

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

AiA Art News-service



Movie Review: 'Art and Craft' tracks curious career of prolific forger

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12:00 AM, Nov 28, 2014



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INDIE MEMPHIS

SHOW CAPTION

In December 2001, a soft-spoken man donated a small watercolor-and-pencil study of a tugboat and barge to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.

The work — accompanied by the necessary papers to prove its provenance — was by the French artist Paul Signac, a pioneer of the late 19th-century style known as Pointillism. The unexpected gift represented a nice if minor addition to the Brooks collection and a generous demonstration of philanthropy by the donor.

Except it didn't and it didn't. The artwork and the supporting documents were phonies, perpetrated by Mark Landis of Laurel, Mississippi, a solitary eccentric driven by an apparent compulsion to travel around the country in the guise of a respectable art collector and donate misrepresented drawings and paintings created by his own talented hands to such prominent institutions as the New Orleans Museum of Art, the San Francisco Art Institute and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington.

Landis' 30 years of fraud were exposed in 2010; the Brooks "de-accessioned" the fake Signac (a copy of a 1900 piece in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia) from its collection, then — in response to the publicity — displayed it briefly as an example of an expert forgery.

The Landis story continues Thursday at the Brooks when the museum screens "Art and Craft," directed by Sam Cullman and Jennifer Grausman (with Mark Becker credited as "co-director"), a fascinating documentary portrait of a truly unusual man. (The movie had its local premiere Nov. 1 during the Indie Memphis Film Festival, with a screening attended by Landis and Cullman; however, the forger was not invited back to the scene of his "crime" to host the Brooks event.)

Landis seems to have given his film biographers full, intimate access to his meager existence. As seen here, he is an unassuming and even sympathetic mastermind, operating out of a messy lifelong bachelor's apartment, where he moons over wedding photographs of his beloved mother; files papers related to his youthful treatment for schizophrenia; and produces

painstaking copies of works by such dissimilar artists as Mary Cassatt, Egon Schiele, Dr. Seuss and Charles M. Schulz (he recommends spilled coffee as an easy way to “age” paper). With his tall, thin frame and bowed, balding head, he resembles an El Greco Eisenhower, accessorized with Alfred E. Neuman ears; he speaks in a soft, insinuating, almost whiny drawl that suggests Droopy Dog. He’s the movie version of an undertaker.

Although he apparently is one of the most prolific known art forgers in U.S. history, Landis has avoided prosecution because he has never profited from his meticulously crafted misrepresentations; legally, he’s more of a prankster than a crook. A talented performance artist as well as visual artist, Landis forged narratives and identities to accompany his paintings and drawings, concocting false personae — a priest, a grieving heir — for his “donation” visits to museums.

“I got addicted to being a philanthropist,” Landis rationalizes; he also seems addicted to old movies, quoting Bela Lugosi and — more to the point — Warner Oland: “Necessity is the mother of invention but sometimes the mother of deception,” he says, borrowing a line from “Charlie Chan’s Secret.”

Admirably unfussy and nonjudgmental, the movie intercuts Landis’ activities with the obsessive detective work of the forger’s self-appointed nemesis, Matthew Leininger, who was registrar at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art when he discovered several forgeries and began the investigations that would expose Landis’ ruse. As in a fiction film, however, audience sympathy remains with the antihero, the rogue, and not his pursuer; Leininger seems vengeful, while Landis seems lonely.

In some ways, Landis has benefitted from the exposure of his imposture; several galleries have displayed and sold his work since he was “outed.” The movie follows Landis as he moves uncomfortably through the crowd at his first gallery show, but the artist seems more sad than hopeful about embarking on a no-longer-secret life that will require him to impersonate the “real” Mark Landis for his admirers.

‘Art and Craft’

Not rated; contains no objectionable content.

★★★½

‘Art and Craft’ screens at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. Tickets are \$9 each, or \$5 for students and museum members. Visit brooksmuseum.org for advance tickets or more information.

Nine works by Mark Landis can be seen at the Jay Etkin Gallery, 942 S. Cooper. Hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, or by appointment. Call (901) 550-0064, or visit jayetkingallery.com.

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