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GOLDEN GATE PERSISTENCE OF VISION AWARD **LOURDES PORTILLO**

The POV Award honors the achievements of a filmmaker whose work is crafting documentaries, short films, animation or work for television.

FESTIVAL SCREENING

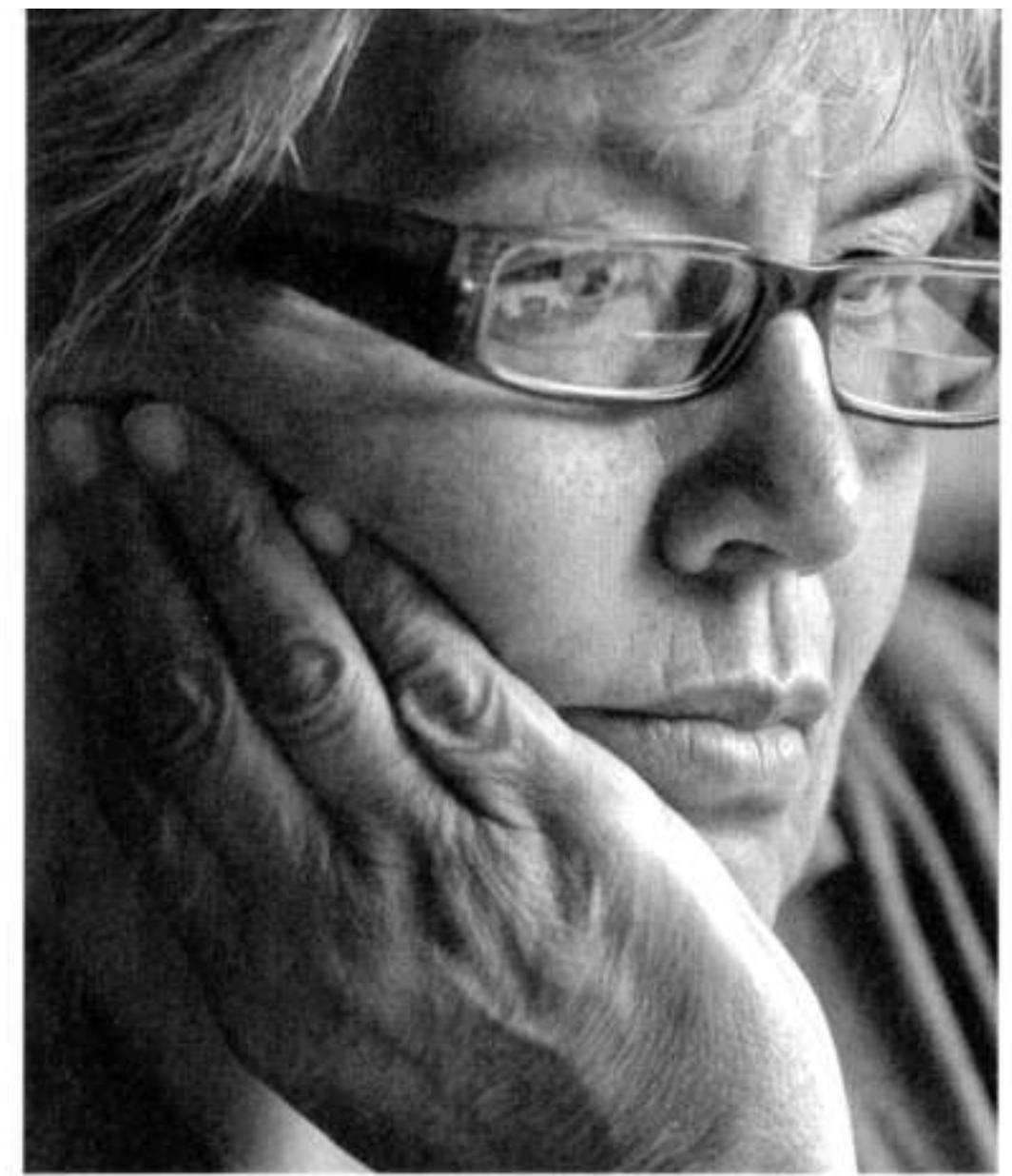
Al Más Allá

PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS

2008 Errol Morris
2007 Heddy Honigmann
2006 Guy Maddin
2005 Adam Curtis
2004 Jon Else
2003 Pat O'Neill
2002 Fernando Birri
2001 Kenneth Anger
2000 Faith Hubley
1999 Johan van der Keuken
1998 Robert Frank
1997 Jan Svankmajer

I am a guest in Lourdes Portillo's home. A fresco of vintage Italianate stencils grace the ceiling over her living room, the music is a symphonic John Adams. She is away today, in Ciudad Juárez, investigating the femicides of young women murdered by psychopaths, or the narcos, or the police. The targets of her investigation are not pleased. I find a knife and a key placed by a stranger, ominously and intentionally, on the sidewalk in front of her door. This, the home of a woman who once inspired my stoic husband to pose in front of MacArthur Park with a Selena doll under his raincoat.

