



By Whitney Mallett

Dec 19 2015, 3:20pm

## **Maggie Lee's 'Mommy' Is a Devastating, Nuanced Documentary About Losing Your Parents**

***Mommy* chronicles a return to Lee's childhood home in New Jersey in the wake of her mother's unexpected death. It's a collage of home videos, grief, cell phone videos, suburban memories, Kumon classes, stuffed animals, and GeoCities aesthetics.**

Like her film *Mommy*, **Maggie Lee** is funny, perceptive, and says things in the simplest, most effective way possible. Her new movie chronicles a return to her childhood home in New Jersey in the wake of her mother's unexpected death. It's a collage of home videos, photos, grief, cell phone videos, suburban memories, Kumon classes, stuffed animals, and GeoCities aesthetics. It's poignant but also lol. Pain and humor exist side-by-side in Maggie's post-internet universe.

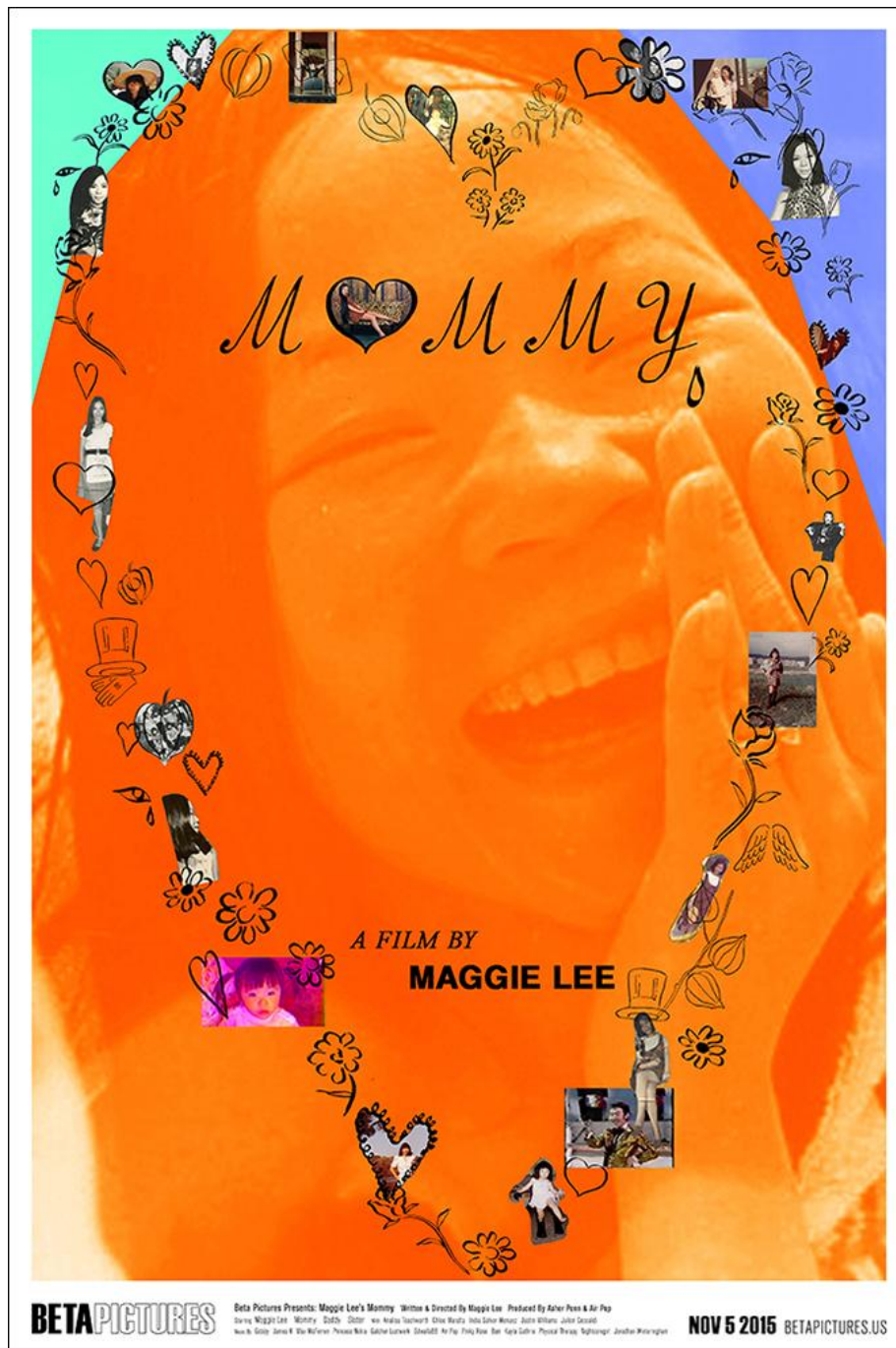
*Mommy* is a seriously unique film. The closest analog is maybe Laurie Anderson's ***Heart of a Dog***, which shares the subject of loved ones lost and also a multimedia approach to storytelling. But even Anderson's film follows more closely the rules of an essay film and language sometimes takes priority over images. In contrast, Maggie weaves the two together in these expressive diaristic montages cut to a frenetic pace. What's remarkable is the way she's constantly adapting and playing with form to find the absolute best way of expressing an idea at that moment in the story.



