

## Documentaries draw viewer to underside of American experience

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"It was one of the most bone-chilling visions I've ever experienced," says Austin filmmaker Laura Dunn ("The Subtext of a Yale Education") as she remembers her first aerial view of "cancer alley," the corridor of petrochemical companies stretching between Baton Rouge, La., and New Orleans. A master's candidate in the department of radio-television-film at the University of Texas, Dunn is describing the stark aerial photography that became part of her latest documentary, "Green," which is being screened at this year's South by Southwest Film Festival. The straightforward but emotionally charged film chronicles the impact of environmental pollution on the residents who live along the corridor, which borders the Mississippi River.

"The juxtaposition between this beautiful, majestic river and these massive petrochemical plants, between this virgin river and what looks like tumors on the ground, to me it captured the essence of the story," Dunn said.

At a recent screening in Louisiana, one local woman stood up after the film and told Dunn that the shots (captured by Austinite Vance Holmes with a 16 mm film camera mounted on the nose of a helicopter) were a public service.

A native of New Orleans, Dunn became interested in the region's environmental problems a few years ago when she read an article in the Wall Street Journal that described how the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic had defended a small community in Convent, La., against a petrochemical company that wanted to build a second plant in the area.

Dunn spent two years shooting "Green," mostly on her own, and she says that one of the most difficult aspects of the project was dealing with the depression that overtook her while establishing an intimacy with her subjects, many of whom have horrible health problems. "By far the hardest part was processing that hard, human suffering," she says.

Speaking about her hopes for the film's reception at SXSW, Dunn describes a revelatory moment during production, when she noticed a train passing through the area and realized that the romance she once associated with the sound no longer applied.

"Now that I know what chemicals these trains are carrying and how they impact the lives of people that I've grown to love and care about, when I hear that train, I think about something else," Dunn said.

"If every time after seeing my film someone hears a train and thinks about the people suffering in Louisiana, then we've done a good deed."

While Dunn's documentary follows a number of characters throughout the course of its story, Heather Courtney's SXSW film, "Los Trabajadores/The Workers," focuses on two members of Austin's day-labor population.

Courtney recently graduated from UT with her master's degree in fine arts, and her previous experience working with Rwandan refugees in Africa and for immigrant advocacy agencies in Washington, D.C., made her especially interested in Austin's immigrant population.

"There's this paradox that exists -- and it has always existed in America's treatment of its immigrants -- where we want their labor but we really don't want to acknowledge them," Courtney said. "We want to keep them hidden."

"Los Trabajadores" attempts to change that. After spending about a month talking with the workers at the former day-labor site in downtown Austin, Courtney began shooting interviews in the summer of 1999. Although all of the men had stories, Courtney knew she wanted to narrow her film's focus to capture the "human quality" of their situation.

Ramon Castillo Aparicio, a husband and father of two daughters in Mexico, and Juan Ignacio Gutierrez, whose brothers and sisters are in Nicaragua, became main characters in the documentary, which also recounts the controversy surrounding the day-labor site's relocation to 51st Street.

But Courtney says this part of the film is not the real story. "It was really just a vehicle to show that this is another obstacle that these guys have to face."

The documentary includes excerpts from conversations with City Council members and some of the residents living next to the new site. Says Courtney, "The neighbors definitely had legitimate complaints because the city didn't inform them and include them in the process."

By focusing on two workers, Courtney helps viewers to identify and engage with a substantial -- and potentially overwhelming -- topic. "It was much more complex than I ever thought it would be," she says. "I can't pretend to know about immigration law or any of those issues. I guess that's why I chose as much as possible to make the film in the words and the voices of the workers themselves. I could have never said what they said half as effectively."

She refers to a sequence in which Ramon, who was laid off from his job in Mexico after the peso crashed in 1994, talks about the trauma of deciding to leave his family and cross illegally into the United States, only to be met by a picket sign that read "No day labor near families."

In the film, Ramon says, "What I did was to come here illegally, and this is against the law of the United States. But it is not against the law of my family, nor is it against my law."

Like Dunn, Courtney hopes her documentary will compel viewers to direct action. But she acknowledges that small-scale responses are equally important.

"If somebody saw my film, maybe the next time they see a guy hanging out on the corner, they won't assume the worst about him," she said. "He might have the same hopes and dreams as everyone else."

(FROM BOX)

On the Web

For reviews, profiles and more on the South by Southwest Film Festival, as well as coverage of the interactive and music festivals, go to [www.statesman](http://www.statesman.com/sxsw)

[.com/sxsw](http://www.statesman.com/sxsw).

Illustrations/Photos: PHOTOS; Photo: Laura Dunn's 'Green,' above, looks at petrochemical companies along 'cancer alley' in Louisiana. Heather Courtney's 'Los Trabajadores/TheWorkers,' left, chronicles the lives of Austin day laborers.