

Lourdes Portillo: La Cineasta Inquisitiva

Mónica López-González



[“Lourdes Portillo: La Cineasta Inquisitiva”](#) is now playing at MoMA.

Bold searching mind, an embracer of multiple genres, and unfazed by conventional documentary filmmaking, Lourdes Portillo is a contemporary filmmaker to know, see, and follow. Born in 1944 in Chihuahua, Mexico,

Portillo moved to Los Angeles, CA with her family when she was a teenager. Her introduction to the art of filmmaking happened by chance when a friend in Hollywood asked her to help out on a documentary; she was twenty-one years old. Her career path was set: an apprenticeship at the San Francisco, CA National Association of Broadcast Engineers and Technicians led to a stint as first camera assistant to cinematographer Stephen Lighthill for Eugene Corr's 1977 drama "Over-Under, Sideways-Down," and by 1978 she was graduating from the San Francisco Art Institute and off to create with American writer and independent media producer Nina Serrano what would become her first narrative short film in 1979, "Después del Terremoto" ("After the Earthquake"), with funds from an American Film Institute Independent Filmmaker Award. In 1980 Portillo co-founded Cine Acción, a group and center in the San Francisco Bay Area dedicated to promoting Latin American cinema in the United States and supporting Latinos living in the States to produce media for the purpose of educating the general public on Latin America and the Latino experience.

During her time as an art student and active human rights advocate in the '70s and '80s, Portillo was immersed in a culture that continues to influence her body of work today: avant-garde and social-issue documentary cinema as a highly valuable art form for engendering social change, and, perhaps closest to her search for self-identity as a female immigrant living between two countries, two cultures, and two languages, feminist Chicana—a term used to refer to Americans born of Mexican descent—and Latin American issues and politics. Portillo has worked in various genres, including video installations and collage, narrative, experimental, and documentary films, and investigative journalism. She has collaborated with the Latino comedy troupe Culture Clash for several comedic stage plays, and merged everything along with the occasional playful use of satire and performance art for the past thirty years. Her films are a hybrid of personal and experimental artistic interests that have become the hallmark of her style. In a similar vein to the innovative documentarian style of African-American filmmaker and gay rights activist Marlon Riggs, who produced the bulk of his critically acclaimed TV film work on American racism and homophobia in the late '80s until his death in 1994, Portillo's films champion a documentary filmmaking style in which storytelling is an intricate mixed-media collage of objective facts and the subjective affective experience of the film's subject and the filmmaker herself. In a recent interview in 2010 for the PBS series "Point of View," Portillo states: "That is the great thing about documentary. That we're adhering to the truth as we see it. But at the same time within that truth, you know, there is a lot of possibilities of art, of imagination, of poetry, metaphor, allegory, all that."

All that indeed and more! A favorite amongst academic and educational circles for her subtextual themes of self and aesthetic representation of it on screen, Portillo's body of filmic work presented at the MoMA for the retrospective "Lourdes Portillo: La Cineasta Inquisitiva" can be summed up in the following four main categories.

Femininity, Women, and Human Rights

As a storyteller of and for the Latino and primarily Latina community, Portillo brings to her narratives four very specific fundamental elements: she is (1) a Mexican who immigrated as a child to the States and has family in both countries, (2) a speaker of both Mexican Spanish and English, (3) a self-identified Chicana with children of her own who currently lives in the States and asserts her rights as a Mexican-American and honors her indigenous past, and (4) a professional female filmmaker who seeks to faithfully represent and give a more significant voice to Latina women of their socio-politico-cultural experience as Latinas both within and outside the United States.