These are the dissonant sensibilities of Lourdes Portillo—the elegant, the insurgent, the fearless, the wickedly funny—which she orchestrates with transcendent skill into an exhilarating body of work. Consider **Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo**, her emotionally charged documentary of women standing for justice for the *desaparecidos* in Argentina; **Columbus on Trial**, in which the official story of conquest and the legacy of the explorer himself are sliced, diced and fried in a hilarious send-up by the comedy troupe, Culture Clash; or **Al Más Allá**, her latest experimental documentary/fiction (never a contradiction in terms within Portillo's genre-defiant oeuvre). This most recent work puts globalization and filmmaking practice itself on trial. In its film within a film, a documentary director and her crew pursue the allegorical story of a Mexican fishing-cum-resort village caught up in transnational drug trafficking. Filmmakers beware. Portillo's sly lampoon of the pretensions and absurdities of the filmmaking process will make you think she's been spying on your shoot.



THE ELEGANT INSURGENT

By Renee Tajima-Peña

Portillo reminds us what a restless imagination can, and must, produce. No two of her films are ever alike. There is, however, a definite Portillo style distinguished in part by a stunning visuality, from the hallucinatory portrait of diasporic Mexican culture in her early **La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead** to the edgy landscapes of Ciudad Juárez's own particular vision of hell in **Señorita Extraviada** and the sumptuous, surrealism-infused visual feasts of **The Devil Never Sleeps** and **Al Más Allá**. It is an aesthetic of reinvention, formally daring and bound by a filmmaking ethos that cultural critic Rosalinda Fregoso calls a politics of love.

Fregoso, who literally wrote the book on Portillo's work, cites Che Guevara's, "*Sin amor no hay revolución*" ("Without love there can be no revolution") to describe the compassion and meaning that courses through Portillo's films. **Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena** could have stopped at parody in its tour of the Tejana singer's hometown and center of fandom, Corpus Christi. After all, Selena Quintanilla's outsized legend was matched by a voluptuous physicality and a style that borders on high camp. But beneath the adulation, Portillo finds a liberating self-love on the part of the singer's fans. Selena embodied the brown Mexicana girls. Her gorgeous, everyday beauty defied a world of white visual privilege in which even the Spanish-language television stars are *güera*-dominant.

Portillo first emerged as a filmmaker amid the ferment of cultural and social movements in 1970s San Francisco: feminism, Chicana/o cinema, social documentary, avant-garde art. No doubt adherents of all would claim Portillo



SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2001 *Señorita Extraviada*
- 1999 *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena*
- 1996 *Sometimes My Feet Go Numb*
- 1994 *The Devil Never Sleeps*
- 1992 *Columbus on Trial*
- 1989 *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead*
- 1985 *Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*
- 1979 *After the Earthquake*

as their own, but as an artist she has always been too singular a force to be bound by any collective template. In an era of identity formation, Portillo embodied all manner of contradiction. Wife, mother, lesbian. Brown within white independent cinema. A woman within male-centric, Chicano cinema.

Although Portillo worked on the outside of political formations, her films are no less disruptive and decentering. **The Devil Never Sleeps** is a murder mystery as *telenovela* for instance, and at the same time an implicit critique of family, nation and the hypocrisy of social mores that shadows both. A personal investigation of the death of her favorite uncle in Mexico, Tío Oscar, the tale is ripe with Portillo's particular brand of irony. It is the first of her films that she narrates; she is a neo-noir sleuth of her own family's secrets. **The Devil Never Sleeps** has been variously described as postmodern, queer-identified, a vision of border-crossing hybridity. Like a specter, though, Portillo can't be pinned down. Her stylized visual devices, especially the photographs from the past literally and metaphorically adrift, are inventively productive rather than merely referential.

The feature documentary, **Señorita Extraviada**, is the culmination of Portillo's formal strategy and critical humanism. Hundreds of young, poor women have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez, a gritty metropolis of maquiladoras and near-apocalyptic sprawl, just over the border from El Paso. **Señorita Extraviada** catalogues the horror. Severed skulls are left for mothers to identify, bodies are left to decay in the desert, anonymous. Portillo

names these women, and insists upon their humanity. The visible evidence of their lives is pictured with a symbolic religiosity. Shoes, shrouds, a girl's dress laid out for a communion. Or a burial?

Portillo imagines the landscape of femicide with a disharmony of visual elements and a tense, dirge-like soundtrack. As interrogator she is relentless, probing the police, the state and the alleged perpetrators with the same skepticism, until a larger picture of male impunity and official impotence—or complicity—emerges. Like canaries in a coal mine, the murdered women of Juarez signal a deeper, prophetic menace. One witness describes photos of atrocities that were shown to her by her uniformed torturers. These shades of Abu Ghraib-like perversion make **Señorita Extraviada** less a mystery than a portrait of a terrorism that keeps the city's population perpetually on edge. "I could have killed you and no one would have known," one victim remembers being taunted by her attacker. Lourdes Portillo's 30 years of filmmaking demand that we never forget these voices. She is an alchemist who lures us inside her imagination, and we have no other choice but to watch, listen and remember.

Renee Tajima-Peña is an Academy Award-nominated documentary filmmaker and graduate director of the social documentation program at UC Santa Cruz.