

Pasatiempo

MIXED MEDIA

Of land and of sea: Sylvia Johnson's activist documentaries

- Lauren LaRocca 10/25/19



Sylvia Johnson, whose recent work explores the life of refugees, photo Kerry Sherck

Some people have a way with time. Take Santa Fe filmmaker Sylvia Johnson, who transforms 15 minutes into a powerful story of two refugees and their struggle for asylum in the United States. Perhaps, like so many artists these days, she's motivated by a mission: Her art is also her activism on subjects like water pollution, transgender discrimination, and animal rights.

Four of her films are highlighted in *Seeking Refuge: Films by Director Sylvia Johnson*, on view through Jan. 12 at SITE Santa Fe (1606 Paseo de Peralta). The show includes two short documentary films in their entirety — the aforementioned *Refuge(e)* and *Luz's Story* — as well as a sample from *Mermaids Against Plastic* (out in January), and the opening sequence of her feature-length film *Roaming Wild*, about wild horses on public lands in the West.

“My work has always been about using visual storytelling to shine a light on global issues,” Johnson says.

Born in Bolivia and raised in Latin America, Johnson has served as a contributing faculty member at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design and George Washington University's Corcoran School of the Arts and Design. She is a Fulbright scholar and a National Geographic Explorer. She currently splits her time between Free Roaming Studios and Santa Fe Dreamers Project, a nonprofit that provides legal services for immigrants.

While Johnson's work tackles huge issues, it is also visually stunning. The rich textures, intentional palettes, and movement of her documentary films are often hypnotic, making an art museum an apt screening venue. Watercolor animations by illustrator Austin Blasingame appear throughout *Refuge(e)*, for example, adding gravity and yet softening the intense story, which follows two men whose journey culminates in a six-month stint in a private prison, the Cibola County Correctional Center.

Refuge(e) and *Luz's Story* were created in partnership with the Santa Fe Dreamers Project. In addition to being screened on a loop at SITElab, they'll be shown in the SITE auditorium at 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 26, followed by a Q & A session with Johnson. There is no charge for admission to the SITElab exhibits or the screening event. For more information call 505-989-1199 or see sitesantafe.org.

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