

Lourdes Portillo, game-changing International filmmaker, dies at 80

Story By Andrew Gilbert, San Francisco Chronicle

LA VOZ EDITOR'S NOTE: *The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center extends condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Lourdes Portillo, beloved filmmaker activist/cultural warrior, whom we were lucky to have here at the Esperanza and in San Antonio joining in on panels about several of her celebrated films during her lifetime.*



Lourdes Portillo graced the halls of the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center in 2002 screening the award-winning film *Señorita Extraviada* about the El Paso/Juárez femicides of maquiladora workers.

Lourdes Portillo, an award-winning Mexican American documentary filmmaker who mastered the medium's formal constraints before expanding them, was an

essential figure in the Mission District's creative ferment in the 1970s and '80s.

A masterly storyteller unafraid to tackle harrowing topics, she explored state-sanctioned terror, rituals of mourning, and her own travails as a filmmaker. Often employing elliptical narratives and voluptuous visual metaphors, her films, like 1988's "La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead," co-directed with Susan Muñoz, were widely broadcast on PBS.

Portillo died at home in San Francisco on Saturday, April 20, at the age of 80. Diagnosed with aggressive bile duct cancer six months ago, "she had a chance to say her goodbyes and was surrounded by family and friends," said her son, cinematographer Antonio Scarlata.

Portillo first made her mark with 1985's "Las Madres: The Mothers of Plaza De Mayo." Co-directed with Muñoz, the Academy Award-nominated documentary brought international attention to the movement of mothers and grandmothers seeking information about loved ones "disappeared" by Argentina's military during its "dirty war" against leftists in the 1970s.

The corrosive nature of violence, particularly when targeting women, was a recurring theme in her work. In her 2001 film "Señorita Extraviada" ("Missing Young Woman"), she investigated a vast wave of femicide around Mexico's Ciudad Juárez.

"I think that's her most devastating film," said writer Sandra Cisneros, a longtime friend of Portillo's. "Working on 'Señorita Extraviada' made her physically ill from the things she learned. She was very brave."

Cisneros became a character in one of Portillo's films as one of the intellectuals analyzing the posthumous fame of slain Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla in 1999's "Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena."

If Portillo was drawn again and again to humanity's dark side, her films also revealed a deep, affectionate and sometimes self-mocking sense of humor. She collaborated with the Chicano

comedy troupe Culture Clash on the 1992 short film "Columbus on Trial," which, like many of her pieces, screened at the Sundance Film Festival.

Her masterwork, 1994's "The Devil Never Sleeps," was inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress in 2020. In hailing Portillo's first-person investigation into the mysterious death of her Tío Oscar, New Yorker film critic Richard Brody wrote that she "discovers her family's story to be a lurid melodrama of conflicting interests and political corruption, and she films it — and her childhood memories — with a labyrinthine style to match."

"The Devil Never Sleeps," a close collaboration with award-winning cinematographer Kyle Kibbe, marked a breakthrough for Portillo, who found inspiration from walking around New York City, taking in "the art work in the streets and museums," she said in a 2021 interview with KQED Arts. "I liked this idea of a baroque and postmodern approach to a telenovela kind of story that Latin Americans tell about our families."

Portillo's legacy includes several generations of filmmakers she mentored. Spanish documentarian Gemma Cubero del Barrio had never made a film when Portillo hired her to do investigative work on "Señorita Extraviada," an experience she said "served as film school," steeping her in "the power of visual metaphor."

Fascinated by the possibilities presented by new technologies, Portillo was an early adopter of small digital cameras, which she used for intimate interviews in "Señorita Extraviada."

Her longtime editor, Vivien Hillgrove, a Hollywood veteran whose credits include "Amadeus," "Blue Velvet" and "The Unbearable Lightness of Being," described Portillo as very different from other directors. Rather than providing detailed instructions "she'd communicate with me through a huge swath of art, music and poetry, where the feeling goes deeper than words—that was her genius."

Born on Nov. 11, 1943, in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, Portillo was 13 when she immigrated with her parents and four siblings to Los Angeles. She started working in film there at 21 when a friend recruited her to work on a documentary. Relocating to San Francisco in the early 1970s, she came out as lesbian and gravitated to Cine Manifest, a collective of radical filmmakers. Looking to hone her craft, she studied filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, graduating in 1978.

With an eye for sensuous imagery and a storyteller's intuition for subterranean emotion and silenced voices, she deployed the power of journalistic inquiry while pushing against its formal limitations.

"From the get-go, I was trying to break away from the real conventional documentary approach, though I still believe in the very conventional style as well," she said in a 1999 interview. "I've tried to work both ways."

Portillo is survived by her three sons, Antonio, Carlos and Karim Scarlata; four siblings, Eduardo, Antonio and Sabela Portillo and Christina Young; five doted-upon grandchildren; many nieces and nephews; and a large extended family in both the U.S. and Mexico.

BIO: Andrew Gilbert is a Bay Area freelance writer. Originally titled Lourdes Portillo, game-changing San Francisco filmmaker, dies at 80, the article can be found at: bit.ly/lourdes-film.