*All images courtesy of Maggie Lee and Beta Pictures*

Her film begins with her mom Yei-Ping Mennor-Lee first coming to America 1971. She moved from Taiwan and worked hard to open her own Chinese-American restaurant in New Jersey. Maggie's father who was a magician abandoned the two of them early on, forcing her mom to have to work even harder. Maggie's mother Ping was of course concerned about her daughter's impractical aspirations to be an artist in New York. The way Maggie tells the story, every part unfolds with sweet details, from the miniskirt her mom arrived in America wearing to the little mints her dad always had with him that "looked like tiny ball bearings."

You can **rent or buy *Mommy*** on-demand now through **Beta Pictures**, a studio founded by the film's producer Asher Penn. But it's also already been shown in a few different contexts including a movie theater screening of the first part at Anthology Film Archives in 2014 and a sculptural installation at Greene Naftali gallery as part of a group show this past summer, where the film was looping on three TV sets that Maggie personalized. Stay tuned for another iteration of *Mommy* at the Whitney Museum this spring, too. VICE caught up with Maggie to talk about *Mommy* at her apartment in Brooklyn last week.



**VICE: Was there a moment when you realized you needed to make this film?**

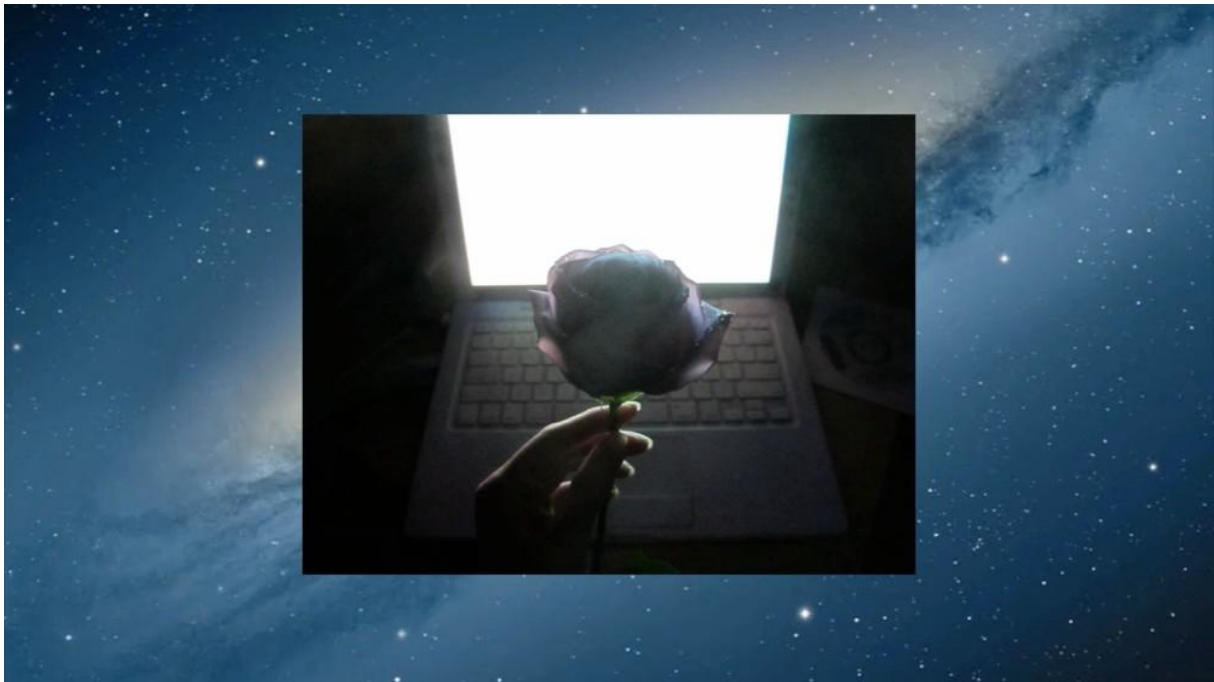
**Maggie Lee:** After my mom died, I was in New Jersey and it was really depressing. I was always blogging. I was constantly documenting things because it was so lonely there. Asher saw my blog posts and he asked me if I wanted to make a movie. I had been working with him for so long before, too.

I wanted to recreate all these feelings I had while living in New Jersey. I wanted to film it so I could have it in some way before I had to leave my life and my childhood home. I would sleep in every room and recreate these feelings and put them in the

movie. Also, my mom was always saying she was writing a book. I really wanted her story to be complete.

**When you were back in your childhood home going through all these old videos and photos, were there surprises?**

We never had cable or anything, but I loved TV. I would always watch these home videos over and over again. And I think my dad was filming a lot at the time because he knew he was leaving our family and he wanted me to have something for me to remember times together. I really only remember him through these little experiences. It was really surprising when I went through these tapes and there were some clips I'd never seen before. I felt really emotional watching these little home videos.



