was a big question. A lot of the six hours of footage has people in it. Not because I necessarily wanted to shoot them but when you show up with the camera, they want to be in the movie. We shot all of these scenes but then, coming back to the Western world, it's like, "No, problematic, problematic, problematic, problematic. No, no, NO!!!" But, again, there's a power dynamic of what it means to hold the camera, which is off-set by the fact that everybody has a camera at this point. We've moved beyond this direct power relationship from one-to-one. It really became about the invisible labor that surrounds us. We don't think about the time that is taken, the systems that it has taken to produce this.

NOTEBOOK: Clothes from Bangladesh...

MACK: Clothes from Bangladesh, avocados from Mexico, asparagus from Chile. What that actually means is that everything is so caked-in and amalgamated, we'll probably never get to the bottom of it.

NOTEBOOK: Do you weave and sew yourself?

MACK: I started sewing a little bit before this project, which was exciting. But I had never really sewn before. I did a bit of weaving on the road with some of the families.

NOTEBOOK: How was that?

MACK: It was fine! It's just not—yeah, it's funny because it is so similar to animation. But it doesn't move, so it doesn't excite me as much. I think I'm more of a choreographer—a weaver of time, of ideas, of images and sounds. If that makes sense. If I had a dollar for each time I didn't make sense...