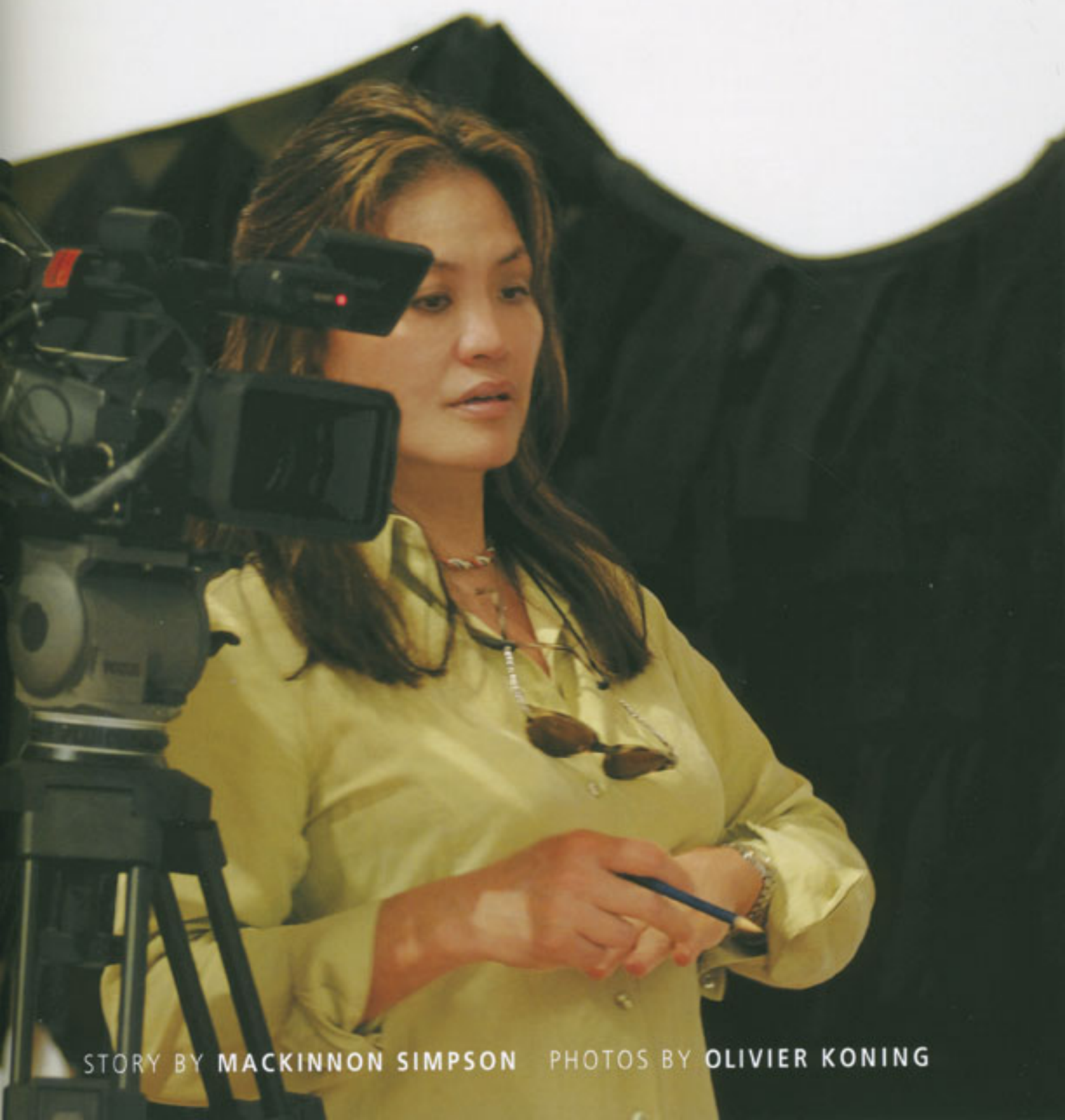


Candid Camera

Edgy Lee's movies take a frank and loving look at Native Hawaiian life



STORY BY MACKINNON SIMPSON PHOTOS BY OLIVIER KONING

Edgy Lee has spent most of her life involved with celluloid: She lived a quarter-century in New York and Los Angeles in front of the camera — appearing in movies, on the Merv Griffin and Johnny Carson shows, co-hosting a children's television show with Bill Cosby — but it was when she returned home to Hawai'i and visited friends in an extremely poor section of Honolulu that she became a filmmaker.

