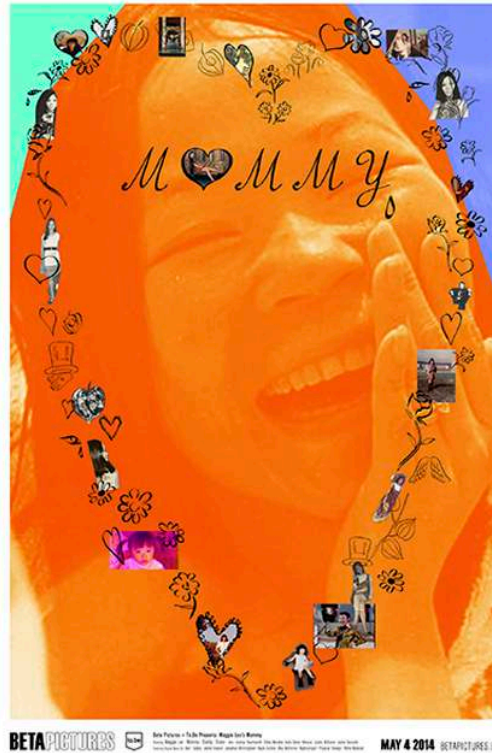


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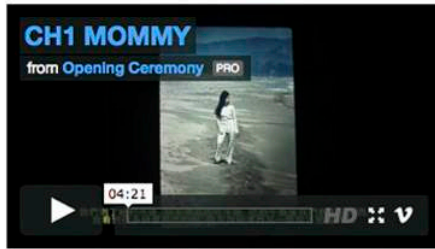
Maggie Lee's Mommy

SCREENING ROOM: MAGGIE LEE TALKS MOMMY

BY FIONA DUNCAN | THU. MAY 8, 2014 | 12:00 AM | CULTURE CLUB

At the premiere of her film *Mommy* at Anthology Film Archives this past Sunday, artist [Maggie Lee](#) wore a plastic flash camera around her neck. In a swift, single-handed gesture, she'd reach for it and snap a shot, candidly capturing the scene. *Mommy* is half-made of footage like this. The 45-minute documentary tells of the life and sudden death of Lee's mother, a first-generation Taiwanese American living in New Jersey who married a magician, opened a restaurant, and had two daughters, whom she largely raised by herself after her husband performed an illusionless disappearing act. Maggie narrates her mother's life story, visualizing it in found footage—old photographs, static-strung VHS recordings, and newspaper clippings—and her own diaristic archive (now 26, Maggie's been selfie-ing since she was a tween).

Part vlog, Vine, music video, and newsreel, *Mommy* shifts tones with hyperlink logic. A montage of Maggie's partying days transitions to a tour of her empty, for-sale family home, and old voicemails are layered over low-res cellphone video of hands in space. The film's Internet look was aided by a new "collage the Internet" program called [to.be](#). The film's production and distribution is also very new media: made with [Beta Pictures](#), *Mommy* will be released in full via YouTube on May 11, one week after the live premiere at Anthology. In anticipation of that release, OC presents an exclusive clip from the film and an interview with its maker, Maggie Lee.



FIONA DUNCAN: When did you start working on this film and how long did it take?

MAGGIE LEE: My mother passed away in May 2012 shortly after her sixty-sixth birthday and right after she received her first retirement check. I had to move back home immediately and was constantly documenting and writing in my diary. It took about two years to sift through a lifetime's worth of information with a fine comb.

How did the film and/or you evolve through its making?

My mother was always making me so angry and constantly stressing me out. When I moved to New York City, I made it a point to be independent and have little contact with her. It was only after I started working on the film that I realized she was trying to protect me so I wouldn't have to struggle as much as she did.

I went through some major life changes in the aftermath of her death and the process of making this movie, like learning not to be so angsty—there's no time for that. Now, I try to be a smiley face, enjoy life, surround myself with what I love, and make beautiful things.

There's a part in the film, after the death of your mother, where you speak of reuniting with her in your dreams. It reminded me of something I once heard Bruce Sterling say about how, as he's gotten older and seen loved ones die, his dreams have come to be almost exclusively populated with the dead. He mused that the dream world may be an afterlife. What do you think about this?

I definitely think of time with my mother in dreams as a continuation of her afterlife. Prior to her passing, she was creating a lot of drawings of a smiley face angel looking through the window of a smiley face person going to the bathroom. The drawings said, "An angel is always watching you, even in the strongest places." She didn't speak English that well and meant to write "strangest places."

Do you feel her watching you in places, strange or strong?

There were a few instances where I was visited by my mother's presence. Once, when I was alone cleaning the house, organizing my mom's bills and thinking about how they were so expensive and how I didn't have enough money to pay for taxes/sewage fees/etc., I stepped out to take a break. I lit some incense and when I came back in, I found enough money to pay for the bills on the stairs. I called my sister and relatives but no one had come by the house to leave money in the stairway. It's definitely a good sign and I know my mommy is protecting me because I'm her baby.

Your mom was such a fashion plate. Are there particular outfits that stand out in your memory?

Favorite garments of hers? Items you've inherited?

Yes. There's this sheer white-and-red knit cardigan from Taiwan in the '70s. I love it. I'm almost afraid to wear it sometimes because I want it to last forever. Also, my mom always wore Kenzo Flower perfume, so I like to wear that when I think of my mom or wear her clothes.

You were born in 1987, the same year as me, which I always think of as an interesting time, as we came of age exactly as the Internet was coming of age. In *Mommy*, we see media as it developed through your mom's and your lifetimes, from black-and-white photographs through VHS and e-mail. You document handwritten letters as well as GIFs. I'm wondering how you think about your relationship to media: it is a natural extension of yourself? To always have a camera always at hand—is that like having a third eye?

My other chakra is my cellphone. I am always wanting to get my hands on all forms of technology. I like to make it a game and play with it. I was especially psyched to collaborate with to.be for *Mommy*. The program was still being created when I got involved and I knew working together was riding on the cusp of something. To.be's technology is so simple and open-ended; it was a challenge to push its capabilities. New tools were being created as the movie was forming so anything was possible—I just had to figure out the puzzle.