SARGASSO Interview

Sargasso: Caribbean Film 8 (1993)

Poli Marichal: Interview

Poli Marichal is one of the outstanding women filmmakers in Puerto Rico. She has received numerous awards for her experimental films and her animation. Although she began working in the Super 8mm format, she now prefers multimedia. She lives in California alternates that with at least four long stays a year in Puerto Rico, a way of always feeling her roots. This interview by María Cristina Rodríguez took place during one of these stays.

María Cristina: Tell us a few things about your artistic background.

Poli Marichal: I come from an artistic background in the sense that my mother was an actress for many years and my father was a set designer and illustrator, so when I was little I grew up backstage practically, and I even learned plays by heart, listening to my mom rehearsing and later on in life I decided I wanted to study art so I went to the Escuela de Artes Plásticas del Instituto de Cultura where I studied for a year. Then, I received a scholarship to study in Spain so I went to Barcelona to la Escuela Massaná which is a fine arts school that is very prestigious so I studied there for two years and came back to Puerto Rico where I finished my B.A. in art at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas. Then, I worked for a while with animator José Luis Díaz de Villegas at his studio. And, I got really interested in what could be done with drawing and movement and using film to give movement to drawing, which really interested me because I felt it was like a marriage between the visual arts and this new art of this century which is film. And, then I went to Boston to study filmmaking because I really got interested in film but I went to a school that was specialized, I guess, or at least they gave the students the freedom to do a lot of experimental filmmaking which was what really interested me, because I thought you could do with film more things than just a narrative film and you could do even like a sort of extension of painting or drawing in film so I decided to experiment. I did several little films and there I got really interested in Super 8mm because it allows you to do inexpensive films and at the same time learn a lot about the technique of filmmaking without having a big budget like the big studios. Then I came back to Puerto Rico where I worked for Díaz de Villegas again at his studio and then I went to work for a visual communications company where I designed audio-visual productions for about 3 years.

At the same time I was doing experimental film and working with a group, Taller de Cine La Red, which was a group of Super 8 filmmakers that were really interested in not just making film but in bringing films from other countries to Puerto Rico to have like a cultural exchange because we found that there was a necessity in this country of making people aware that film wasn't just something the big studios could do but it's something that with a little camera you can express yourself and say something about your reality. While we were working...
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with La Red, I had the opportunity to work with Kino García, Eduardo Cánovas, Carlos Malavé, María Cristina, Oscar Colón, Marién Barreto, Waldo Sánchez and several other members. The Taller did several yearly encounters and it brought films from all over the world and it was, for me at least, a very enriching experience and I did several little films that travelled outside of Puerto Rico and were also shown here, there and everywhere and for me it was a wonderful experience to see that films that were done with so little money could travel so much and bring like a link between other filmmakers in other parts of the world who were also interested in doing very personal films. Those films were shown in Brussels, Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Venezuela, United States, Canada; I think, Lybia and Tunisia and some other places.

MC: Do you have your own style in films?

PM: I started doing a certain kind of experimental film where you painted on the emulsion film and I mixed film footage, like live footage of people, etc.; I painted over it and scratched the film and it gave me a lot of freedom which is something I really treasured because in regular filmmaking there are so many rules as to what should be done, what shouldn’t be done, what lighting is and so on. I wanted to break the rules and do whatever I wanted to do and see what came out. Especially in experimental film you can really work with reality in a very poetic and symbolic way which is, I guess what my tendency is more like.

MC: Could you comment on the work of women in film here in Puerto Rico?

PM: I guess women in the arts, specially since most Puerto Rican women filmmakers right now like Frida Medin, who is first a photographer, then Marimater O’Neill who is a printer first, and Teresa Prévodi, who leans more toward journalistic literary sources, came from other disciplines that were very art-oriented and they found in film an extension of that, of what they were doing in their own fields. For example, Marimater does portraits of reality, but in a very symbolic way. She makes actual facts but she sort of transforms them into something else. Frida Medin is very internal—she’s looking towards her insides, it’s non-oneiric; it’s an extension of where her photographic interests are. I guess for women in Puerto Rico filmmaking is not a way of making a career in the traditional film, like narrative filmmaking, but a way of expressing themselves artistically. It is something that has happened that is very curious. Men here are usually more narrative-oriented or documentary-oriented and they don’t tend to look so much at their psyches. I guess it’s a manly quality. Men don’t want to see so much inside as women do. It’s not a rule but I guess generally that’s the way it is, men are more disconnected with their internal torments and fears. They are not so aware of what’s going on: their emotions, feelings and self examination. Women are more oriented towards—especially if they are in the arts—if they have an interest in expressing something, they first look inside and then they throw it back at the world. Generally, that’s the way it happens. Agnes Varda, the French director, has very interesting films. She shows what’s going on inside the characters, more than to die.
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shooting at each other or pushing drugs or that kind of film or the buddy films which are another mentality.

MC: And your own narrative film?

PM: "Nos Despedimos de Mandrágora Luna" is a sort of symbolic narrative. The film starts with a group of friends, Marfa Dolores Rodriguez and Roxana Riera; we used to get together and had a brainstorming of what we wanted to do, so we started developing this story and the story became more and more complicated and each one had phantoms that we wanted to take out of our psyche. It was like a year before we did anything. I took part of the ideas of everybody and did a story board and we discussed it. The project took like a year and then it became simpler. It was the first time I did something like that.

We did the story as I drew it. It more or less expressed what we tried to say after so many months. So finally we did the film. It was a great experience to shoot on Sundays. We shot the whole film in Old San Juan. Waldo Sanchez did the lighting with Enrique Puig, and I did the camera, directed the actors and did the make up. It was lots of fun. Every beginner's film has lots of mistakes and it could have been done in a more complete way. I'll do another one some day and learn more from it.