Portillo's co-directed first film, "**Después del Terremoto**" (1979), screening June 27th, is a dramatic short shot in black and white that precisely analyses the internal conflict Irene, a young Nicaraguan woman who has immigrated to California, finds herself in as she adjusts to the more liberal gender role relationships within and consumerist and political values of American society. While I haven't seen this particular film, I found it interesting to read in an article written by human rights and feminism scholar Rosa-Linda Fregoso (who appears as one of the intellectuals in "Conversations with Intellectuals about Selena"), that Portillo's physical spatial placement of events throughout the film, which primarily take place indoors, have significant meanings

to the aesthetic representation of Chicanas. In other words, Fregoso argues that Portillo's photographic framing of specific "spaces" for certain events that occur within the narrative has the purpose of metaphorically deconstructing several aspects of Chicana identity. For example, in the beginning sequence when Irene purchases a TV with her own earned money, the event is representative of the newly arrived immigrant female who has proved her independent and integrated consumer status; furthermore, the bedroom in a following scene is presented as a space where (retained) religious customs are expressed (and challenged) in private; and the kitchen is a meaningful space where the older unmarried women (i.e., "las tías" ["the aunts"]) talking gender and politics follow through with their domestic rituals as they cook tamales, a representation of the older generation failing to integrate into American society.

Portillo continues her analysis and search to understand the socio-cultural representation of Chicanismo within the United States in "**Conversations with Intellectuals about Selena**" (1999), screening June 27th and 30th, a kind of cinematic discussant sequel to "**Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena**" (1999), screening June 30th. In a very informal and rather amateurish round-table discussion, five Chicana scholars discuss the meaning and (inevitable) consequences of Mexican American singer-songwriter Selena's status as both a positive and negative role model for young Chicanas. For those unfamiliar with the Selena phenomenon of the '80s and early '90s, Selena was a Tejana superstar known for her voluptuous figure, Tejano songs about love, and music videos. She won for ten consecutive years the Best Female Vocalist Award in the Tejano Music awards from 1986 to 1996. In 1995, at age twenty-three, Yolanda Saldivar, president of Selena's fan club and manager of her fashion boutiques, fatally shot her after an argument ensued between them in the motel room where they were to discuss Saldivar's role in money embezzlement. Between shots of eating guacamole, sipping on margaritas, and petting a dog at random moments, the camera pans back and forth between the five Chicana scholars as they dabble, occasionally code-switching between English and Spanish, into such topics as Chicana (un)popularity, expected sexuality, and objects of desire; the role of patriarchy in Latino society; the typification of lesbian women as evil and beyond redemption; and Selena's unfortunate fate as the stylized product of a historical climax when Chicana identity was gaining strength within American culture. After a black screen pause, the film continues with a quick informal segment of the women standing outside in the garden with margarita glasses in hand and briefly narrating their own complex relationships with their most dominant parental figure. Again, topics and questions are tossed out and mused upon, but neither conclusions nor answers arise amidst the laughter.

Departing from the issues of the Chicana experience, but still keen on establishing the female perspective, Portillo turns towards injustice against women in Argentina and Mexico. Her second film and collaboration, this time with Argentinean film director Susana Muñoz, "**Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo**" (1986), screening June 28th, uses traditional documentary filmmaking techniques such as voiceover narration, archival video footage of strikes, political speeches, and news reports, photographs of the victims, and typical sit-down interviews with the victims' parents to tell the story of the organization of Argentinean mothers since 1977 who have become human rights activists in order to fight for the right to know about and be reunited with the more than 30,000 sons and daughters disappeared during the Dirty War of 1976 to 1983. The first two minutes are brilliantly effective and arguably the most harrowing moments of the film as the camera focuses on the faces of hundreds of mothers in the Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires, in front of the presidential palace as they scream and beg for help to a reporter. It's a pity, however, that the directors only introduce a few seconds of Astor Piazzolla's sad *nuevo tango*-style composition "Invierno Porteño" before whisking it away and relying for the majority of the film on the visual cues of the pained and crying faces of the mothers to express the tragedy of these people. "Las Madres" was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1986.