**You have different chapters in the film about your mom, your dad, and your sister. Do you feel like you are mix of all these people in your family?**

Going through this and making the film, I realized a lot of me comes from my dad, even though I barely even knew him. Everyone who raised me is a part of me.

**How did you decide to structure the film with these chapters?**

At first, the film was so abstract and unorganized. I was just making things. If I had an idea, I would just do it really fast. We were working with this start-up **to.be** and I was using their program to make mood boards and doodle on the interface program. It made sense to make chapter markers using to.be's program—that's when the film started coming together.

**It has that balance between being abstract and structured. It feels really suitable to our attention spans as kids of this internet-generation, too. Do you feel like your diaristic impulses come from growing up online? What kind of kid were you when it came to the early web?**

When I first got a computer, I was obsessed with it. I grew up with a Japanese neighbor and her parents owned a calculator company, so they had a Mac early on. We had an Apple computer too, but the screen was black and green and it barely worked, so that doesn't count. But yeah, I was always obsessed with computers and when I finally got one, I was always on it. Staying up in chatrooms until four in the morning and making a web site. I was just reading all the terms and conditions because I just thought you had to.

**Sometimes I want to be diaristic, but I'm so self-conscious of the persona I'm putting out being terrible. From your movie, it seems like you aren't self-conscious about that, but I wonder still if you ever feel that conflict?**

I was really careful to make everything perfect because if I'm embarrassed of something then there's no turning back. But I was also fearless in a way after all this happened. I felt this independence and that it was up to me to take charge of my future. I was so happy to see the end of being in New Jersey hell and I wanted to show everybody and tell my story. I just felt like this was something I had to do.

