

Go West. Jennifer West's *Exploded Film Quilt*, 2015 - *Gilda Williams*



“America really is The Beautiful” reads the frontispiece of Andy Warhol’s *America* (1985).

Warhol’s black-and-white photobook – the Statue of Liberty silhouetted on its silver cover – is a gritty, glossy portrait of the nation. Scattered among its 200+ pages are: bikinied wrestlers, fading movie queens, aspiring fashionistas, gargantuan bodybuilders. There’s a young Michael Jackson and a naked Keith Haring. Farrah Fawcett and Ryan O’Neal – ‘the most beautiful, most American couple’, Warhol writes – beam iridescent smiles. Lance Loud – fresh from the first US reality-TV show, *An American Family* – looks as handsome as a film star. In Warhol’s hands the US is a riotous, sprawling, high-energy place, relentlessly photogenic and brimming with youth and stardom and bravado. Andy Warhol’s infatuation with America may have been his most enduring and satisfying love affair. I love the United States that Warhol pictured.

I love the America that Jennifer West pictures. Baseball-capped parkour boys diving into headstands against an overexposed Manhattan sky.¹ Stringy, giggly, Californian twenty-somethings skinny-dipping in semi-legal darkness.² A mother trampolining with her four-year old son.³ The joyful, under-age abandon in Jennifer West’s films can shift from high-octane recklessness – speeding along highways; launching homemade explosives – to quiet reflection, as teens contemplate a pink dawn rippling over the Pacific and another long aimless night draws dreamily to a close.

Jennifer West’s colors are unmistakably American. Disney blues, Jell-O reds. The

¹ **One Mile Film** (5,280 feet of 35mm film negative and print taped to the mile-long High Line walk way in New York City for 17 hours on Thursday, September 13th, 2012 with 11,500 visitors - the visitors walked, wrote, jogged, signed, drew, touched, danced, parkoured, sanded, keyed, melted popsicles, spit, scratched, stomped, left shoe prints of all kinds and put gum on the filmstrip - it was driven on by baby stroller and trash can wheels and was traced by art students - people wrote messages on the film and drew animations, etched signs, symbols and words into the film emulsion lines drawn down much of the filmstrip by visitors and Jwest with highlighters and markers - the walk way surfaces of concrete, train track steel, wood, metal gratings and fountain water impressed into the film; filmed images shot by Peter West - filmed Parkour performances by Thomas Dolan and Vertical Jimenez - running on rooftops by Deb Berman and Jwest - film taped, rolled and explained on the High Line by art students and volunteers) 58 minutes, 40 seconds, 2012

² **Skinnydipping Carbon Beach Malibu Film** – In Front of David Geffen’s House (16MM color and b&w film neg sprayed with fried pickle juice, painted with Bloody Marys using, celery stalks & ash from the Malibu fires, submerged in the ocean – skinnydipping by Renee Lotenero, Lia Trinko-Browner, Karen Liebowitz & Jwest – lit by the full moon & search lights), 2008, 5 minutes, 8 seconds
Electric Kool-Aid Fountain Swimming Film (35MM movie negative submerged in LA’s Mulholland Fountain, dripped with Kool-aid and liquid LSD - featuring nighttime fountain swimming by Mateo Tannatt, Lia Trinko-Browner, Lesley Moon, Mariah Csepányi and Jwest), 2008, 4 minutes, 38 seconds

³ **Nirvana Alchemy Film** (16mm black & white film soaked in lithium mineral hot springs, pennyroyal tea, doused in mud, sopped in bleach, cherry antacid and laxatives - jumping by Finn West & Jwest), 2007, 2 minutes, 51 seconds

rainbow shades of Day-Glo fruit-scented felt-tip pens. Seeping, saturated, packaged tie-dye colors. Ditto regarding the music: American FM staples from Nirvana to Hendrix, and the quintessential '70s US band, Led Zeppelin – who, I only discovered when I moved to London, are actually British! But Led Zep are honorifically American because they *rock*, and Americans are *doers*. Jennifer West's lengthy titles string together multiple action-packed verbs, as people, film, and things are marked, scratched, stomped, covered, dragged, thrown, soaked, marinated, licked, sledgehammered, spliced, jumped on, skateboarded over, dove upon, smashed, crushed, *ad infinitum*. For *Exploding Film Quilt* (2015), West blew up leftover filmstrips with gunpowder, then dipped them in aphrodisiacs, and finally stitched them together. Back in the 1970s, American avant-garde filmmaker Tony Conrad⁴ would pickle or electrocute his films; sometimes Jennifer West seems, like Conrad, to punish her filmstock. But other times she treats film like a lover: experimenting with aphrodisiacs; rubbing it with cinnamon butter;⁵ smearing it in K-Y Jelly, mayonnaise, chocolate, even the relatively tame body-lotion. Sometimes West does things with filmstock that you might do on an early date: share a coffee; attend a festival; spend Superbowl Sunday together ignoring the football.

In *One-Mile Film* (2012), long onscreen scratches roll by like tracks beneath tires; is there anything so American as burning rubber on the open road? That cross-country feeling – endless strips of asphalt with glowing signage and headlights flying past – seems miniaturized in West's burnt celluloid, punctuated by illuminated flashes and fleeting, half-glimpsed scenes. Random, magic-markered words rush past, like 'EAT': a single-syllable instruction recalling an all-night diner's neon, or a Robert Indiana Pop painting. So many Americanisms intersect here, including US postwar art history: Warhol's oil-lamp colored projections on the Velvets; Stan Brakhage's markings on film surfaces. Europeans – all thrift, tidiness and common sense – could

⁴ Coincidentally, Tony Conrad was also a key influence on the band Warhol produced, the Velvet Underground.

