

# FLICKERING FORMALISM: THE ART OF LORNA MILLS

Presented by RM Vaughan, Toronto, Canada

It only looks like a cat.

The belly, the fur, the paws. And so it is a cat. And not.

In Lorna Mills's art, the shape of a thing is both the whole of the thing and only the shape of the thing. Both and either. In other words, don't let the form fool you: The cat is a cat and a cut-out of a cat and an animated cut-out of a cat and a metonym for cat-ness and then just a dumb, fat cat again and then we start all over.

Same here. Disco pixel boom chic-ah-lac-ah, blam, smash. Party time! Mills likes noise and gunpowder flares. It's pretty and it flashes and you could just be happy with that and walk on. But what we have here is a vivisection of an explosion, with each bit of shrapnel, each flame out and pop broken down into controllable sets of boxes, little pixel tentacles and the heart, the hot infernal heart, compressed until the atoms behave. Again, what you are seeing is the opposite of what you think you are viewing: An explosion tamed, a violence made exact and measurable. This animation is about as random as a crossword puzzle.

The warships sink in the most elegant ways, like butterflies closing their wings. Down they go, into diagram-patterned oceans made of holiday coloured shawls. I imagine a ship sinking makes an awful mess, but here we are concerned only with the shape of things. It's like ballet, but even more treacherous [...] to die in clouds of Easter Egg dye [...] there isn't enough time to consider the real world consequences and that's the point. We hardly do anymore. More pretty pixels!

And more antic fray. Houndstooth widget plumes and egg cream burns. Indigo flames and pearly hot spots, solar flares viewed through seven veils, weapons as ornament. Remember Brando's famous "The horror, the horror" scene from *Apocalypse Now*? This is what he saw and rather liked: The innate beauty of the imprecise bomb, how no two mushroom clouds, like snowflakes, can ever be the same. Everything is charming in the abstract. Fighter jets, sleek as runway models. And just as harmless (or, just as made-to-appear-harmless harmless or, just-as-harmless-as-pretty-things-ever-are harmless) [...] or, simply, liars. Here we see Mills's arch formalism at its most playful and sinister. The military jets are so adorable, schooling and criss-crossing like busy fish in an overfull aquarium. They dazzle as they blink past. We could forget why they are in the air in the first place; we could admire their clever design and, more to the point, Mills' clever re-positioning of the instruments of mass death as benign, likeable objects, something between hummingbirds and well-made cars, something cool and chic, cigarette and pencil perfect. Their phantom aftermath is no less seductive. What exactly explodes into mushy rainbows? Nothing, of course. But you were dazzled, weren't you? It is not accidental that Mills's work is silent.

Sound is like odour or scent – sound triggers associations and thus consequences. Of course, for the super-attentive, all this cascading imagery doubles back on the viewer and is read as sly commentary, with the military-industrial complex cliché rendered in Eden florals, is read as a bitch slap. For the rest of us, pretty is pretty – because we are all Formalists in this post-journalism, post-fact check, post-trust image economy. Bubbling water or a house on fire? Either will feed.



Fig. 1. Lorna Mills, *Party Manners*, 2014, still from animated gif.

Some (many) moments in Mills' menagerie. Mills is not interested in cute, she is interested in the enacting of cute. Arguably, one creates the other, but in Mills' animals-and-dumb-people slams, only the attempt, conscious or involuntary, counts. This allows her to reshape even the most heartbreakingly adorable pets and heart-rending jackass YouTube fame seekers into complementary sets, to make the seemingly dissonant elements whole or at least related and thus show how the core movement, the action (ahh, the "form") is what determines a meme's longevity, not its big eyes, fluffy puffy textures, near-nudity or superficially apparent intentions.

A dancing bear equals a crusty hippy equals a wagging tail equals a face plant equals kittens, acres of kittens equals a belching frog equals a jiggling fat man equals a car crash equals a street fight. In one of the GIFs, a dolphin puppet stares at the wrestlers writhing beneath it. The dolphin's eyes are popping out, its mouth is wide open, in a grin or a gasp. The dolphin is the viewer and the dolphin is Mills. Mills's art is always, at heart, an act of sharing. Glamour is Cute's demonic cousin. Attractive people doing unattractive things (aka glamour) remind us of our own limitations and yet also allow us to think of ourselves as having taken the high road in life. And so both iterations serve the viewer in the best way possible – they make our own foolishness more reasonable.

The idiotic (if animals can be said to be foolish) has a similar function. When Mills finds a panting, possibly murderous little rat-dog and pairs it with over-glossed lips or a horrific car crash and its too-cruel body count with a boxing match between a dog and a deer, she is having her practice both ways – swarming us

with layers of information that we digest first as content (“that dog and that woman are making the same face!” or “that guy is kicking another guy in the head!”) and then as a painfully precise collage of deep-linked visual cues, as systems of matched actions, shapes, gestures.



Fig. 2. Lorna Mills, *Party Manners*, 2014, still from animated gif.

Mills's work requires two viewings, at least. In the first, just watch and giggle. Don't look for structures and sub-structures, don't peek at the skeleton. In the second, marvel at the diamond shard cuts, at Mills' maddening sense of timing, comic and dramatic, at how Mills composes her kinetic dioramas with a ruthless attention to form and how this hyper precision creates, when the works are amassed (as they are most often displayed), a state perversely opposite from the fugue state-like dissociative and volatile imagery captured – namely, calm, the calm of being swaddled in a visual stream that induces a delicious information option paralysis. If I had a child, I would project these GIFs above its head at night, to help it sleep. This is and will be the world every child born today inherits, so why not start early?

Panic is a misunderstood blessing.