Perhaps Portillo's most haunting and devastatingly honest film to date is "**Señorita Extraviada**" ("**Missing Young Woman**," 2001), screening June 30th. Using an investigative journalistic approach, Portillo tells the unsolved story of the mysterious kidnapping, raping, and murdering of hundreds of young Mexican women from the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The requiem-like choral soundtrack composed by Todd Boekelheide is used to heartbreaking effect as the victim's parents, relatives, and friends recount their own

torturous experiences as victims of sexual harassment and rape and the events prior to their beloveds' disappearance, and as faded photographs and news clippings of the victims and their stories are shown. Shots of police crews and community volunteers searching for cadavers and pieces of torn, bloodied, or burned clothing in the desolate deserts outside of Juárez add to the frustration of silence and unknowns that cloud the city. No definite answers or conclusions are given or proposed, and the aggregation of archival news and security video footage, interviews with government and corporate officials, police, and apprehended suspects, and a constant, obsessive observation by the camera of daily routines such as mourning by relatives and the community, young women heading to work, blurred dancing in seedy clubs, and caressing slow-motion shots of young women's faces serve to highlight the inconsistencies, cover-ups, and lies within the on-and-off investigation of these murders and the downright suffering of all in this pandemic crisis of terror against women. Watching the film, which won The Nestor Almendros Human Rights Prize in 2002 and an Ariel Award for Best Mexican Documentary in 2003, amongst seventeen other awards, is itself an emotionally taxing experience.

Latino History and Culture

Changing gears from the emotional strain of "Las Madres" and "Señorita Extraviada," Portillo offers a set of educational fact-based films intended to address historical and cultural elements of Latino heritage. In "**La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead**" (1989), screening June 29th, Portillo lovingly paints a narrative picture of the traditional Mexican and adopted Chicano celebration in honor of the dead that takes place annually on November 1st and 2nd. A male narrator and a female narrator alternate between presenting the dates and facts of the beginnings of the celebration and the (positive, almost humorous) emotional significance that death has to Mexican peoples. The film is divided into two sections: while the first follows with an almost silent lens the ritualistic behaviors of preparing the graves, altars, and feasts, generally performed by women, that have been handed down through the generations, the second travels to the Mission District (the Chicano and Latino neighborhood in San Francisco) and follows the parades and ritualistic altar-making that have been adopted by Chicanos and Latinos as a sign of love and respect to their indigenous relatives.

"Mirrors of the Heart" (1992), screening June 29th, continues to delve into the origins of Hispanidad (i.e., the glorification of everything Spanish, which was actually proclaimed as an official national ideology of the Dominican Republic by the dictator Rafael Trujillo from 1930 until his assassination in 1961) and the changing roles the identity concept has acquired throughout history as the film begins in the mountains of Bolivia and travels to the Dominican Republic. Weaving voiceover narration, archival photographic footage, and intimate interviews with Bolivians and Dominicans, Portillo reveals the ominous presence of conquistador values as citizens reveal the racial tensions that continue to this day under the sad truth that people just "...haven't been able to grasp [their] negritude." Despite the gloomy outlook, the film ends on a hopeful note as the camera lingers on the faces of children of mixed Spanish, indigenous, and African parentage as they head to school, reminding us that change will ride on the backs of this young generation.

A perfect example of Portillo's use of video collage and spot-on satiric voice can be seen in her short "**Columbus on Trial**" (1993), screening June 29th. Commissioned for television for the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America, Portillo and her co-writers, Culture Clash, concoct Columbus's trial five hundred years after the fact, with the judge and defense lawyer as Chicanos highly reverent to everything Hispania, and the prosecutor as an American Indian determined to redeem his people and convict Columbus. The result is a humorous and biting critique on American justice, historical accuracy, and the preferences communities of individuals make to validate their identities.

