

POLLOCK

VENICE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

IndieWire, September 7, 2000

Proving once again that most artist bio-pics are indistinguishable from each other in terms of downward spiral, Ed Harris nevertheless unleashes a furious performance as Jackson Pollock, the American abstract expressionist who made the 20th century safe for self-doubting, self-absorbed, self-destructive artists crippled by their own celebrity. This is Harris's "splatter movie," though not for reasons you might think: The actor/director's subdued, almost innocuous directorial style -- Real Simple magazine translated as cinema, with a Tom Waits track tacked on the credits for good measure -- is so overshadowed by his incandescent acting abilities that it's easy to forget that he's done triple duty here. (Harris was also one of the film's producers).

As the volatile, hard-drinking Pollock, Harris explodes onto the screen in a feat of wounded bravado, much like the frenzied dollops of paint dribbled across Pollock's own blank canvasses. It's a performance style steeped in the brawny, masculine tradition of Richard Burton and Marlon Brando and even if the film goes unnoticed by year's end, Harris's searing thousand-yard stare should be remembered at Oscar time. And then he might think about signing on to play Jean Genet.

"Pollock" opens in 1941, as fellow abstract expressionist Lee Krasner (Marcia Gay Harden) -- a brash Brooklynite prone to shrill accolades of "He's a great paintah!" -- knocks on the door of Pollock's meager Greenwich Village studio, falls instantly in love with the shy, hard-drinking artist, then embarks on a relationship and eventual marriage that endures almost until Pollock's tragic death in 1956.

The stagy, methodical recreation of the New York art scene of the forties is made palatable by a series of juicy supporting walk-ons that makes the film a treat to behold: Amy Madigan startles in an all-too-brief turn as pampered art patroness Peggy Guggenheim, the early supporter who gave Pollock his first gallery show, not to mention the intoxicating first sip of celebrity that would drive the artist to his ruin. Val Kilmer pops up briefly as Willem de Kooning, Pollock's friend and rival in abstract expressionism, and with his blond-streaked collegiate hair and constipated expression you could swear that Kilmer shared the same toilet seat with Marlon Brando on the set of "The Island of Dr. Moreau." Whatever crackpot infliction he picked up down there, Kilmer's terrific here.

But then the film shifts in tone, irrevocably so, as the cameos stop and the film

focuses on Pollock, the tortured artist, and Krasner, the devoted lover. Fortunes improve for the artist at the dawn of the fifties, but the film's brilliant luster seems to vanish before our eyes, as if someone were sandblasting graffiti off a brick wall. Pollock takes on the sensation of art in reverse -- negation! -- during what should have been its most compelling and thought-provoking moments.

After relocating to East Hampton and discovering a modicum of domestic stability (these scenes look like they were yanked from a Pottery Barn catalog), Pollock births the distinct paint-splattering technique that went on to make him a household name in America. Fascinatingly, Pollock was at the height of sanity and sobriety during this period of artistic fervor -- it's too bad the film resorts to feng shui instead of psychoanalysis. We barely come to know Jackson Pollock at all -- he's but a series of brooding, externalized temper tantrums in a pretty cottage. The artist's inevitable downward spiral kicks in a few scenes later and Harris, the actor, delivers the most convincing impersonation of Burt Lancaster you'll ever see in a motion picture. As good as his acting is, though, it's not enough to save the film from mediocrity.

The sad fate of Pollock (and similar biopics, including recent fare like "Surviving Picasso" and "Basquiat") is that the artistic temperament simply doesn't make for engrossing screen fare. You know from the first pout, the first drunken bender, the first kitchen-table freakout that the artist will eventually implode -- so what's the conflict, exactly?

Not even the impaling of Salma Hayek by a metal pole in the upcoming Frida Kahlo bio-pic will make audiences care any more about tortured artists and the pain they require to create. What's most frustrating about "Pollock" is its inability (or refusal) to examine its subject's precarious mental state with anything but the most cursory glance -- it's more concerned with depicting 1950's stoicism, from an interior decorating perspective. We never really come to learn what made Jackson Pollock tick, nor why he painted in the manner that he did. How disappointing that a film about abstract expressionism, of all things, should come across as so blandly literal.

http://www.indiewire.com/article/venice_review_ed_harris_splatter_movie_pollock#