



James Chasse lying on the sidewalk after his beating by Portland police. The photo was taken by Jamie Marquez of the Portland Mercury and is a reference point in the new documentary "Alien Boy: The Death and Life of James Chasse," beginning a five day run on Sunday, Feb. 24 at Cinema 21.

## Alien Boy: The Death and Life of James Chasse

### OPINIONATED JUDGE

*Editor's note: The Portland Observer this week introduces Judge Darleen Ortega to our Arts and Entertainment coverage. Ortega is a real life judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals, and an avid movie reviewer off the bench. I'm sure you will enjoy her contributions as our "Opinionated Judge."*

BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA

I am seeing so many wonderful films! One of the best is Alien Boy: The Death and Life of James Chasse, which screened this month at the Portland International Film Festival and opens this week at Cinema 21.

The movie is the work of Portland documentarian Brian Lindstrom, whose prior film, "Finding Normal" offers a thoughtful take on lifelong addicts trying to find a normal life in recovery.

In Alien Boy, Lindstrom has turned his sensitive eye to a complex story that Portlanders will think they know — of James Chasse, a gentle man with schizophrenia who was tackled by three police officers one day in the Pearl District, and suffered terrible injuries including 17 broken ribs and a punctured lung, and then died in police custody.

Although the story was well-covered by local media, it is really more complex than could be gleaned from following that coverage—and of course, James Chasse was not merely a mentally ill



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vagrant in the wrong place at the wrong time, but rather a person with his own story.

Lindstrom wisely focuses first on telling us something about the man, in the voices of those who loved him. It turns out there is a lot of material to work with, since he was an artist

and a whimsical soul; had he not spent so much of his life battling the demons of schizophrenia, he might well have been a performer or a comic book artist.

There is a surprising amount of material to mine that Chasse himself created, including letters and drawings, artistically rendered through animation. The kindness and care that is evident in presenting Chasse's life is a painful contrast to the treatment he got from police, who do not even seem to have regarded him as a person.

ingly callous treatment he received in its aftermath.

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Although only one police officer would answer questions from the filmmaker on-camera, there is a lot of footage from the various inquiries that followed the events, so most of the story comes directly out of the mouths of participants and witnesses.

Director Lindstrom maintains such a steady tone that all the emotions he stirs up feel really genuine, not the least bit manipulated. It's a masterful piece of work, with relevance that extends far beyond Portland. Its five-day run at Cinema 21 begins on Sunday, Feb. 24.

*Darleen Ortega has been a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals since 2003 and is the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. She sees two to three films a week and has been writing about movies for over a decade, including blogging two film festivals and publishing a list of the year's best films. Find her movie blog at [opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com](http://opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com).*

As the film progresses, the focus subtly shifts to the events that led to Chasse's death. The filmmakers (including a soulful editor) have culled through an enormous amount of material to present Chasse's initial encounter with police and then the alarm-