

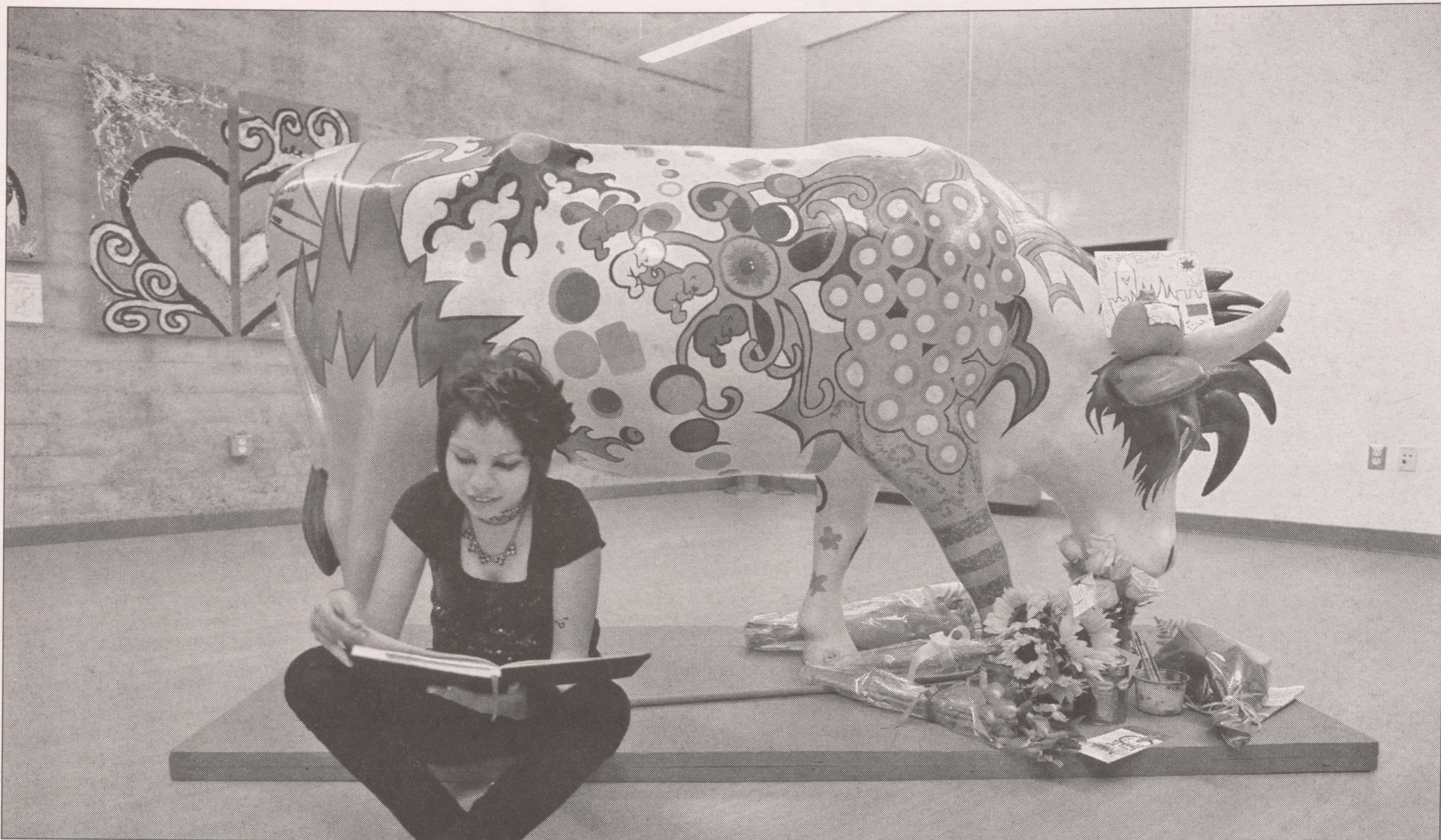


PHOTO BY SEAN FINE

The film, "Inocente" shows the artist as she prepares for an exhibit at a San Diego nonprofit that uses art to create positive transformations for young people facing adversity. Inocente created 30 pieces of work for the show. Her artwork raised \$12,000. She says that each painting is "a story."

