



# Willie Varela Filmmaker and Videographer

Retha Oliver\*

Willie Varela finds beauty in the conflicts and contradictions of life. His images, whether in photography or on video, capture quirkiness in the midst of ordinary scenes and subjects. In three decades as filmmaker and videographer, he has been honored with screenings of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of Art, two inclusions (in 1993 and 1995) in the Whitney's biennial exhibition and broadcasts of his work on public television throughout the United States. Not bad for a kid from El Paso with no formal training, who bought his first Super 8 camera with money saved from working the census. "I just started taking pictures," says Varela.<sup>1</sup>

It was 1971, and Varela was inspired by two major artists then working with Super 8 imagery; musician John Lennon and experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage. "I thought, if these guys can make home movies, why can't I? I didn't need to be working in commercial film," he says. Nonetheless,

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"At the time I was very much tempted by Hollywood," says Varela. "Who wouldn't be? There's money, fame, and you get to sleep with beautiful women. But there were very few artists saying anything worth saying there. I asked myself; could I bend my vision to the desire of the market place? And I just couldn't do it."

Stan Brakhage would remain a powerful influence. Varela's latest installation, exhibited earlier this year at University of Texas at El Paso and at the Hudson Showroom at ArtPace, in San Antonio, Texas, acknowledged his debt to Brakhage, who Varela calls "my only real mentor." Varela met Brakhage in the summer of 1973, and a handful of encounters over the years cemented the impact of the older filmmaker. "Over the years I probably spent a total of only 10 days with him, but every day was a day in which I was transformed," says Varela.

Brakhage himself was inspired by Jean Cocteau and Maya Deren, people whose work was poetic and psychologically laden. Varela, too, produces poetic, tempting, and psychologically intriguing work, emphasizing strong images, unlikely juxtapositions.



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positions, and video clips with powerful, recognizable context. Currently an assistant professor of film studies at University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), Varela is "visually omnivorous," he says. "I devour everything that's in front of me visually, and I have to expel these images somehow. And once you become visually literate you inevitably try to interpret it."

Varela, 53, credits his calling to a coalescence of aesthetic influences that were unique to the time. "The United States was a different place in the '50s and '60s," says Varela. "The tremendous consciousness of race had not yet overtaken society. The middle of the twentieth century was a terrific time. It was the post-war boom, the age of Eisenhower, abstract expressionism and a gradual turn of the center of the art world to New York from Paris." Far from the throb of America's emerging art world, Varela's working class background and public school education was unexpectedly fertile.

Sun drenched, wind-swept El Paso, Texas is about as far from Hollywood and the New York hub of contemporary art as one can get. In the 1960s, it was not the place one might expect to nurture a budding experimental filmmaker. Yet, says Varela, there was a temporary flourishing of cinema art that gave him an opportunity to experience the world's great art films: "If El Paso ever had a golden age of film exhibition, it was between the mid-'60s and the mid-'70s. The Museum of Art and the university ran series of classic and foreign films. They screened great films by Buñuel, Fellini, Antonioni —and they drew huge audiences; the auditoriums were always crowded. Nowadays, you wouldn't draw flies."

"It was," muses Varela, "a dark time for me; four years at a Jesuit high school had left me feeling lost." It was also the Vietnam era, and Varela says, "I felt minorities were being sent to fight for old men." Filmmaking gave him a way to express and

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explore his responses to cultural influences, and his own internal confusion.

Varela studied education at UTEP, then spent several years as a public school teacher before heading for San Francisco, California in 1982. There, in the heart of America's experimental film community, Varela rubbed shoulders with filmmakers Kenneth Anger and Bruce Conner, among others, learning from everyone he came in contact with. Throughout, he worked a day job: "I wore a tie to work: it was weird. At night I was hanging out with Bohemian types." In California, Varela "grew tremendously as a filmmaker and as an artist." Still, El Paso was home, and Varela returned four years later with his young daughter and his then-wife, who wanted to be closer to family. "Perhaps I'm a bit more culture bound than I like to admit," he acknowledges.

