

# ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

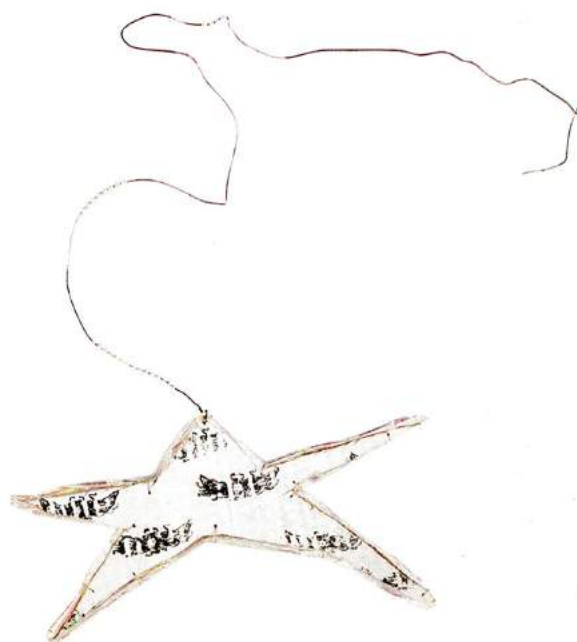


Above: Maggie Lee, *Mommy*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 56 minutes 23 seconds. Below: Maggie Lee, *creative reuse star*, 2015, acrylic, wire, beads, cellophane, 11 1/2 x 5 1/2".

1000 WORDS

## MAGGIE LEE

TALKS ABOUT MOMMY



**MAGGIE LEE'S** *Mommy*, 2015, is about devotion—about filial piety, love, guilt, but also about the haunted fidelity between the image and the body, the projection and the real. The video is largely a recounting of the artist's adolescence, with her mother and their time together at its center. But it is superimposed with scrolling text, voices, drawings, animations, footage recorded on phones: a palimpsest of motion graphics in the age of Snapchat. And the icons of Lee's suburban family life also migrate into her hanging hearts and stars, which echo the decals in her sister's car, and into her zines, with their ciphers of DELIA's alt-mall style, model-minority yearning, and suburban punk revolt. Here, the artist talks about her work and its mutation of autobiography into something fantastic.

—Wendy Yao

**AFTER MY MOM DIED**, I was constantly documenting things as fast and as much as possible, using whatever I had on hand, whether it was my phone or my computer. I was living alone in New Jersey in the house I grew up in, and I wanted to feel everything, sleep in every single room of the house before we had to sell it, and record everything. It was about storytelling and about preserving life and memories. All of my work is diaristic, but this project has had the most meaning in a way. It felt like something I had to do.

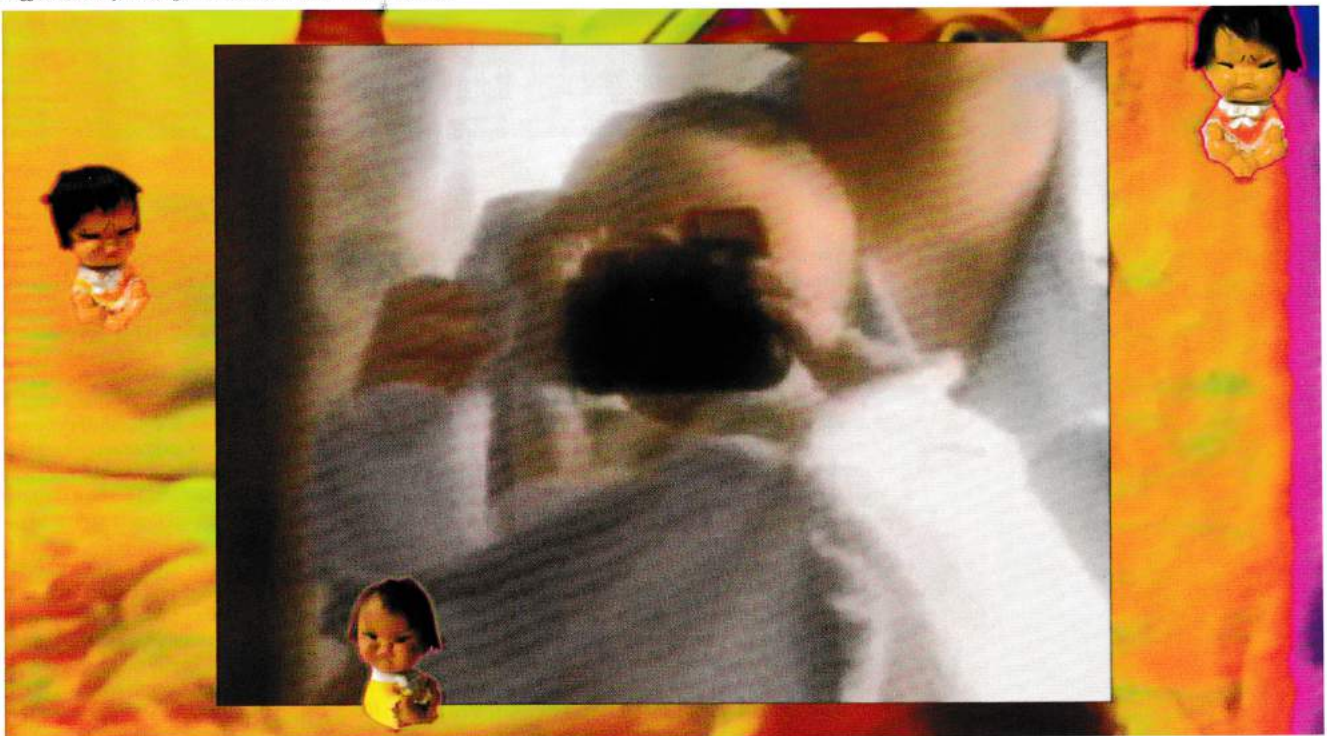
I accumulated so much material—everything was pulled from everywhere. I'd go through home videos or read through my old journals and rediscover things from my past. Cleaning would take forever because there was a memory attached to every single object. In the garage, I found all these slides I'd never seen before, photographs of my mother when she was young. So I set up the slide projector in my room—it was really exciting to see these images for the first time. Those slides eventually became the film's first

chapter. The text you hear in the voice-over during that sequence is an autobiographical essay that my mom wrote for an ESL class. It was read by my best friend Jen Shear's mom. She's Taiwanese too, so I thought she would be the right person to do the voice-over.