⁵ *Riot Grrrr! Alchemy Film* (16mm b&w and color film neg danced on with sneakers, sprayed with cherry tomatoes, rubbed with cinnamon butter buns, strawberries and candy bars – based on lyrics from Sleater Kinney, Bikini Kill and Le Tigre – food fight on the table performances by Ariel West & Jwest, shot on superbowl Sunday by Peter West who was kind of drunk), 2008, 5 minutes, 52 seconds

never quite bring themselves to throw paint with Jackson Pollock's abandon, or spill buckets of ketchup and chocolate sauce like Paul McCarthy. West shares their all-American disinhibition with liquid abundance.

Falling heavily in loose rolls at the bottom of *Exploded Film Quilt* are a few spare yards of filmstock, a special West Coast waste product: the film detritus accumulated on a cutting floor. Stitched and hung on the wall, the *Quilt*'s alternating strips of bright colour and scorched blackness produces a bold, striped pattern, reminiscent of the American flag. Visiting foreigners always remark on the US's ubiquity of stars and stripes: swaying from porches; fluttering over schools; expanding to vast square footages of red white and blue polycotton and waving gigantically above shopping malls, gas stations, post offices, you name it. No other country flies its flag so prominently; the rare UK events that drag out the Union Jack are royal milestones – Queen's jubilee; Diana dead, at half mast; the Prince's nuptials – all cleared by morning and stored god-knows-where, unrequired again for years. The flags of most nations smell of mothballs; American flags smell like the sun. Jennifer West's film-flag shines so brightly, it is literally inflamed.

Above all, the United States is an everlasting land of *stuff*. Film technology may be dying, but in *Exploding Film Quilt* the sturdy filmstrip supernaturally survives fire, drowning by multiple aphrodisiacs, even a hanging. Immortalized in Warhol's *America* are not just MTV stars and beauty queens but motorboats and Marlboros, tombstones and bridges, clocks, garbage cans, chandeliers, fruit baskets, fences, ski equipment, cacti, gym equipment, double-strollers. Jennifer West's titles reflect the limitless volume of American consumables, like reject-shop offloads, or firesale pile-ups, or the random assortment of junk stored in suburban garages: dye; bleach; oysters; vanilla; Plexiglas; suitcases, buckets, salt, mayonnaise; kitty litter, lighter fluid, body lotion, lavender mist air freshener, Diet Coke, tubes of arnica. In Jennifer West's art, the average American home is a toxic overspill of potential artist's materials.

In Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2012) nothing reflects Lambert family relations better than their stashes of junk. The parents' misguided concern is best expressed by the items they'd packed for son Chip when he left for college: a chess-set; a six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln; a navy-blue blazer. Mom sends Chip a box marked "Stocking Stuffers": a package of cough drops; a second-grade school photo in a miniature brass frame; plastic bottles of shampoo from a Hong Kong hotel visited a decade ago. In the basement Mom hoards non-consecutive issues of *Good Housekeeping* and stacks of decades-old gas bills; upstairs are amassed "chairs and tables by Ethan Allen. Spode and Waterford in the breakfront". Franzen shares West's US-born habit of calling products by their brand names: a beer is a Bud; painkillers are Advil; kids drink Kool-Aid and chew M&M's. Meanwhile vaseline, band-aids, coca-cola, and pepto-bismal become generic, lowercase, household things. For both West and Franzen, an excess of stuff translates into an excess of language.

West's paragraph-long titles read not so much as captions but as witness's affidavits: a forensic inventory detailing not only item purchased at the 24-hour CVS drugstore, but what West and her friends *did* with their abundance of liquids, film equipment, and leisure time. Imagine dropping acid just before Home Economics class: instead of the recommended 2 cups sugar 2 oz butter 3 eggs $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp salt, whisking nail polish, eyeliner, tanning lotion, Visine, marmalade, vodka, and body glitter. Or experimentally machine-stitching raw filmstrips instead of the usual pre-cut squares of calico and gingham, *just seemed a good idea at the time*. I remember the crooked patchwork throw-pillows stitched in junior high, the burnt culinary disasters my sister and I concocted while a distracted babysitter watched TV. Sadly for me however, West's radiant filmic dreamscapes don't resemble my suburban Long Island adolescence; likewise, my American 1970s bore no resemblance to Warhol's star-studded candid shots. Even so, I like to imagine these artists' pictures as magically belonging to me, merging with my staid memories of youth. West's faded and flashing celluloid becomes weirdly spliced with my recollections of ordinary US adolescence, which is instantly improved.

Finally, what could be more nostalgically American than a *quilt*, for heaven's sake: a symbol of pioneering resourcefulness and functional beauty. Curiously, even Warhol's glamorous *America* includes a photo of two elderly quilters. Apparently, American quilts are more intricate and spectacular than their European counterparts because of the dire scarcity of fabric in the colonies. Every shred, every thread was preserved, some mosaic-like scraps no bigger than a 70mm film-frame like those in *Exploding Film Quilt*.

Jennifer West's art produces in me a strange, expansive feeling of ... is that *patriotism*? ... light years away from the pro-America sentiment summoned, say, from a Trump rally or army recruitment poster, which instead make me remember why I'd left the States as soon as I was legally able. But I remain nostalgic for another America, the one West or Warhol spent their lives in love with, resplendent with adventure and curiosity; a daring kind of artistry; comradeship; confidence; informality: a sexy, spontaneous re-invention of beauty.

– *Gilda Williams*