

ARTNEWS

'DESIRE, DRIVE, AND DELIRIUM': MAGGIE LEE AND ASHER PENN ON LEE'S NEW FILM, 'MOMMY'

BY *John Chiaverina* POSTED 11/03/15 11:22 AM

This Thursday marks the Los Angeles premiere of *Mommy*, the debut film from the New York-based artist and photographer Maggie Lee, at Ooga Twooga, the Boyle Heights space located at 356 Mission. Using a good deal of archival footage, the film, which first appeared last year in an earlier cut at Anthology Film Archives in New York, tells two parallel stories: one, of the life, and unexpected death, of Lee's mother; the other, the artist's own coming of age.

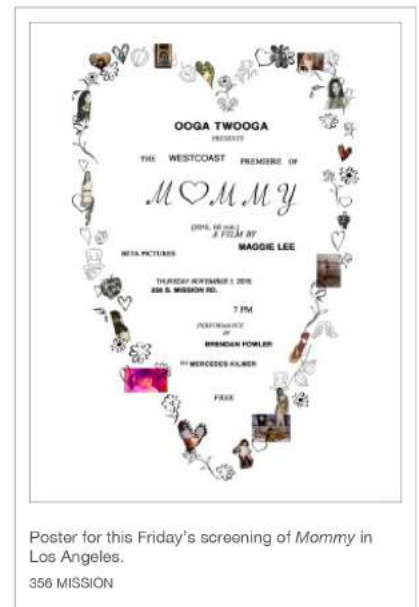
"With *Mommy*, this was something I needed to do," Lee told *ARTnews* over e-mail. "It was a way of helping me move on and a tribute to my mother and family. I felt more fearless making this work and trying new things because I had nothing to lose. I went through the worst times of my life and was ready to fuck shit up in a cute posi way."

After the passing of her mother—who immigrated from Taiwan in the early 1970s, ran a Chinese American restaurant, and married a magician who left her early in her daughter's life—Lee moved back to her childhood home in suburban New Jersey, where she had to renovate the house for an immediate sale. "I was constantly documenting memories as fast as I could, as much as I could, trying to re-create all these feelings. I felt as if they were slipping through my fingers," she said.

Lee was sending documentation of this process to the artist and publisher Asher Penn for use on his blog, *Sex Life*—part of his online magazine, *Sex*. At the time, Penn was starting up a film studio called [Beta Pictures](#) with the artist and musician Air Pop. Beta Pictures arose out of what Penn called, over e-mail, "a general disappointment towards youth-oriented films being released and wanting to see more films that spoke to our generation's experience." With all of this in mind, he asked Lee if she wanted to do a movie.

Lee was included in the "live archive" of the 2009 New Museum exhibition "Younger Than Jesus" and shot multiple covers for *Vice* during the publication's print heyday, among many other accomplishments. Penn called the *Mommy*-making process "totally improvisational." Although the film is structured with chapter markers, he explained that the "chapters themselves were totally freeform. There really were no rules and Maggie consistently surprised me with new ways of telling the story."

"I tried my best to emulate a high-production movie with no money," Lee said. "It was about community and independence. I wanted everyone I admired to be part of *Mommy* in some way or another. I've never felt so much love and support. I've never felt such desire, drive, and delirium. It was like magic, working on this movie, editing felt like DJing at one point."



Mommy feels at once personal, ethereal, and punk. Visually, it successfully synthesizes the VHS-fried home movies of Lee's youth with more a contemporary animated GIF-based aesthetic that, over the past decade or so, has been found everywhere from MySpace to MoMA (parts of the movie were created with the software to.be). Lee blends eras and fidelities to create something tethered to a timeless sense of youth culture. It reminds us that zines, net art, and music videos essentially come out of the same impulse. It also includes an impressive soundtrack, the highlight of which is a striking cover of "Say It Ain't So" by Weezer, taken on by Air Pop and Flannery Silva of the band Odwalla88.

"Before *Mommy* I was always making diaristic zines," Lee said. Although this is her first film, she took some classes in high school and college and more recently made a series of what she called "video salads"—video megamixes set to music. "In the end my work is just collage, no matter what media is used," she said. "They are all based on feelings. I can only make artwork when I feel a certain need."

"Working with Maggie's archive of materials was incredible," Penn said. "I have not met anyone who has documented their life so obsessively with so much poetry."