

## San Francisco Film Festival 2013

# An interview with Jem Cohen, director of *Museum Hours*: “Art is something people do like breathing.”

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*David Walsh spoke to Jem Cohen, director of Museum Hours, during the San Francisco film festival.*

David Walsh: What prompted this particular film?

Jem Cohen: My parents always took me to museums when I was a kid, it's something I've done all my life. That was basically the spur, but I also wanted to think about why art matters, if it matters, how it matters. There is also the issue of how art can be meaningful to people today. That has something to do with it being pulled away from the market emphasis so dominant in the way people think about art these days.

DW: The relatively thoughtful or leisurely pace seems to be a conscious effort too.

JC: Yes, I want people to be able to get away from the bombardment that surrounds us all the time. I think a movie can be a real good place for that, to provide an oasis of sorts where people get a chance to look and think.

DW: The characters, it seems, do the same thing in relation to the paintings. Think about them.

JC: Yes. They're letting the paintings come into their lives. That doesn't mean they're thinking about them in an academic way, but they're somehow becoming open to them. Because the art work is about the things that humans have always thought about: life, death, sex, the environment, what we build, religion, history.

DW: You say the film discusses *whether* art matters. I don't think there's any point in the film that would call that into question.

JC: Well, it obviously matters *to me*. A lot of people have brought art into question, and for reasons that I understand, because it can be very trivialized and very commercialized.

I don't think that museums are necessarily innocent players, but sometimes by default a work in a museum is removed from the market, because people are not engaging with it in terms of its price tag.

DW: There's another issue alluded to, that museums can become mausoleums. And that the museum-going crowd at

present is aging.

JC: That's one of the reasons I was able to make the film. The institutions are worried about that problem. It was perhaps intriguing to them that I came along and said, I want to talk about why you are relevant to people, if they have access and are allowed to realize that museums are not just about archaic things.

Museums can be very intimidating. And the Vienna museum in particular is a very intimidating structure. To some degree we can make our own choice not to be intimidated, but that's not always easy for people to do.

DW: Especially under conditions, for example, in the US where public art education is destroyed, budgets are under siege and backwardness is encouraged in every form.

The anecdote about the “left” art student is interesting. He says that when he looks at painting, he mostly sees money and that if Dutch painters of the 17th century commissioned works about their possessions, today we should paint piles of Rolex watches, champagne bottles, flat-screen TVs.

JC: I was working off and also taking the piss a little out of [left-wing art critic] John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* [1972], which I think, all in all, is a very valuable book. The kid has probably read it at university.

Berger himself has spent his life looking at art with incredible empathy and love and interest, never separated from social and economic concerns, but never dominated by them.

The young guy who presents those ideas has come out of university and wants to fit the world into a particular pattern that he's been taught. But some of his ideas are really good ones. Art museums *should be* free. People talk about these elite institutions that charge \$15, but they go to a movie and pay \$13.50 and don't blink.

Then, again, museums and movies should *both* be free. Because a sane culture would recognize that if we're going to subsidize something, then we should be subsidizing the commonality of human language in all these forms, rather than

subsidizing the military, for example.

I like to see people question what they're handed, even from the left, so I like the idea that people would see the movie and engage with some of these ideas, but not necessarily recognize the way in which they are being introduced. It would be a different thing to be making a movie that was just clearly about one subject, or clearly intended to make one point. Because it really isn't, it's about the world, life, which happens to be complex.

DW: People speak and act in your movie as human beings do.

JC: I hope so. I tried to keep it pretty down to earth.

DW: What about Bruegel?

JC: I love him. The guide is trying to convince people who could use some convincing that Bruegel is a radical figure, in his own way. You have a painter in the 16th century, who wasn't a peasant, interested in that subject. I don't know if he was the first or the only, but the fact is this man took a very close, careful look at how working people, peasants lived and did it without a sentimental overlay, but with a respectful interest in the details of their lives.

Bruegel did many other things that were radical. He was one of the first to decouple landscape from its role as a purely religious backdrop.

DW: There's the drama of the two central characters, Johann and Anne, who both seem a bit sad, a bit alone ...

JC: I don't know that we know all that much about what they are, but we get hints. Johann says he plays a lot of online poker, which is not necessarily a tragic thing. But he does other things, he gets along with other people. He's not a sad, clichéd loner. Nonetheless, we're all spending a lot of time online these days and it's not necessarily making us all that happy.

DW: There is a reference to Johann's ex-partner, who has died. And Anne is not in Vienna under the most cheerful circumstances either.

JC: No, because people have to deal with difficult things in life. ...

I like Vienna. It's also known for its tourist veneer, but there's always another city under that. So I thought it would be nice to show that other city.

DW: The point is made that Anne can't afford to go anywhere very expensive anyway.

JC: There are movies made about all sorts of people, but there aren't too many made about people who are not necessarily poor but are not doing very well and whose situation is somehow precarious.

DW: What do you think of the general cultural situation?

JC: It's pretty dismal, but there are always exceptions to that, and we had better pay attention to those exceptions, or it gets a lot more dismal. I think the commodification of culture is very extreme, and needs to be engaged with. We have reached a classical level of spectacle entertainment, and you wonder, how much farther can it go?—between reality television and Hollywood blockbusters.

But, that said, there are good movies being made, good bands playing, good books being written. It's dangerous if people turn against art because they don't like the structures that support or surround it. I think this is one of the problems that happens on both ends of the political spectrum. The left and the right both sometimes have a tendency to reject art.

On the right, because art is considered to be intellectual and elitist. And, on the left, they reject it because it's bourgeois and commercial. Either way, I think they're missing the target.

DW: That's not any "left" that I recognize.

JC: I don't think that art is about money. If we reject it because we don't like various things external to it, then we end up making it about those things. That's not fair to the actuality. Because art is something people do like breathing. They make things, they draw things, they sing songs, and I don't think that should ever be completely attached to social, political and economic conditions.

DW: Art in its own way, in my view, tries to establish the truth about the world. To reject art as a means of reflecting on, considering, gaining one's bearings in the world is a terrible mistake.

JC: There are times when people feel the need to shake up the institutions.

DW: And the institutions deserve to be shaken up, no doubt. But not the paintings.

In regard to the present situation and its cultural difficulties, the powers that be in the US certainly have no interest in a population that is engaged, sensitive, compassionate. And art helps create such people.

JC: There is always a sense in which art can be a little dangerous, and that's not good for the dominant forces.

I could have made a documentary about the subject, but I like the idea of working through these people's lives. Big thoughts and concerns are not removed from people, any kind of people.

You take a museum guard. He or she could have sore feet and want to get off their feet, like anyone else. But museum guards have this extraordinary situation, they are spending more time with art works than most humans will ever, ever spend, and that surely makes for some interesting translations and thoughts. It was nice to use a person like that as a conduit to get at certain ideas.

There is that social, historical element in Dutch art: there was a new capitalist class and they wanted to show off their possessions. But is that all that's there? The orange peel in that painting is sublime, the light hitting the table cloth in this one is miraculous ...



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