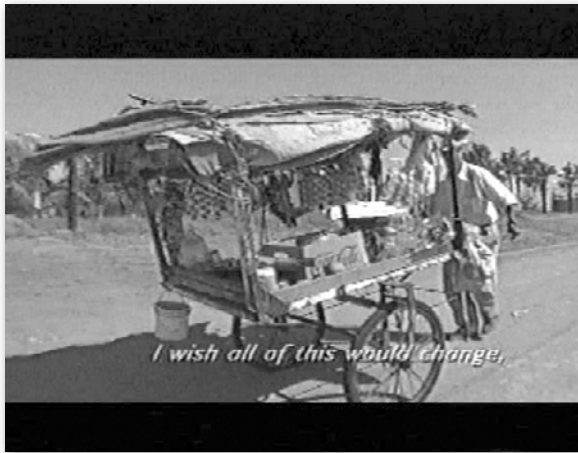


Natalia Almada

EL GENERAL

Film/Video > Film/Video | History | Politics | Southwest/Pacific | 2005



Natalia Almada is an award-winning documentary director and producer. Her experimental documentary *All Water Has A Perfect Memory* was an official selection of the 2002 Sundance Film Festival; the film also won best short documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival and a gold plaque award at the Chicago International Film Festival. It is currently distributed by Women Make Movies and has been broadcast on the Sundance Channel. In 2003 Almada received a New York State Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in film; she has also won two grants from the New York State Council on the Arts. Almada received her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design and is currently working as a freelance filmmaker in New York. In addition to *El General*, she has directed and produced *Al Otro Lado - To The Other Side*, a documentary that looks at immigration and drug trafficking through Mexico's tradition of Corrido music. *Al Otro Lado* was a selection at the 2005 Tribeca Film Festival.

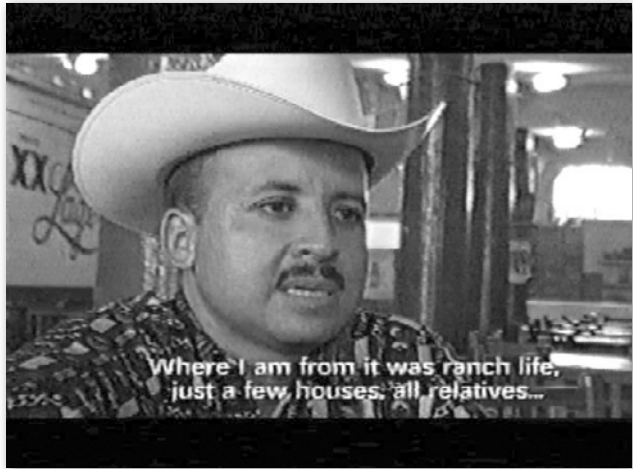
"When I'm in Mexico, I really am a Mexican. And when I'm in the States, I'm really an American," says Natalia Almada, whose bicultural identity forms the spine of her films. Born in Mexico to a Mexican father and a North American mother, Almada lived a "very uprooted life," she says. "I moved a lot. I went to 8 schools and lived in about 14 houses by the time I started high school."

While getting her MFA in photography at the Rhode Island School of Design, she also began making movies. Her celebrated 2002 short, *All Water Has a Perfect Memory*, lyrically captures the profound loss her family endured when her two-year-old sister, Ana Lynn, drowned in their pool. "I wanted to create a visual memory, because my family had a memory that I didn't have," says Almada, who was just seven months old at the time of the accident. Combining Super 8 home movies with evocative imagery—a spinning dress, ripples in a pool, a sewing machine—Almada shaped a cinematic *memento mori* for her late sister. But what's more striking about *All Water* is the bilingual voiceovers—one spoken by her father in Spanish, the other by her mother in English—that highlight the cultural differences at the heart of Almada's family. "*All Water* is such a personal film that I was shocked that it got out there," she admits. "But by being so personal, I think it was able to reach people."

Following *All Water*'s intimate, subjective portraiture, Almada turned to a broader, more social context. Her 2005 debut feature, *Al Otro Lado (To the Other Side)*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, expanded her own cultural split into a poetic and politically insightful documentary about illegal immigration and Mexican *corrido* artists, who sing about the heroic adventures of drug traffickers and the hardships of border crossings.

(continued)

“They say he was a dictator; my family says he wasn’t. But I don’t want to say that he was or he wasn’t,’ she says of her controversial ancestor . . .”



All images: Stills from *Al Otro Lado - To The Other Side*, 2003

Supported by Creative Capital, Almada’s new project *El General* is a perfect marriage of her first major works, combining personal and family memory with the equally slippery constructions of political and social history. *El General* is a subjective portrait of Almada’s great-grandfather, Plutarco Elias Calles, the embattled president of Mexico from 1924 to 1928. The film looks at her family’s and Mexico’s history using archival images, family films and photographs, new footage of contemporary Mexico, and—of paramount importance for Almada—audio recordings made by her grandmother, Alicia Calles. “One day, my aunt gave me these audio recordings, which nobody listened to, because it’s the disembodied voice of their dead mother,” she says. “And because of that, it was almost like my grandmother had handed me these tapes and said, ‘Do something with them.’” Currently, Almada is collecting archival material and transcribing the tapes, and recently shot two scenes to raise additional funds. She plans to finish the project by the end of 2006.

For *El General*, Almada intends to tap not only memories but their fickleness. “They say he was a dictator; my family says he wasn’t. But I don’t want to say that he was or he wasn’t,” she says of her controversial ancestor, who was dubbed everything from a ‘nun-burner’ to the ‘father of modern Mexico.’ “I’m not the person to make a biography and I have no interest in redeeming his image in Mexico’s history. I’m just trying to pose more questions about memory and to look at how there are always these differences. I feel the same way about history,” she continues. “It’s not a question of saying it was this way, it wasn’t that way—a right and wrong history. It’s acknowledging the complexity of history. There are so many layers,” she adds, “and they’re all legitimate.” *

Email Natalia Almada at nataliaalmada@hotmail.com