

Paint It Wack

At the Drawing Center, experimental filmmaker Jennifer Reeves offers a ride through an anxious brain



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BY ROBERT SHUSTER

In a brownstone walk-up on the Upper West Side, Jennifer Reeves is experimenting with drugs. From a drawer of medication, she selects a capsule, separates it, and pours the brown powder into a bowl. She stirs in some water and a little food coloring, dips a brush into the concoction—and begins to paint. Reeves's pigments are unorthodox, for sure, but her art isn't exactly common. She's dabbing colors onto individual frames of 16mm film, creating an extraordinary form of abstract expressionism. Run through the projector and magnified, the resulting kaleidoscopic sequences of colors, shapes, and patterns are so thrillingly visceral that they seem to make direct connections with your nerves.

"I've been very influenced by psychoanalysis," says the petite, soft-voiced, 37-year-old filmmaker, who's done her time on the couch. "You free-associate in time. So whether there's a story or not, it's all coming toward a meaning through one thing coming after another." This happens to be a perfect description of her art, particularly a 26-minute work titled *Light Work Mood Disorder*. A double projection of side-by-side frames (screening, through July 19, at the Drawing Center's revelatory show "Drawing on Film"), it feels like a

journey through an anxious brain. Red masses, golden constellations, greenish cells, and white structures resembling dendrites dance across the screen while eerily recolored snippets from 1950s science demonstrations occasionally pop up, like weird, deeply embedded traumas. The visual turmoil—all without a single spoken word—rides on composer Anthony Burr's electronic soundtrack, which stretches out long tones both piercing and plaintive. "I'm very into the fleeting moment," Reeves adds, "but there's always an emotional trajectory I'm going for." By the end of the film, you've experienced nothing less than a catharsis.

The fleeting moments don't come easily. "The number of hours I spend on a film is pretty enormous," Reeves admits. The effort begins in her wind-up Bolex, a 16mm movie camera that she has taken around the world to shoot various subjects. For projects that use two projections (sometimes side by side, sometimes overlapping), she splices together her brief clips (often with sections of blank stock) into two strands and threads them into a synchronizer, which keeps the two lengths aligned in parallel over a light table. Advancing thousands of frames one at a time, she delicately brushes colors onto both strands using mixes of

Art

A different kind of art frame: Reeves at work

thick and thin paints, inks, chemicals, and even a blow-dryer's hot air (which cracks the paint to form her signature dendrites). "The whole thing makes me feel more like a scientist," she laughs.

Finally, because painted film can't move through a projector, Reeves has to rephotograph the entire strand on a vintage device called an optical printer, which transfers each frame to a blank strand. Surprisingly, until very near the end of the process, she doesn't watch the work as a running film. "I just have this weird sense of 24 frames per second," Reeves says. "It's kind of like music: People for centuries are writing it and hearing it in their heads."

Reeves's interest in the moving image reemerged during a "rough adolescence" in Akron, Ohio, where she became obsessed with foreign films and messed around with her father's VHS equipment, "making stupid videos with friends." Then she landed at Bard College, in a film department that happened to focus on the avant-garde. Experimentalist king Stan Brakhage's celebrated thrill rides through pure abstraction, naturally on the curriculum, proved inspirational.

But more compelling, Reeves found, was *Fuses*, Carolee Schneemann's 1965 short that combines murky glimpses of graphic sex (Schneemann and her boyfriend) with superimposed shapes, scratches, and colors racing through the frame—a film that plays out as a jumbled recollection of an ecstatic summer screw.

The influence of *Fuses* is evident. For all their abstraction and jittery motion, Reeves's films also tend to portray a kind of wistful longing. It's rooted, certainly, in the retro techniques, old-fashioned stock, and her preference for projecting the actual film (rather than a digital version). And the music from Burr, a frequent collaborator, adds an autumnal edge. Even more suggestive of the past is Reeves's imagery, however abstract. Everything comes to you veiled, colored, or fragmented by another layer, like vague memories you can't quite clear up. Reeves heightens the effect when she overlaps separate projections exactly on top of one another; in *He Walked Away*, nature shots, glimpses of a young man, and busy hand-painted shapes flutter over each other in a touching daydream.

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"It's actually the happiest time of my life," Reeves says, "so it's strange that I'm so into nostalgia." But it's not hard, she adds, to think of the past more fondly than the present, "with film dying—the heyday of New American Cinema was the 1960s and '70s." Recalling the encouragement she's received from two giants of the period, Brakhage and Barbara Hammer (maker of experimental lesbian-themed documentaries), Reeves sighs: "There's always this feeling that something's lost."

A different kind of lament courses through *When It Was Blue*, Reeves's hour-long elegy to the environment, which will have its New York premiere in October at the Kitchen, its soundtrack performed live by a trio. Four years in the making, complex and ambitious, the project may test the limits of abstraction. "To get a 60-plus-minute non-narrative, nonverbal film to work is pretty challenging," she says.

As a counterweight, Reeves plans "more dialogue, more acted scenes" in her next project, her second feature-length story. She completed her first in 2004, the award-winning *The Time We Killed*, a gritty tale examining a New York writer's malaise in the wake of September 11. Filmed in a washed-out black-and-white, it was, Reeves admits, "a little depressing," but she promises that the next one, *Firelight Song*—based on the life of California's first female forest ranger, who happened to be the partner of Reeves's grandmother—will have broader appeal. Even this filmmaker, whom Hammer once proclaimed to be "carrying the torch" of the avant-garde, can have a more conventional wish: "I would like to have a bigger audience, I have to admit." It's likely just a matter of time before thrill-seeking crowds discover Reeves's intense cinematic ventures into the psyche.