

MIAMI SALUTES ITS SHORTS



It's after midnight in the brain cave of the [Borscht Film Festival](#) and James Franco has blacked out. James Franco is a very tall, dumb robot made of cardboard boxes, an afterthought muse, splayed out on the workshop of the spacious, nondescript warehouse the fest cohabits (for \$700 a month). "We should fill James Franco up with Adderall in time for the premiere Saturday," says a lingering Borscht filmmaker. "Just like the real thing. He can be an

Adderall pinata.” On the second floor, made up of quasi-production offices and a sea of white giftbags, under laptop glow, last minute edits are being decided for a short film entitled *Life & Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*. The short in question is a loose and tropical reimagining of *La Jetée* starring the city’s eponymous [booty rap entrepreneur](#) and former 2 Live Crew frontman. Two days later—the night of Saturday, April 23rd, *Freaky Times*—will be one of 23 new short films projected in front of a capacity audience of 1,800. Unlike say, SXSW or Comic Con, the audience will not consist of industry and blogger-related visitors and genre fans. Highly localized, attendees are an energized mix of mainstream moviegoers, monied socialites, and bleary-eyed rowdy artists. Though there’s not a “mumbling indie-type” in a backrow mumbling about *Aguirre*, the fest will be introduced on a huge screen by Werner Herzog, only Herzog will have the chopped-up voice of Pitbull. The catch is that of the 23 shorts, 19 of them were conceived, produced, and shot in South Florida, the result of a productivity heatwave that began back in February.



For those who follow the film-shunning Alan Moore, who predicts that culture at large is accelerating so rapidly and recklessly that it will inevitably become steam, this might be alarming. Last Saturday evening, sitting inside downtown’s Arsht Center, it kinda was. Bathed in studio bumper-like interludes showcasing native, psychedelic coral and tentacles, as made by a Borscht duo known as [Coral Morphologic](#) now collaborating with Animal Collective, here was a DIY event supported by a major grant and backed by a city that has famously shunned artists young and old (at least the good ones). Miami is the surface-capable city where if you’re a local or student filmmaker, one either sticks around to pursue making ads for, say, Crispin Porter, or relocates to Los Angeles or New York City (the very cities that have placed a stronghold on Miami’s media and filmic iconography for decades.) Suddenly, in a single season, the place is in favor of handing \$150 thousand and professional resources over to the kind of heady, collective 23-year-old energy that dependably says, “Fuck Hollywood. We can do this all ourselves. Our stop signs shall be famous also.”

Technology and a nasty wake of dreamers have seemingly come to a head, allowing Borscht’s 20-somethings to plant a flag, and allowing Miami’s denizens, naturally, to realize there’s money to be made, and an identity to be seized, cultivated, and home grown. Or at least that’s what a lot of people are saying down there. I decided to premiere two of the better, shorter Borscht entries on Vice, works that I felt contextually exemplified the festival and company’s potential. Longer entries, which on average were between three and 20 minutes, will now be submitted to outside fests. One short starred ole’ [Otto von Schirach](#) as he hunts down a stopmotion prehistoric eel (insert metaphor) to serve on a dinner date. Another, entitled *Play Dead*, wordlessly follows pups escaping a Miami zombie apocalypse (and feasting cats), and is being developed into a feature (L.A. sez: “*28 Days Later* meets *Homeward Bound*”). Overall, it was a fascinating experiment that was also unnerving, in that the line between a short film, a student film, an unfinished film, a music video, a comedy sketch, and an overly ambitious YouTube vid was left unchecked. Maybe only Franco knows for sure.



"I Am Your Grandma" - Directed by and starring Jillian Mayer



"I like to think that the short is structured like a joke or a throwaway YouTube video," says 26-year-old Jillian Mayer, "but it also has serious art concerns behind it. This highbrow versus lowbrow dichotomy fuels a lot of the festival, and collaborators' perception of Miami. There's a savvy audience here, but it's not as large as other major cities. So, one way of doing things here to draw the crowd that wants 2-D butt and gay jokes is to expose them to what appears to be a funny viral video but is actually video art." Last year in NYC, Mayer made a similar statement after being chosen as a finalist for the [YouTube Play Biennial](#) at the Guggenheim. "Forcing people to watch something I've made in a theatre is different from a gallery. I feel like it's better to make it short and not waste their time. At the same time, one of my influences is Adult Swim and *Tim & Eric*. How they push uncomfortable situations to the breaking point. Miami is so hyper-sexualized and sensationalized, it leaves intense aesthetic and psychological scars on any reasonable person who grows up here. To me, the only thing that ends up seeming reasonable among the madness is realizing that it's all entertainment."



I asked Mayer, who's also behind the aforementioned *Freaky Times* short, if popping out babies bums her out or makes her think of drying curtains of

blood. A previous stage project of her's involved her singing maternalish bittersweet nothings to her snaggle-toothed, gremlin-like Chihuahua Shivers. It was meant to be amusing but it was also a difficult question. Just days before the festival, Mayer's mom suffered a severe accident. Everything was becoming surreal and dark. "Recently, yeah, I have been reminded how fragile life is. Cliche I know. It's freaking me out. My mother actually came to my solo show at the [David Castillo Gallery](#) a couple weeks ago. She saw my Grandma film there, she liked it, but she hated another video, where I took original footage from my birth—hey, by the way thanks Dad!—and superimposed my face over hers. It really upset her. I feel like I deal with social norms and better communicate my thoughts through video art because it relates to all the programming I've seen of family structure on television. I've been indoctrinated, probably like you, into these expectations of upward mobility, instant gratification. It's, like, the succinct finesse of a television sitcom. I guess my work tends to critique the dissonance between my childhood optimism and the state of culture right now." Mayer minivan in her future? "My mother and father, they really want me to make babies at some point. Yeah, I usually think that someday I will."