I wanted to re-create experiences throughout the film, so I tried to figure out the best way to transmit each feeling. In one section of the film, there's text that scrolls across the bottom of the screen that's kind of like a poem. I wrote it while I was trying to remember my happy place, when I was a six-year-old with my big sister. *Empty can of Orangina . . . laying in bed looking at rotating black light star projector . . . 70s 90s punk skater mod tomboy hardcore thrift vegan.* It's like, when you're really young, and you hear a song that you love but you don't know what it is, and the sound is really specific. You spend the rest of your life seeking it out, trying to recapture that moment and, through the process, creating styles and interpretations revolving around that idea.

Certain images in the film are references to specific

Maggie Lee, *Mommy*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 56 minutes 23 seconds.





Four stills from Maggie Lee's *Mommy*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 56 minutes 23 seconds.

**Memories were more valuable than actual things when I was working.**

memories, but they're abstracted. The flowers and the hearts are based on stained-glass cutouts that my sister had on the windows of her car. I re-created them with window gel and filmed them because I was inspired to capture that detail.

Memories were more valuable than actual things when I was working on *Mommy*. That's why I had to make everything really fast, to record all my thoughts and ideas, everything I wanted to say, to pack in as much information as possible, while it was in its purest form, before it was forgotten, and to be careful not to leave anything out. I treated this film as a tangible, condensed archival document, in compensation for all the loss and things I could not hold on to.

The layering of sound and images and the devices like scrolling text were ways to add extra information. I used a new software program called to.be, which I was testing for the movie. It had never been used to make a film before, so it was really exciting to work with it. It's just a basic blank template (called a field) that you can drag things onto, and you can

move things around, make them different sizes, and draw on top of them. I used it to create mood boards, putting down thoughts, collaging video, text, graphics, animation, and sound. You can see that to.be is also used for each chapter introduction.

At first, the film was really abstract, but it kept changing and building on itself. It became a kind of archive of everything in my life up until the day I finished editing. I tried to incorporate everything that was important to me and everyone I love. That's why there's such a long thank-you list. I wanted to shout out everyone who ever helped out or talked to me about *Mommy*.

Before *Mommy*, New York City in 2010, I was going to friends' DJ sets and shows. Using their music on the sound track was a way to share what I identified with at the time. It was also a way to showcase the creative work that was forming in that scene.

I wanted to find the right person for each voice-over, like my friend Jen's mother. But I also enjoyed doing things simply, quickly, and easily. My father's

voice-over is read by my roommate, Justin, because Justin happened to be there when I was working on that part of the film. I asked, "Do you have three minutes right now?" and we just went into my closet, and I showed him how my dad would say something, and we kept rehearsing it till it sounded right.

I was careful about what information I gave out in the film and about how things were said, because I was aware that people I didn't know would see it. I felt a little vulnerable. But it feels good to screen the movie, to see it with other people and talk about it. Sometimes I'll get really emotional, but sometimes I'll feel good and think, "Wow, I finally finished this. It's done."

I would like to say it's an art film, but it's a documentary at the same time. It's been screened in movie theaters and event spaces and shown in galleries as part of exhibitions. I wanted to kind of sell it as an artwork but also to make it affordable so that everyone could see it. So it's also available as a five-dollar rental on Vimeo.

When I started working on *Mommy*, I had a BlackBerry, but then I switched to an iPhone and then got an HD camcorder. I'd barely done anything with video before, so this project taught me how to work with a new medium and how to make a movie in the most DIY, experimental way. I want to keep making movies, but I'd also like the next thing I do to be completely different. I think it's important to experiment, and it's also more fun than doing things you've done before. What you make doesn't have to be perfect, as long as it gets your message out.

I've felt that way since I was a kid. When I was in seventh or eighth grade I started making zines because I was really attracted to the DIY approach. I remember the first zine I ever saw—it was really simple, but it was really cool, and I realized that this was something I could do too.

I started blogging around then—first with Teen Open Diary when I was about ten, and I was just obsessed with it and blogged every single thing that was important to me. My mom was always at work,

so I had to entertain myself, and I would just go online and talk to people on a message board. I had a GeoCities page. Later I got LiveJournal. And then I had BlogSpot when I moved to New York in 2005. So this is something I've been doing my whole life. Every blog has a different sensibility—the music or the way it's written or other elements. You create a mood or a style, kind of like DJ-ing or making a playlist. For me, it's a way of seeing and organizing, and an extension of self-publishing.

In 2010, my mom found my blog, so I stopped blogging because now it was tainted, not meant for her to read. So I deleted it and started using the name Suede87. She only found my blog because her friend taught her how to use the computer. Then I created a new blog to please my mom. The posts were mostly about music she would like, like Bach. I made this blog just for my mom to find, and she found it and left me a voice mail about it: "Oh, I love this so much." I wish I had a recording of that voice mail. □

Maggie Lee, *Mommy*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 56 minutes 23 seconds.

