

Urban Justice Center

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

<https://www.urbanjustice.org/2021/09/26/reeling-2021-the-journey-of-monalisa-is-intimate-and-winding/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The Spool

Unraveling Pop Culture One Thread at a Time

Nicole Costas documentary about the life and times of poet, artist, friend, and sex worker Ivn Monalisa is insightful and wry.

(This review is part of our 2021 coverage of Reeling: The Chicago LGBTQ+ International Film Festival)

The title says all about *The Journey of Monalisa*. Nicole Costas poetic, thought-provoking documentary is about the journey and process of Ivn Ojeda becoming Ivn Monalisa Ojeda. Originally from Chile, Ivn Monalisa has been living in the United States as an undocumented sex worker since the late 1990s, writing poems and performing art pieces about their experiences. After some twenty years in The States, they're able, through The Urban Justice Center, to change both their citizenship and gender permanently.

Like La Joconde herself, Monalisa is always Art. The picture follows her as she walks New York City, a long braid behind her, collecting the grime and life of the streets as she goes. Her poetry provides meditative intertitles that allude to a depth of feeling swimming under the next chapter in her story. Often, her candid moments merge into poetic philosophies and like any poet, she sometimes speaks in lines.

Sadly, *The Journey* doesn't fully explore Ivn Monalisa's art practice, choosing instead to focus mostly on her life as a sex worker. It would have made for a more detailed portrait of the enigmatic person being celebrated as an artist if we learned more of their thoughts on the workings of performance and poetry or how she views her craft. Monalisa has something to say and a queer audience she wants to reach with her art. It would have been nice to have this queer elders' ideas on art and praxis archived for future queer generations.

Still, *The Journey of Monalisa* has a peculiar, sly smile to it. Costa has known Ivn Monalisa since their days in school together at The University of Chile where Ivn was a student sensation. There's an already-established intimacy that helps the documentary feel personal and not devoutly somber.

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Though both Ivn Monalisa and Costa are serious about their work, they're not without a sense of humor about themselves and the fact that they're making a documentary. Monalisa is wickedly candid at times about both herself and her clients. And both she and Costa are acutely aware of the hilarious, often grotesque, angles being used to lean into caricaturesque humor.

Outside of Costas' own up-close filmmaking, the film relies heavily on the archival footage shot by a friend of Ivn's who brought a video recorder anytime they went out. Costa can collage together a tableau vivant of the cultures that produced Ivn Monalisa out of miles and miles of rare footage documenting the trans-inclusive New York nightlife of the 1990s. It challenges the popular notion of it means to live an undocumented life. Yes, Ivn was living in the US without proper citizen documents, yet his life is well documented because of his friends and the camcorder. Such wealth of footage helps us visually watch the journey of Monalisa happen over time while drawing important parallels to the way both she and culture have changed.

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It's not joyous all the time though. For Ivn, Monalisa is oftentimes an enemy, someone who causes him to sometimes endure tremendous personal, spiritual, and social suffering. During one extended, if slightly awkward sequence, Ivn Monalisa explains his preference for Two-Spirit because of the way it accounts for the internal duality he feels. If they could choose a third option, Ivn Monalisa would identify as gender non-conforming because they feel an oppositional divide between his masculine and feminine sides.

This opens more questions to consider long after *The Journey of Monalisa* has finished. Ivn Monalisa crossed borders and genders, so it's logical for him to see them as mutually malleable. Yet for many, including Indigenous folks in North America, borders crossed them. Land matters. It plays a real part in identity formation.

Physical territory is only a mental state. My identity is my true territory and it doesn't belong to any one place. In my discovery Ivn Monalisa says as *The Journey* comes to a close. It's a profound statement that simultaneously explains how Monalisa sees nationality and gender identity as related, even coterminous. It's an interesting insight into what transgender transnationalism might look and live like.

In spite and because of this, what remains astonishing about *The Journey of Monalisa* is the way it explicitly, though somewhat haphazardly, ties the process of changing borders and changing genders. For Ivn Monalisa, this is a symbiotic journey. Changing one

allows them to change the other. And while they would have preferred to have been listed as gender non-conforming rather than singularly F for female, its nevertheless an emotional conclusion for Ivn Monalisa to have two dreams of being recognized simultaneously come true.

The Journey of Monalisa Trailer:

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