Cecilia Aldarondo Discusses Her Film, “Memories of a Penitent Heart”

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These Polaroids—showing Miguel with his partner Aquin and with his mother Carmen—were taken in the late 1980s when Miguel was hospitalized at Columbia Presbyterian in NY. A generation later, Cecilia Aldarondo discovered them 3,000 miles apart.

Cecilia’s film “Memories of a Penitent Heart”premieres this month at the Tribeca Film Festival. Below, she speak with Visual AIDS about the upcoming film. Tickets to the film can be purchased here.

Visual AIDS: Can you describe your film “Memories of a Penitent Heart,” and your inspiration for creating the project?

Cecilia Aldarondo: My uncle Miguel died when I was only six years old. I only met him a few times. But I grew up with stories about him—this bright young actor who wanted to ’make it’ on Broadway but died of cancer at 31. That was the legend my family spun about him. But as I got older, I started to sense that there was something wrong about the way my family—my devout Catholic grandmother in particular—did and didn’t talk about him. There were whispers: Miguel

was gay. He may have had AIDS, not cancer. He had a boyfriend that disappeared and no one seemed to care about. And worst of all, that he'd asked to see a priest on his deathbed and repented of being gay.

This stuff was kind of dormant, lingering in the back of my mind. That's how memory works—-it can sit there, waiting for the right moment. And in 2008, my mother found a box of 8mm home movies in her garage, and asked me if I wanted them. And as I watched them, I began to remember my uncle's funeral. And the more I thought about it, the more I started to develop a hunch that something was wrong about the way my family was remembering his death. That was the beginning of this project.

Visual AIDS: The film brings together home movies, interviews, and contemporary vérité footage. What was your process for creating "Memories of a Penitent Heart"?

Cecilia Aldarondo: I see this film as a kind of archeological dig, piecing together my uncle's life and death from the remains he left behind. I spent a lot of time chasing it all down, not just home movies, but photos, love letters, and personal effects. You can tell a lot about how a person is remembered by what people do with their stuff after they die. In my uncle's case, I was interested not just in what was left behind, but what was missing and why. For example, my uncle's death certificate said 'Never Married' and that he died from 'natural causes,' two frequent euphemisms for 'gay man who died of AIDS.' Or his obituary, it states that he left behind his mother, father, and sister, but makes no mention of his partner, who lived with him for years. I saw something really productive in these clues. They were like symptoms.

The film attempts to mine those silences, to ask us to pay attention not only to what we remember, but what we selectively forget. In a similar way, we shot a lot of b-roll in empty spaces—the cemetery where Miguel is buried, the church where his funeral was held—in order to try to contemplate not just his life, but his absence. In the end, one of the hardest things about making this film is knowing I'll never really know my uncle or be able to bring him back. And I feel that, in a way, this is part of the purpose of the film—it's an elegy to all of him, not just the part my family wanted to remember.

Visual AIDS: It will premiere this month at Tribeca Film Festival. Can you talk about the upcoming screenings, and this premiere context?

Cecilia Aldarondo: I feel very lucky to premiere the film in New York. This is the city where my uncle became an adult, came of age as a gay man, developed his artistic ambitions, and eventually died. Not only that, it's a city that was really brutally impacted by AIDS in the US. Of course, AIDS has always been, and continues to be, a global phenomenon; but New Yorkers went through something particular. It's my biggest hope that people who can relate to my uncle's story can come to the screenings and share their own experiences. I will be present at all four screenings for Q&A, and I really want it to be a dialogue with the audience.

Right now, two of our screenings are sold out, but we have tickets left for April 17 at 10pm and April 20 at 9:15pm. You can purchase tickets here.

Visual AIDS: What narratives around Latino identities and their relationship to HIV/AIDS emerge from the film?

Cecilia Aldarondo: We are living in a really interesting moment when the US crisis is being historicized in a big way—we've seen a lot of films in recent years looking back at the 80s and 90s. Many of them are worthy projects that have really done a lot to bring necessary attention back to HIV/AIDS. But at the same time, it's dangerous to think we can have one universal history of AIDS. The reality is that these films have largely focused on the stories of white, middle-class men, when people (women as well as men) of color continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. For them, as in many countries in the Global South, AIDS is not 'over' or a thing of the past. And as much as my film is about the past, it's also about the ongoing present.

There's also an important cultural piece that plays out in my uncle's story. Miguel grew up on the island of Puerto Rico, a place where the Catholic Church has thoroughly permeated every aspect of family life. It's also a place where it's profoundly disrespectful to question your parents, where homophobia and stigma are still huge problems. These factors played an really central role in the way my uncle died. While he was lying on his deathbed, his mother was campaigning for him to repent of his sexuality. This story is not uncommon, even now. And I really think it's important that we continue to fight for nuanced analyses of HIV/AIDS that take factors like religion, ethnicity, class and gender into account.

Visual AIDS: How do themes of art, AIDS and activism emerge from "Memories of a Penitent Heart"?

Cecilia Aldarondo: For me, these three things are inextricable. My uncle was an artist—a theater actor, director, and playwright—who, like so many people, died before he could ever complete his work. A lot of this process of making the film has been about excavating his artistic legacy. But at a certain point, I realized he didn't leave much behind. Some unfinished plays, a few half-formed ideas. I realized that if anything, I was reckoning not with his art, but with his potential. Some might say that he's not worthy of a film—he didn't accomplish anything! But isn't that missing the entire point? Isn't this one of the biggest tragedies of the 1980s and 1990s? The black hole of artist potential that we'll never be able to fill? As someone who was a kid in the 1990s, it took making this film to realize what I had been cheated of. And that, to me, is a political question. It's something worth fighting for.

Cecilia Aldarondo is one of FILMMAKER Magazine's "25 New Faces of Independent Film" of 2015. Her directorial debut Memories of a Penitent Heart received support from the MacDowell Colony, Sundance Institute, IFP, Jerome Foundation, Firelight Media and NYSCA among others. She is Assistant Professor of Film at Skidmore College.

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