



INSPIRING MAKER

THE GIFT OF STRUGGLE

The risqué subject of the documentary might have pushed the voting tallies over the top. The film was about the revival of burlesque, which has plenty of sex appeal and is a fairly popular pastime in the Pacific Northwest. The film is good in its own right, and it's narrated by Margaret Cho, which gives it some star appeal.

But Courtney Hermann probably could have made a film about grass growing and won. Hermann is an acclaimed Portland documentarian and professor at the Art Institute of Portland. She was voted one of Hand-Eye Supply's Most Inspiring Makers, an honor given to Portlanders who make things. She rode atop the supply store's dazzling float in the Starlight Parade last month.

Hermann is deserving of the seat: her films have won audience awards at several film festivals and have appeared on PBS, among other prestigious outlets. But she humbly credits her many current and former students in town for the Maker title.

"I'd like to say I got votes because of the project alone, but I think it was students," she says (we might find out next year if the work content actually matters in voting – Hermann's next film is about uranium mining).

Hermann, 40, has a philosophy about filmmaking that intersects with her identity. She identifies as queer – she's a woman, but she presents herself with many masculine characteristics. Her queerness for a long time was a source of struggle, something she says that all good documentaries need. That struggle has helped her become the successful creator and teacher she is today.

"I think the struggle is a gift," Hermann says, "because you instantly have this whole other relationship with the rest of humanity, where I think you can more easily tap into the shared humanity of people who are different from you."

Hermann grew up in Baltimore with conservative parents – "old school," she calls them – Christian, but not the "you're going to hell" variety. They bought her baseball bats and footballs and were still surprised when she came out of the closet at 22.

But shortly before that milestone, they bought her the only thing she ever really begged for: a video camera. One of the first models for home use, it recorded to VHS and cost \$1,200.

"That was a lot of money in the '80s," Hermann said.

She enjoyed making home movies, but she knew she wanted to be a teacher. Her mom did it; so did her sister. It was in her blood.

But she didn't know she wanted to teach film until one day in 1992 in Charlottesville, Va. She was there for the Virginia Film Festival. Her professor for her documentary film class sent her. She was 19, and she and some friends filed into a cool theatre to watch the documentary "To Render a Life" by Ross Spears.

The film is about the ethics of making the documentary: how to portray the lives of other people and the questions one grapples with in the creation process. All of that resonated with Hermann, but what sticks with her is one scene.

The film included the story of a family living in rural Virginia. They lived in a trailer with no air conditioning and a wood-burning stove. In one scene, the mother makes dinner for her family in a crowded kitchen in the middle of the humid summer, sweat dripping from her brow.

"It struck me," Hermann says. "It struck me with the humanity on display and how much I felt like I was really moved by the strength and power of this character. Those are the kinds of characters that interest me in my own work – strong individuals persevering despite situations that are really difficult."

Hermann walked out of that theater knowing what she wanted to be when she grew up.

Today, Hermann is a faculty member and assistant academic director of the digital film and video department at the Art Institute, and she's received the faculty of the year award. Hermann feels that her androgynous sexual identity has been more of an asset to her as a teacher than a detriment. As she puts it, she feels like she can "be everything to everyone." Women are grateful to have a woman role model in a field dominated by men, and the men see her as someone who is accessible and understands them.

"I feel in the final analysis, that being queer and a different gender somewhat, has actually improved my ability to relate," she says.

Overall, Hermann says some of her proudest moments come when her students access the power she's learned to find within herself.

"The students really see, in some cases for the first time, they really, truly understand how hard they can actually work," she says, "so they get this great sense of self empowerment and come out the other side of this really tough and difficult experience feeling great strength and power. And it's all in service to this art form that I love – documentary."

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