Mexican Politics and Police

Perhaps because of the dangerous nature of exposure from revealing too much too quickly to a large public through cinéma-verité, Portillo has been successful in finding creative ways to cinematically deal with the seemingly untouchable subject matter that Mexican politics and police dealings are known to be. In one of her

most imaginative films to date, **“El Diablo Nunca Duerme”** (**“The Devil Never Sleeps,”** 1996), screening June 28th, Portillo beautifully tackles the complex job of finding and putting together the pieces of the puzzle—to the extent to which they can be assembled into a solvable picture—of the death by gunshot wound to the head of her uncle Oscar Ruiz Almeida in Chihuahua, Mexico. In the flavor of a *film noir*, Portillo sets out to find the truth about a beloved family member: was it suicide, as declared by Almeida’s widow, or an intricate murderous plot, as believed by many of Almeida’s family? Including archival footage, family photographs, 8mm home movies, one-on-one interviews with family and community members from Chihuahua to Guaymas (the coastal city where Almeida was mayor for some time), and clips from Mexican TV soap operas, and employing varying high and low camera angles, reflective shots, and particular lighting choices to emphasize the mood of the moment, Portillo challenges the meaning of all these forms of media as evidence of truths to reveal a web of greed, exploitation, blackmail, and covert familial grudges. In personalizing her investigative search, Portillo very slyly reveals much of the political culture of northern Mexico around the 1940s and beyond without ever really finger-pointing at any one individual.

A hybrid documentary that employs both non-fictional and fictional elements, **“Al más allá”** (**“Beyond the Beyond,”** 2008), screening June 27th, is Portillo’s latest work to investigate the facts and effects of secretive narcotics trafficking along the Mayan coastline of Mexico. In the guise of filming a documentary within the documentary itself, Portillo uses a clumsy film crew led by an arrogantly choosy yet romantically visionary documentary filmmaker (played by the renowned Mexican actress Ophelia Medina) to question the locals of the beach town about the corruption and ensuing violence. Amidst complaints of the scorching heat and the crew’s stubborn efforts to photograph the beautiful scenery, Portillo manages to get her filmmaker character to engage in small talk with a tourist guide, merchants, and an American expat about the local corruption and violence. Like all her films in which the silent but fatal waters of crime and exploitation are forcibly disturbed, lawlessness reigns and solutions remain ambiguous.

Masculinity and Life with AIDS

And then, almost like an afterthought, Portillo addresses the American cinematic representation of masculinity. In her experimental short **“My McQueen”** (2004), screening June 27th and 30th, Portillo and long-time collaborator as director of photography, Kyle Kibbe, have a tête-à-tête on filmmaking as they discuss the impact of American actor Steve McQueen’s cool, emotionless, and silent character in *“Bullitt”* (1968) and the movie’s iconic car chases through the hills and valleys of San Francisco’s streets. Portillo notes the nuances of McQueen’s body movement, Kibbe sees the cars as a stand-in for McQueen’s motionless body, and then vroom! the movie’s soundtrack takes over. As they talk in the studio with video cameras around them, scenes from *“Bullitt”* are projected on a laptop screen (giving a movie-within-a-movie effect) while actor Sean San José sits nearby across from a mirror and performs dialogue from the movie’s script, repeating lines to capture the essence of their meaning with just the right facial expressions. While shots of San José reenacting street scenes from the movie as a man of color follow, Portillo poses the question: what if McQueen’s character in *“Bullitt”* were a Latino man?

Equally interesting experimental shorts made prior to *“My McQueen”* but dealing with the psychological and physical ramifications of living with AIDS were **“Vida”** (1989), screening June 30th, and **“Sometimes My Feet Go Numb”** (1997), screening June 28th. Commissioned by AIDS Film in New York for the purpose of encouraging AIDS awareness and speaking to young women in the Latino community about following safe sex practices, *“Vida”* follows a young Latina woman living in New York City as she struggles with the dangerous reality of living with the disease. In the black and white performance short *“Sometimes My Feet Go Numb,”* Portillo’s wide-angle lens is used to striking effect as she focuses on various body parts as African-American poet and playwright Wayne Corbitt performs his own poem of the same title narrating the effects of AIDS drugs on his body.

I look forward to seeing where Portillo dares to tread next with her forthcoming narrative feature...