MC: You also mentioned a Multimedia project.

PM: In 1989 I received a proposal from a group of friends in Boston who have an organization called the International Center for 8mm Film and Video who are also sponsors (with the National Endowment) for the Taller de Cine La Red. They asked me if I wanted to submit a proposal. I asked them if I could do anything I wanted and they said "sure". I had been dying to do like a multi-media, a portrait of Puerto Rico. I wrote a proposal and did several drawings of how the installation was going to be and it got approved. They gave me $18,000. I began filming and shooting slides at the same time. I wanted to combine what I had learned in Boston doing audio-visual design and do a multi-media where slides and film are integrated and synchronized together to do a huge wide screen, similar to something like Panavision and projected on a painting of the island of Puerto Rico. It was like several media mixed together. It took a year and it was a lot of work. I realized I was trying to do a $90,000 project with $18,000. I started putting in money from my pocket. It was shown in Boston, Lawrence and Springfield, Massachusetts. It was like a travelling show and went from place to place and we showed it at several galleries and museums. My husband told me that people would put tar and feathers on me and drag me out of town but to my surprise the reaction of most of the Puerto Ricans in the audience was very supportive even though for them it was not the most optimistic of visions. It was a very personal vision and it reflected what I had seen in the island. So it's a portrait that not everyone is going to like. But I wanted to say something, to show something else, not the beautiful things. I did something that is political and very critical of the situation right now in a crazy, elliptical way. I haven't been able to bring it to Puerto Rico because it's costly just to bring the equipment and the insurance for

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all the lenses. We have to use some lenses for the audio-visual projectors and just bringing the screen, which is 20 feet long is very costly. I'll bring it some day when I get a sponsor. I'm working in Los Angeles where I live now. I've been going back to my roots in the graphic arts and I've been doing a lot of print-making but I've also done some animation commercially for the studios, for Columbia Pictures.

MC: What has your experience living and working in Los Angeles been like?

PM: I sort of had to start again because when I moved to L.A. I felt like uprooted. Suddenly, I was like an unknown in a huge place, so I'm still getting the idea of where I have to work and what my reality is. I've been writing proposals to get money to do another multi-media installation which is with video money. I did a proposal for an animated film and for the Independent TV service and I got to be a finalist but I guess it was too costly for them. I'm working on several ideas for animated film—three films one minute each. (Editor's note: this project was approved last February.)

MC: Is making films in Puerto Rico terribly difficult?

PM: My experience doing film in Puerto Rico has been that there is not much support on the island; especially for experimental filmmakers, there is no support at all. You can get $2,000 here, $5,000 there but that's not enough if you want to really develop work. For the commercial film it is even harder. Just to get work competing against all the studios nowadays in Venezuela, Brazil and others who are taking a lot of the commercial work out of the island. So I guess film working in Puerto Rico is uphill even if you are doing commercial things.

If you're doing Super 8 you have the freedom that you can do whatever you want; if you have $200 or $300 or $500, you can do your own little piece of work. If you want to do a feature you are in big trouble because it's really hard to get money. There are a few people like Jacobo Morales who have done it but it has been uphill even for them. If you have an investment of one million dollars you have to make at least 3 million dollars for it to be profitable. It's an endless struggle even for the people who are doing it with money. So I don't know what the future is. It would depend a lot on the government. And the government spends so much money on bureaucracy so by the time it gets to the filmmakers there is very little left over. The government should realize that film travels a lot, is seen in many places, and it would be a wonderful way of telling people in the world that there is a little island called Puerto Rico. People don't realize that the arts are the best way of getting your country to be known in the world.

A few years ago I was in Canada in the National Film Board. They have these huge buildings, that the government sponsors. They have the lab to process the film, they have the cameras, the studio for the filmmakers. The animators have a lot of support. And it doesn't matter if your film doesn't make money. Public TV in Canada shows everything that is produced by the National Film Board and they have agencies all over the world that distribute those films, so the films in the end always make money. If the government in

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Puerto Rico would realize that if money is distributed in an intelligent way and filmmakers were required to really produce film and if they're trained to do quality work, they could have a moneymaking industry here. But they never really wanted to put the effort and the money that that requires. It makes filmmakers really frustrated. They go abroad, they study, they have all these ideas accumulating dust for years and they have no way to get that film produced because it's so hard. I think that should be a priority in this country. Not only in filmmaking, it concerns the arts in general.

MC: How do you see the insertion of Puerto Rican films in the rest of the Caribbean region?

PM: I know very little of what's being done in the Caribbean. I guess the main reason is because distribution in Puerto Rico is so lousy. You know the Americans control everything, so we hardly see foreign films and needless to say, even though Puerto Rico is in the Caribbean it has been separated from the rest of the Caribbean because of political and national boundaries. You know the U.S. doesn't even try to create contact between the islands. The government in Puerto Rico has always been looking towards Washington. It's been a symbiotic relationship with the Americans. It's like we were living in the Pacific Ocean. We have almost no contact with Jamaica and we are so similar even though they speak English. Even with the Dominican Republic, which is a closer neighbor and there is a group of filmmakers, our contacts have been nil. I've been to their festival--Festival of Women Directors--and they are really wonderful people. They are trying to produce something but they have no money. We have to make a list of the resources in the islands, get through seminars and start doing projects together. We have to know what they have before doing a collective anything. We should start with perhaps some conference or seminar, one from each island, and go to all the islands together. Getting people in contact with each other and allowing them the facilities and a little bit of money. Perhaps donating time of the facilities, access to good equipment, and many other things that will bring us together.