**Part of your relationship with your mother has a conflict that's common to a certain first-generation experience. You want to be an artist, but your mother had made these sacrifices. Through the process of making the movie, did you come to understand your mom's point of view more?**

I was always angry and angsty, and she was always lecturing me. It made our relationship really tough, but after going through this, I now understand my mom much more. She just wanted me to have a better future and to have a safe life so I wouldn't have any trouble.

**When you read parts from the book she was writing, were there parts of her life she hadn't told you before? Did you see her from a different perspective?**

It just made me remember how sweet she is. I had never really read writing by my mom to herself. But some of the text in the film is also from homework that I found when she was taking ESL classes. The intro and the story of how she came to the US is from that homework. I really liked having that moment shine.

Making the film, I just realized how strong of a woman she was, and how hard she worked. She was the first to bring her whole family from Taiwan so that everyone could have a better life. It was so sad because that's what she loved to do—to work hard. But when she finally began to relax and retire that's when she passed away. She only lived to have her first retirement check. But it was really sad because she had

been talking about retirement her whole life and talking about being able have a job where you could have the safety of a retirement check. But we realized that her retirement checks weren't transferable to our family. What she was working for all these years just disappeared.

**You've been working on this film for a while, but you haven't been totally a recluse about it. You've been sharing different versions in different contexts along the way. How has it been to watch people watch the film?**

I really like to watch it with everyone. I love that feeling. It's always different in each setting. The most exciting thing is talking to people after the screening, people who I don't know, and they're so touched by it and have had similar experiences. There's a generational thing that people relate to. Everything is really fast-paced. I was just cutting everything really fast so it is visually stimulating every second so no one gets bored.

Today, I found a place in the back of a guitar store in Midtown to get DVDs duplicated. And the clerk said he usually just checks to see if the DVDs are burning correctly. And he said he didn't have to watch [my movie], but he did... and he also said, he didn't have to like it, but he loved it and thought it was really innovative. Then the other tech people turned around from their work stations and smiled at me.

**It's really not like any film that exists. You really didn't seem to be bogged down with it needing to be a certain way.**

There were no rules to anything. Asher and I are really amateur at this, but we wanted to make a high-production film as best we could. And no one was doing anything like this so I felt like I needed to.

**I love that story in the film where the people who buy your childhood home are complaining about this Chinese lantern plant and it made me think about the different ways someone lives on: Your mom lives on through that plant and now also through this film. Are there other ways you know she's still with you?**

There are a lot of things that happened while making this film, when I was feeling really down, there were times when I felt like my mom would reappear when I felt like I needed her. When I was sad, I would smell her perfume and I would feel safe and comforted. She just has these little cute things that she would do and sometimes I feel like she's playing a joke. Like one time, I was thinking of my mom and then I found \$10 on the floor. Stuff like that happens. Another time, I was worried about having to pay for all these NJ bills with the little money I had and I went to light incense, and when I went back to cleaning, I found money to pay the bills.



When I was at my sister's house, not long after mom died, I was sleeping in the living room and I felt my mom's presence like as if she was sitting in the chair. But I just hid under the blanket. It was too scary because it was not something that I'd ever felt before.



**Has making such a personal film changed how much you share online?**

I blog less about [my mom], but I don't know. I feel like I go in waves. Like I've put all my energy into this and I want to do something completely different now, but I can only make things when I feel like there's a need.

I also do feel vulnerable that I'm giving all this information out into the world. I'm usually really protective and careful about what information I give out. This is something, though, that I have no choice but to do. It's scary letting everyone know but I want everyone to see it at the same time.

**You say you only can make things when you feel there's a need. After this, do you want to make more films or is it more a matter of needing to feel compelled to make one?**

I never felt like I could make something like this. This is the longest project that I ever made and the most serious. But I'm ready to take on a new project with something that I have no experience in. If I want to do something and don't know how to do it, I just try to do it in the simplest way. This film made me excited to experiment with new media, and I want to keep on challenging myself that way. I feel like it's been a coming of age thing. After working on the film, I feel more mature and more independent. I'm totally ready to do more things like this.