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To catch an art forger

The documentary “Art and Craft” pits the troubled character who copied art to donate to museums, and the obsessed registrar who tracked him down

By Iain Millar. Web only



The art forger Mark Landis carefully plans the backgrounds of the personas he will adopt as he visits yet another museum with yet another gift

Back in 2010, *The Art Newspaper* broke a story about how museums and university galleries across the US were coming to the realisation that works donated by one man under a number of different identities were in fact highly convincing forgeries, and in some cases the same “work” had been given a number of times to different institutions. We said that he had posed as a Jesuit priest and might be named Steven Gardiner or Mark Landis. Shortly afterwards the story was picked up in the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times* and the “forger” was identified as Mark Landis, a one time photography student who had had mental health issues and lived a solitary life in Laurel, Mississippi. Also reading the stories were film-makers Sam Cullman and Jennifer Grausman (later to be joined by co-director Mark Becker) who soon contacted Landis and eventually gained his permission to talk with and film him. [The results of their work, “Art and Craft”](#), played at the Tribeca and Hot Docs film festivals and goes on release in New York on 19 September with further roll outs across the country through to December.

Landis is a troubled character, who has schizophrenia and spent spells in psychiatric institutions, but nevertheless gave the film-makers ready access to his life and demonstrates the remarkable ability and ease with which he copies his art, using little more than coloured pencils, coffee-staining to age wood and even a photocopy of a Picasso, distressed with what appears to be wood glue. But for all the film-makers adamant insistence, without doubt sincere, that they wanted to avoid stereotypes and give him a chance to speak for himself, it’s difficult not to see him through an American Gothic prism, living in what was his late mother’s apartment, watching old movies on TV and eating the same microwaved meals. But Landis is far from stupid, and carefully plans the backgrounds of the personas he will adopt as he visits yet another museum with yet another gift. Speaking of his character Father Scott, Landis says: “You can learn all you need to be a priest from the Father Brown DVD series with Kenneth More.”

If there’s anything missing from the film, it’s the revelation from the screening notes that Landis worked as an art dealer in the 1980s, although his business failed and he spent another stretch in hospital. How that worked out must surely have had a bearing on his “philanthropic” activities thereafter. Mark Tullos of the Louisiana State Museum says that Landis “knew right where to hit us... our soft spot... art and money”.

But the film is not just about Landis: there is another principal character in play.

That other is the former registrar of the Cincinnati Art Museum, Matthew Leininger, one of the first museum professionals to latch on to Landis’s faked donations, but whose obsession with his nemesis led to his eventual dismissal and whose young daughter can readily identify the subject of her father’s crusade with a disturbing familiarity.

How these two outsiders, linked by each other’s actions, eventually meet, forms this fascinating film’s climax (no spoilers here). But perhaps the combination of obsessive loners, embarrassed museum heads and curious journalists is best summed up by the former FBI

man who Leininger hoped would find legal fault with Landis (he couldn't, as no money ever changed hands). "A lot of things happen in the art world," says Special Agent Robert K. Wittman. "The art world's a very strange place..."