

MANILATOWN IS IN THE HEART



TIME TRAVEL WITH AL ROBLES

by Curtis Choy

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Eschewing the linear narrative biography, renowned Asian American documentarian Curtis Choy (*The Fall of the I-Hotel*, 1983) assembles a moving portrait of San Francisco poet Al Robles through a collage of animated stories (mostly from Robles himself), old footage and commentary from fellow poets. Best known for his dedicated activist work with the *manongs* (Filipino elders) who populated the SRO hotels of San Francisco, Choy's film also gives us insight into Robles' life as a painter who studied Zen Buddhism and hobnobbed with Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg. The film gives ample space to little-seen footage of Robles' visits to Agbayani Village, a retirement home for Filipino farm workers, in Delano, CA, that Choy shot back in the 1970s. The film ends with a 10-minute poetry reading by Robles, which brings all the pieces of the film together. Choy and Robles are longtime collaborators, and Choy says that Robles helped shape the film, which was completed and released in 2008, one year before Robles passed away. An inspiring piece for anyone interested in the connections between activism and art.

— Neelanjana Banerjee