



INTERVIEW: AFI DOCS 2019 Guggenheim Symposium Honoree Freida Lee Mock

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Each year, the AFI DOCS Charles Guggenheim Symposium honors a master of documentary film. This year AFI recognizes the exceptional career of filmmaker Freida Lee Mock as the 2019 Guggenheim honoree.

Demonstrating a remarkable range of subject matter, Freida Lee Mock has, for more than three decades, been one of America's greatest cinematic biographers. From *MAYA LIN: A STRONG CLEAR VISION* (1994) and *NEVER GIVE UP: THE 20TH CENTURY ODYSSEY OF HERBERT ZIPPER* (1995) to *WRESTLING WITH ANGELS: PLAYWRIGHT TONY KUSHNER* (2006) and *ANITA: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER* (2013), Mock has shown the uncanny ability to take intimate biographical detail and build larger-than-life narratives that reflect and illuminate the broader societal picture. For her extraordinary work, Mock received the 1995 Academy Award[®] for Best Documentary Feature and five total nominations; and a primetime Emmy[®] Award win from two nominations.



Freida Lee Mock

In her new film RUTH – JUSTICE GINSBURG IN HER

OWN WORDS, Mock illuminates an intimate profile of Ginsburg with carefully culled archival footage and interviews, covering the full breadth of Ginsburg's life, views and career.

The 2019 Guggenheim Symposium will pay tribute to this outstanding filmmaker with an onstage interview discussion of her career, film clips and a sneak preview of her fascinating new portrait of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, on Saturday, June 22.

AFI spoke with her about her career and new film, below.

AFI: Throughout your films, you take on these historical figures. What draws you to them and to Ruth Bader Ginsburg specifically?

FLM: In general, all have been living but they are steeped in history and have a major place in the historical-political aspect in the community, country and the world. They have a historical significance,

whether it's Anita Hill or Maya Lin, somehow the work that they're drawn to lends itself to a major impact on sociopolitical aspects of our country and our life, and that's what draws me to these characters and these people.

Anita Hill reluctantly talking about sexual harassment and putting that issue on the national consciousness; or Maya Lin dealing with issues of public art or censorship, a public sculpture honoring the dead. In the case of Justice Ginsburg, some executive producers asked if I would do a film about her. I knew little about the details, such as decades of the pioneering work on gender discrimination, advanced issues of equality for women and men.

AFI: How much research and preparation did you do before going into crafting a portrait of the Justice?

FLM: Every step along the way is very important. I hear the phrase, you "save the film in the editing room." For me, I can't do that. If you do the proper research and development in the first phase, I do a lot of research in terms of primary sources and secondary sources. We try to look at all the visuals, before planning what I call "production phase," which is what needs to be filmed vs. what already existed. If the visual material doesn't exist already, then I will film it or express it differently. For this film, we decided to use animation and illustration to deal with how to dramatize the court cases.

AFI: Was this your first time working in animation?

FLM: I had a psychology project years ago and I used animation. This was a great way to save myself visually — if I can't figure it out visually, I thought, I'll just illustrate it.

AFI: How much archival footage were you dealing with and how did you organize the material?

FLM: We had hundreds of hours of stock footage. The film SENNA [by Asif Kapadia], just by comparison, had 5,000 hours. [For my Ginsburg film], we had to sit days and weeks and months and look at all this footage. When she was nominated for Supreme Court, that's most of the footage you begin to find. The challenge was finding material earlier than 1993, or anything when she's not a Justice. How do you fill in the visuals when she's a professor? Teaching was a critical stepping stone, as was volunteering for the ACLU in the '70s and taking on these gender discrimination cases. Those stepping stones are really important. Is there any visual material? No, of course. That's when we decided to take an animation approach.

AFI: What most surprised you about Ruth Bader Ginsburg?

FLM: I had no idea she had such a singular vision about gender. I had no idea that she was really the pioneer in the contemporary way we approach gender discrimination, equality and justice. A lot of it comes from her childhood, her Jewish upbringing, being raised during WWII [and encountering] overt discrimination and violence toward Jews. So that was really fascinating to understand why she took this path.

The paths she took were a reaction to the outside world. She rose to the occasion, not being an outright feminist, but seeing that these issues were core to her own experience. The cases all deal with issues of injustice.

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Author

hollywoodglee