"Man o' War" - Directed by Coral Morphologic (Colin Foord and Jared McKay); original music and sound design by Geologist (Brian Weitz) of Animal Collective



"Josh and Brian [of Animal Collective] are avid scuba divers, and Brian actually has a Master's Degree in Marine Science, he does work for non-profits in D.C.," says 29-year-old Colin Foord. "So, Brian and I went through a few different animals before we decided on one for Borscht. We wanted one that was surreal." They chose the surreal Portuguese Man o' War, a creature that describes itself in nightmares as a Zip-loc Bag on acid that wants to paralyze you. "What's crazy about this creature, it's not like a jellyfish, which is one animal that swims around. A Man o' War is a colony of different animals that are organized, individual polyps do different things. Certain ones create the gas for the float, others are digestive, others can incapacitate a fish, and this colony floats on the ocean surface. The tentacles trail beneath the float and can become as long as 100-feet. This is one of 25 shorts in a Natural History series, we're focusing on individual species of marine life local to Miami. And the way the Man o' War's tentacles are floating—we present it without any title or preconceived notion because we want the audience to have no idea what they're looking at. It's important for us to convey that this organism could be underwater or something in outerspace. Our view is not only the Man o' War and Miami's coral reef, this should define the future aesthetic of our city. Two hundred years ago, for instance, in science manuscripts, there wasn't a lexicon to describe the neon florescence of many of the same species Jared and I are studying and filming today. People would read the word, 'mauve' and have no idea."



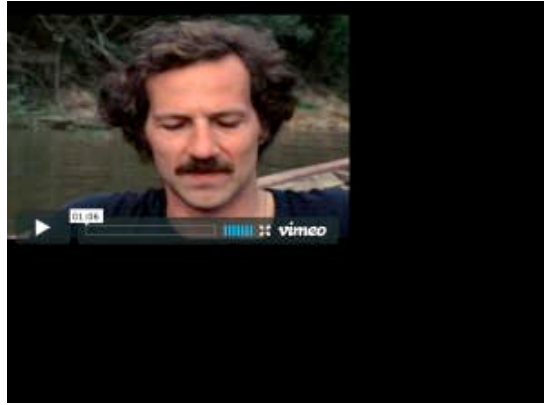
If the calculations of a giant, glowing, living coral in the sky add up to anything, the popularizing aesthetic and expansive vision of Coral Morphologic will supplant the ubiquity of [Romero Britto](#), Miami's anointed would-be Warhol, a man whose shopping center creations evoke the big questions,

"Paper or Plastic?" and "Bare or Bush?" What's rad about *Man o' War* and related shorts is that Coral Morphologic contextualizes their work unabashedly to the city around them, with depth that rates from an encouraging Charlie Rose nod to a trippy Kurt Vonnegut screed. "We realize there's a really big disconnect here between the reef that exists right off the shores of Miami Beach and the city of Miami," says Foord. "Instead, there's long been a strong association in Miami with sport fishing. You know, [Guy Harvey](#), he was basically a South Florida lifestyle phenomenon. That's the closest the city gets to ocean iconography. First off, South Beach is artificial, the sand is imported from the Bahamas, it shouldn't even exist. And that's all the reality a lot of people have of Miami, this postcard. So, what Jared and I, and now Brian, are trying to do is elevate the discourse: coral reefs were here first, long before us and anything else. At Art Basel, we projected coral reefs onto the sides of buildings out on South Beach. Many people don't know that most of the buildings in South Florida are made out of cement that has been mined from the Everglades. It used to be coral reef. They mine the limestone, the coral skeletons are limestone, they mine it, they grind it up, they turn it into concrete and then build buildings out of it. There's obviously irony to that. The skeletons of these creatures that are responsible for basically making Florida and South Florida, now have people who are oblivious to them living inside them." Foord had a look in his eyes that might see Miami's notoriously empty condo complexes as birthday candles.

"Eventually, sea levels will rise here, whether we believe in global warming or not," he said. "Miami will be underwater, and all these buildings [laughs] it's like a pre-made coral reef ready to go. And we love Miami, and working and living here, but our projections of these images of coral, it's recognition and premonition."



In addition to running Morphologic Studios, which hopes to expand, grants willing, into developing 3-D aquariums and installations, Coral Morphologic is heavily tied, as is the Borscht Festival, to the local rock scene, currently lead by bands Jacuzzi Boys and ANR. Foord and McKay, who handle sound design on most of the films, own and operate [Discosoma Records](#), a label that incorporates coral designs into cover art, labels for limited runs of vinyl, and music videos (ANR, *Surfer Blood*). With any luck, the creation and distribution of so much original film, digital, and music content will transform into a three-headed coastal beast the likes of late-era Peter Benchley.



HUNTER STEPHENSON

For more information visit the festival's [official website](#).