By 1991, Varela was burned out on Super 8: "I had worked with the medium for 20 years, and every time I picked up my camera, I already knew what I was going to do. There was no discovery left in it." For Varela, video technology "gave me a new lease on life. I still consider myself to be in transition to video."

In *This Burning World*, his most recent work, Varela retools the video imagery of others and includes his own original shots, delivering compelling footage with enough common cultural touchstones to provide the viewer with reference points to begin to analyze the work. Brakhage often cut incongru-

ous images into each other: in *This Burning World*, Varela achieves a similar effect by employing two video projectors, splitting the screen into a simultaneous feed of both impressions. Varela utilizes news clips and socially recognizable experiences along with landscape shots and mundane footage. While one side cranks out visceral-response images of human cornea surgery, Kennedy's assassination, and the World Trade Center attack, the other projects visuals seemingly captured by a camera held nonchalantly out an automobile window. Varela's video conversations are intensely personal, but the shared imagery of our common cultural history provides a guide to begin to decode the artist's intentions. The result is mesmeric.

The proximity to the border and dominance of Latino culture in El Paso assures that Varela's films and still photos reflect his complex cultural awareness and identity. Yet there is a universality in his work that transcends race and ethnic lines. When Varela was selected recently for inclusion as an artist-in-residence in 1994 at ArtPace, in San Antonio, the decision was made by a European curator, Ute Menta Baver, from Berlin. "It's exciting to think you've managed to attract an international community of interest," Varela says.

San Antonio's ArtPace has established itself as a leading residency program for contemporary artists. It is also closely watched by trendsetters in the art world. While Varela's previous successes





do not need the embellishment of an ArtPace imprimatur, his selection is an impressive validation of a singular career and presents Varela with new opportunities for experimentation. For his upcoming residency, Varela plans to construct unique images that budget and time constraints have not previously allowed: "I want to set up studio shoots, have auditions for young men and women for tableau photography. I want to capture elements of sexuality, modern life, culture and Hispanic influences, mostly Catholic imagery."

Thirty years after Varela started making "home movies," American society has radically transformed. A new Latino middle class and burgeon-

ing Mexican-American population has embraced Latino culture in films and on television and showered success on popular artists like director Roberto Rodriguez and comic George Lopez. Yet Varela, who chose long ago to value art over enterprise, has no regrets: "I'd hate to think what kind of person I would be if I were rich and famous." **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All quotes are taken from telephone interviews with the author in June and August 2003.



### WILLIE VARELA'S WORK

His public exhibition career has spanned over 20 years, with one-man shows at such independent film showcases as the San Francisco Cinematheque, Los Angeles Film Forum, Chicago Filmmakers, Millennium Film Workshop, Rice University, Berks Filmmakers, the Boston Film/Video Foundation, Anthology Film Archives, Collective for Living Cinema, Pacific Film Archives, Austin Film Society, Guadalupe Central Arts Center San Antonio, Donnell Media Center and many others. Highlights of Varela's career include a Cineprobe at the Museum of Modern Art in 1988; videos in the 1993 and 1995 Whitney Biennials; and inclusion of 12 Super 8 films in the *Big As Life: An American History of the 8mm Films*, put on by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He was also the subject of a mid-career retrospective of his completed work in film and video at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the spring of 1994. This exhibition was organized by Chon Noriega. Varela's films and videotapes have also been shown on broadcast television outlets, including KQED in San Francisco, KUHT in Houston, KDET in Corpus Christi and KWHY in Los Angeles. Photographs and visual/text pieces have also been included in group shows at the Bridge Center for Contemporary Art in El Paso, Texas; the El Paso Museum of Art; the San Antonio Museum of Art; and the Jansen-Perez Gallery in San Antonio, Texas. Varela has also been the recipient of film production grants from the Southwest Independent Production Fund, the Texas Commission on the Arts, the City of El Paso Arts Resources Department and the New Forms Regional Initiatives Grant. Currently, he is an assistant professor of film studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. To find out more, see [www.geocities.com/film8](http://www.geocities.com/film8)