"When I went up to Papakolea, what a surprise!" Edgy recalls. "Friends asked if I had talked to the *kūpuna* [elders] who met with FDR. Now in their nineties, these were Hawaiian women who, threatened with the loss of their homestead lands in the 1930s, faced down big business and the territorial and federal governments to demand that these lands be

Cowboys of the Far West. Set primarily on the ranchlands of the Big Island, the film told a story dating back to the introduction of cattle to the Islands in 1793 and the arrival of Mexican *vaqueros*, who taught the Hawaiians to ride, rope and herd cattle.

"In Hawai'i, the 'cowboys' were the 'Indians,'" Lee notes ironically. "They were called *paniolo*. Today, paniolo lifestyle is slowly dying as developers carve up ranches for alternate uses and mechanized technology replaces the cowboy. It is one of the greatest losses one witnesses today in the Islands."

From horses to hotels: Lee next turned her finely honed eye to Waikiki, the historic Hawaiian district transformed from sleepy beachside village to famed visitor destination.

Her film *Waikiki — In the Wake of Dreams* blends vintage footage with new imagery to weave a tale of twentieth-century romance and commerce. With her subsequent two films, Lee's emphasis shifted from Island traditions to current social problems: She wrote and directed two in-depth films on Hawai'i's methamphetamine epidemic. Today, her company continues to produce hard-hitting films on social issues and native



peoples. When the Smithsonian opened the National Museum of the American Indian, Lee was asked to create a film to represent the Hawaiians. She produced *The Hawaiians — Reflecting Spirit*, an acclaimed celebration of the sophisticated culture she is so proud to document. Next up: Lee is starting the Pacific Network, an Internet network of nine channels, and will produce and direct a film on an upcoming Waikiki stage production created by the original Cirque du Soleil creative team.

deeded in perpetuity to the Hawaiian people. Their efforts caught the eye of President Roosevelt. After I'd spent hours meeting with the *kūpuna*, Auntie Emma Akiona turned to me and said, 'OK, we will give you our story.'

"Cinematographer Haskell Wexler — he had several Oscars — and writer/producer Saul Landau — he had an Emmy — both agreed to work on the film for free. We were on a guerilla budget: One day Haskell had one of our volunteer grips push him around on an office chair to get a tracking shot. But at that moment, I knew why I had come home: to make films about a place and people who for over a century had been misinterpreted."

Papakolea — A Story of Hawaiian Land won the national Silver Award for Independent Programming from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. It was a triumph and only the beginning. Next Edgy turned to the story of Hawai'i's cowboys, with *Paniolo o Hawai'i* —

peoples. When the Smithsonian opened the National Museum of the American Indian, Lee was asked to create a film to represent the Hawaiians. She produced *The Hawaiians — Reflecting Spirit*, an acclaimed celebration of the sophisticated culture she is so proud to document. Next up: Lee is starting the Pacific Network, an Internet network of nine channels, and will produce and direct a film on an upcoming Waikiki stage production created by the original Cirque du Soleil creative team.

"Our company mantra is 'Imagine a perfect world,'" Lee reflects. "The Portuguese have a word, *saudade* or 'the absence of something.' Art is created from this nothingness — a blank page, an empty canvas — when someone comes along and decides 'Hey, a whole universe exists here!' and magically it does. That's why it just seems to make sense to imagine a perfect world." ❀

"At that moment, I knew why I had come home: to make films about a place and people who for over a century had been misinterpreted."