

LANDSCAPES OF FEELING

Laida Lertxundi's short, self-reflexive, enigmatic and intensely beautiful films read like subtexts to stories waiting to be told

By Erika Balsom

Laida Lertxundi's 16mm films revel in the kind of emphatic localism that perhaps only an outsider can capture. The Bilbao-born artist has lived in Los Angeles for a decade, filling her films with images of the sun-bleached concrete, citrus trees, cacti, and airy interiors of Southern California. But frequently, as in *Cry When It Happens* (2010), this specificity is offset by periodic departures into the uncertainty of the sky. Lertxundi returns again and again to visions of drifting clouds, that profoundly cinematic motif that interrupts solidity and permanence in favour of capricious transformation. Whereas the landscape offers regional detail and tangible ground, a frame within which to place experience, the sky is a dreamy anywhere that abstracts and loosens, that resists circumscription. In this charged play of earth and air, one finds an oblique hint of Lertxundi's larger concerns: her films are poised between the rigour of control and the fancies of imaginative suggestion, between the stability of structure and the mutability of affect.

Lertxundi's films leave one shaken by a delicate power of form and feeling that is all the more forceful given their brevity, always under 15 minutes. Yet they are recalcitrant, too, yielding little in the way of easily articulated meaning. To call them cryptic would be to wrongly presume that there is a buried secret to be revealed through decoding; it would be better to say that they insist on a poetics founded in the dense opacity of repeated motifs and in tiny moments that court narrative without ever creating it.

Footnotes to a House of Love (2007), Lertxundi's first film made in California, establishes several of the artist's signature gestures: chiselled images of long-haired beauties hanging out in the desert, a sentimentality scrubbed of expressionism, and the appearance of a cassette tape player as the sometime source for an intermittent soundtrack of 1960s pop by Lesley Gore and the Shangri-Las. These are footnotes to a text gone missing. When a female figure lies sprawled face-down on a bed in 2011's *A Lax Riddle Unit* (one of the many supine bodies in Lertxundi's films) or when the artist herself dumps a bucket of ice water over a man's head while apologising repeatedly in *The Room Called Heaven* (2012), we encounter intimations of romance and failure, but no love stories.

Following the tape player of *Footnotes*, devices to record and play back sound frequently reappear, as do scenarios of motion picture exhibition (whether 16mm projection or video, displayed on television monitors) of images seen elsewhere in the film. Figures often play – or play with – musical instruments, and participate overtly in the act of filming, clapping hands at the start of a shot to synchronise the sound. This emphasis on the process of production signals the high level of reflexivity Lertxundi brings to her orchestrations of sound and image. Her works



A crimson peek: *025 Sunset Red* (2016)

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show an attention to the craft of filmmaking in the best avant-garde tradition – an increasing rarity in the age of 'artists' moving image'.

Critics often mention that Lertxundi's work is indebted to that of Morgan Fisher, James Benning, and Peter Hutton. Perhaps this is a shorthand for contextualising the rigour of her work or a way of shedding light on her formation (Benning and Hutton were her teachers). Whatever the reason, the proprietary, patriarchal logic of naming filmic fathers has its limits and its problems. Lertxundi departs from these men as much as she follows them, questioning the faith in structure that has indelibly marked the history of experimental film. She casts doubt on the aspiration to mastery that can inhere in the fetishism of form, insisting that form is not a pre-given frame to be filled



Cry When It Happens (2010)

with content, but something generated by an encounter with experience that will always exceed it. *Live to Live* (2015) begins with a quote from the Argentinian writer Adolfo Bioy Casares: 'If I want to remember what happened on this trip, what should I do?' The remainder of the film proposes multiple answers, exploring how the messiness of life – heartbeats, orgasms, desires, recollections – gets channelled into representation, meanwhile undergoing both creative transformation and loss.

Lertxundi's latest film, *025 Sunset Red* (2016), takes its name from the lighting gel used sporadically throughout to cloak landscape and lovers alike in a crimson hue. Lertxundi's work has long been presumed to be personal – at times to the artist's chagrin – but here for the first time she moves into explicitly autobiographical terrain. Revisiting archival photographs of her father's involvement in the Basque and Spanish Communist parties in the 1970s, to the sounds of Sixth Station's 'Scar of Love', Lertxundi takes on the complexities of inheritance. From Spain to America, from the end of Franco's dictatorship to the start of a Trump presidency, *025 Sunset Red* rearticulates the artist's longstanding concerns through the lens of politics and its place in intimate and creative acts. As menstrual blood is poured on a blank page, it summons the sublime formlessness of Helen Frankenthaler's soak-stain painting technique; later, it is spilled on the ground next to an image of her father. The labile resonance of the film's many evocations of red is in tension with the industrial standard of its title, just as its clouds challenge the rationalised form of gridded glass that at one point shares the frame with them. With beauty and poignancy, Lertxundi here continues her sensitive pursuit of form and what exceeds it. 