

Carlos Alfonso Corral didn't go to film school. If he had, perhaps he would never have made *Dirty Feathers*, his debut feature. The ethics of filming homeless people are so fraught that a respected nonfiction filmmaker recently told me that he always advises his students against it – the power dynamic is so weighted in favour of the filmmaker. All too often, homeless people are stripped of their humanity and too neatly presented as objects of pity.

'I feel the baby move and it makes me feel like shit,' says Reagan in one of *Dirty Feathers*' opening scenes, glass pipe in hand. Corral never shies away from the reality of life on the streets – but a miserabilist tale of victimhood this is not. To film as intimately as Corral does takes a fair degree of collaboration, whether it's observing water droplets on Reagan's husband Brandon's back as he takes a shower, or gleaning details not just about his past but about his dreams for the future, such as opening a soul food restaurant. 'I think I know what you're trying to do here,' said Brandon, when he first spotted Corral with his camera. A partnership was born.

Corral's camera drifts around the streets of El Paso, Texas in the vicinity of the city's corporate-speak-named shelter, the Opportunity Center for the Homeless (from which most of his subjects are banned). His lyrical, handheld, monochrome cinematography shows off his background as a photographer, as well as his training – in lieu of film school – in the camera department of documentary filmmaker Roberto Minervini, the producer of *Dirty Feathers*. He shares with Minervini (and with Khalik Allah, director of the hallucinatory *Field Niggas*) a determination to fuse hardscrabble lives on the edge of society with a freewheeling impressionism and bold aesthetic experimentation – in order to disrupt familiar us-and-them dynamics. 'I wanted to heighten the feeling of what happens between the film and the viewer,' says Corral of his shooting style.

It helps that the 32-year-old director grew up in the same split-border cities on which he sets his camera loose: El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, across the border in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, memorably described by *The New York Times* as 'an estranged couple, surrounded on all sides by mountains and desert'. Commendably, there are no scene-setting vistas in *Dirty Feathers*. And despite the film's setting on the frontline of Trump's war on immigration, political issues – be they healthcare or border policies – only come into focus when a character raises them. Corral's camera is kept tight on his subjects and their experience of the streets – whether sharing trainers, meals, or life stories – and the soundtrack echoes this too: the poetic voiceover merging the thoughts of his characters with the rumble of the surrounding roads. The result is an immediate and intimate street saga that Corral describes as a film not about homelessness but about 'endurance, faith, human connection, love and lack of love'.

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