



Ann Kaneko chronicled the lives of artists in Peru after ex-president Alberto Fujimori's downfall.

Going 'Against the Grain' With a Japanese American in Peru

Ann Kaneko's new documentary examines artistic self-expression with the rise and fall of Alberto Fujimori.

By LYNDA LIN
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"It's a funny story," Ann Kaneko said about how she ended up in Peru chasing the ghost of Alberto Fujimori. It was a natural extension of her first feature length documentary, "Overstay," where she chronicled the lives of several Peruvian workers in Japan.

The Sansei filmmaker had always wanted to live in the Central American country that, at the time, was still being lead by a Japanese Peruvian nicknamed "Chino."

"I found Fujimori fascinating."

So in 2000, Kaneko won a Fulbright grant to work on a documentary about Alberto Fujimori's rise to power. But by the time she arrived in Lima, "Chino" was gone. He fled to Japan after a tumultuous reign and faxed in his resignation to escape the corruption scandal exploding in his homeland.

But with her camera, she managed to capture another more fascinating reality — the exorcism of "Chino's" spirit from the people of Peru and the psychological effects of a decade of oppression manifested in art.

Even though "Chino" was no longer there, it seemed he was still everywhere. A "Wall of Shame" with pictures of the Fujimori regime was erected for citizens to scribble their thoughts. Other artistic expressions popped up in plazas all over the country, so Kaneko decided to focus her camera on a few artists struggling to find their own voices.

"Against the Grain: An Artist's Survival Guide to Peru" is like Kaneko's personal odyssey to self-discovery. Is there a difference between being a Peruvian and an American artist? Are they more or less compelled to make a political comment?

The film, which won Kaneko a nomination in the "emerging director" category at New York's upcoming Asian American

International Film Festival, took over five years to make — but there were perks.

"I got to hang out with these artists. That was cool."

Big 'Chinita' in Little Peru

"Here I'm a little fish in a big pond. There I'm a big fish in a little pond," said Kaneko. In her native Los Angeles, her film has garnered critical acclaim on the festival circuit. But in Lima, she was immediately thrust onto a national television news show within weeks of her arrival.

Kaneko includes snippets of herself in the film fidgeting uncomfortably under the weight of a reporter's gaze. It's one of a few refreshing self-reflective moments that personalizes the often too serious documentary film genre. In another scene when a Peruvian man attempts to send an angry message to back Japan via Kaneko's camera, she wryly shouts back that she isn't Japanese.

"The moment you see is isolated in the film," said Kaneko. "I don't think that it was so hostile. I just thought it was a hostile period."

The whole time she was in Peru, she was called "Chinita," a more affectionate nickname for the country's populous Japanese population.

"Lima is very diverse. I never felt fear," she said.

Kaneko followed the lives of four dynamic artists: Alfredo Márquez, Claudio Jiménez Quispe Eduardo Tokeshi and Natalia Iguíñiz.

"I always tell people that superficially they may seem like they're all different, but they reflect different parts of me."

Kaneko initially lived in Peru for a year and returned twice to continue filming. But her film project was afflicted with a common disease that plagues many other independent filmmakers — funding. Aside from the Fulbright, most of the film's budget came out of her pockets.

"It was a real personal project," she said. "Halfway through, I said I'm going to put this film on the shelf."

She worked on other projects before finish-



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Ann Kaneko (right) arrived in Lima during a period of artistic demonstration. Street art like the 'For Sale' sign (above) in front of the president's palace highlight the mood of the country.



ing "Against the Grain" in 2007 complete with a post-Sept. 11th perspective intricately woven into the narrative. Although the film is about Peru, Kaneko thinks the theme is also very American.

"I think it gives us a chance as citizens and artists to think about our role in voicing our opinions and critiquing our society."

A Rarity Among Sansei

Growing up in Los Angeles, Kaneko spoke Japanese to her grandmother — who lived next door — and fine-tuned her mother tongue in Japanese school. After college, she worked with a papermaker in a rural area of Japan where she became fluent.

"I'm a rarity among Sansei," she said.

Originally, Kaneko studied photography, but she didn't enjoy its solitary nature, so she decided to go into film — it's an influence you can see; her work is frameable art in every scene.

She attended film school at the University of California, Los Angeles and threw herself into a Spanish language immersion program in Guatemala.

Along the way, her parents Masako and Takeo — who were incarcerated at Jerome during World War II — have been supportive of their daughter's aspirations.

"My parents have been supportive of what I do ... if they know what I do," said Kaneko. "It's baffling for people who make a living working nine to five."

Her family of artists has also been supportive of the film, which will screen in Peru for the first time in the fall — her long-awaited dream.

In the meantime, Kaneko is celebrating the simple joy of actually finishing the film.

"It's just a relief that it's done," she said. "And that people actually like it!" ■

Watch It

'Against the Grain: An Artist's Survival Guide to Peru'

July 17
New York's Asian American International Film Festival

Info: www.aaiiff.org/2008,

www.annkaneko.com/againstthegrain

See the trailer: www.pacificcitizen.org