Age of Inocente

Inocente gained fame in the Oscar-winning documentary "Inocente," which shows her pursuing her dream to be an artist. Her paintings exhibit a sense of whimsy, and sometimes, her face is the canvas.

BY ROSETTE ROYALE
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

As a homeless teen, Inocente dreamed of a better life. But she never imagined her dreams would lead to the Oscars.

She lived in San Diego with her mother and three younger brothers, and for years they bounced from the YWCA to friends' houses, from the Salvation Army to short-lived apartment stays. Sometimes Inocente and her family, who were all undocumented immigrants from Mexico, slept in a park. Over the course of nine years, they never stayed in the same place for more than three months.

Through it all, Inocente, who goes only by her first name, held on to one particular dream: being an artist. Her chosen medium was painting, and she favored bright colors. She swirled, dabbed and dribbled paint on any surface she could find. Often, she painted on her face, creating detailed flowers on her temple or swirling arabesques on her cheek. Art brought her joy.

"If people knew my story, they'd probably think I should be painting dark, like dark paintings," Inocente said.

People nationwide got the chance to witness part of her story in 2012, after the MTV premiere of the short documentary "Inocente." The 40-minute film follows the homeless teen as she turns the events of her life into art. Her artistic passions play out against revelations of why she feels responsible for her family's homelessness; they also serve as a joyous counterpoint to Inocente's strained relationship with her mother, Carmela.

This past February, "Inocente" won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short. It became the first film financed in part by Kickstarter, a crowd-funding site, to win an Oscar.

The Oscar win changed Inocente's life. She had always dreamed of traveling, and, thanks to the film, she was able to travel the U.S. to advocate for homeless youth and arts education for young people.

Inocente will come to Seattle Sept. 27 for a series of art-centered events. First, she will participate in an art workshop for young people 12 and older at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) from 6 to 6:30 p.m. After a short break, there will be a screening of the film, followed by a question-and-answer session. The event is sponsored by Seattle University, in partnership with SAM and Sanctuary Arts Center, a nonprofit serving homeless youth in the University District.

Inocente, now 19, said that while she enjoys working with young artists during her travels, she can't watch the film anymore: It's too painful.

Besides, many things have changed in her life since 2009, when she met filmmakers Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine. The husband-and-wife team had sought a young, homeless artist who would tell her story on film.

Looking back on the experience, Inocente said she didn't mind being followed by cameras for almost 18 months. She'd grown used to people looking at her because of her painted face. Besides, she feels the movie isn't about her.

"It puts a face to poor people, to homelessness, immigration and arts education," said Inocente.

But the face that helps viewers connect with those issues belongs to Inocente. It's her story that draws viewers into a young artist's unflinching commitment to realize her dream. And it began in Mexico.

Across the border

Inocente doesn't remember entering the United States.

She was born in a small town in Mexico and lived there with her mother, father and three younger brothers, the youngest an infant. One day, Inocente said, her father had her put on her coat, then sneaked her and two brothers across the border into California. He never asked permission from her mother.

"We were basically kidnapped," she said. Inocente was 5.

Soon after, her father promised her mother he'd return for her and the youngest son. But weeks passed, and he never went back to Mexico. So Carmela bundled up the child and crossed the border. The family reunited.

The reunion produced little joy. Inocente said that in Mexico, her father had been abusive, a behavior that continued in the U.S. One evening, Inocente's father told her to tell her mother he wanted dinner. But Inocente, playing with her toys, forgot. When her father realized she hadn't followed his orders, Inocente said he beat her. Carmela stepped in to protect the child.

"Then all hell broke loose," Inocente said. Her father began beating her mother. Her mother called the police. Her father broke the phone on her mother's head. Cops arrested her father. Inocente, her mother and brothers were taken to a shelter. And her father?

"He got deported," Inocente said.

The 15-year-old Inocente admits she feels responsible for her family's plight: After all, if she had remembered to tell her mother to fix dinner, there might not have been a fight. If there hadn't been a fight, her father wouldn't have been deported, and the family wouldn't have gone to a shelter.

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