

The Artist and the Model: A sculptor creates his last work in the middle of war

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Directed by Fernando Trueba; written by Jean-Claude Carrière, Fernando Trueba

The Artist and the Model is now playing in North America. We commented on the film at the San Francisco film festival earlier this year.

The following is a slightly edited version of that comment.

The Artist and the Model, from Spanish director Fernando Trueba (*Belle Époque*, 1992), is a convincing work about an artistic type that seems in short supply at present. The film's central figure is Marc Cros (veteran French actor Jean Rochefort), apparently modeled on Catalan-French sculptor Aristide Maillol (1861-1944).

It is 1943, in German-occupied France, near the Spanish border, and Cros, 80 years old, has more or less lost his artistic drive. His wife Léa (the great Claudia Cardinale) and servant María (Chus Lampreave) provide him with a new model, a young woman they find sleeping in a doorway. Mercè (Aida Folch) proves to be a refugee from fascist General Franco's forces in Spain and an internment camp escapee. She is given the artist's studio to live in.

Much of the film, written by Trueba and famed screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière (who has worked on films for Buñuel, Godard, Schlöndorff, Wajda, Oshima, Forman and Malle, among others), consists of scenes of Mercè's modeling for Cros. The attention paid to the painstaking artistic process, to Cros' struggle to bring life and reality to his sculpture is remarkable and telling. In one scene, the artist goes over in detail with Mercè a Rembrandt drawing of a child beginning to walk, "a masterpiece without pretenses ... simple as life."

In his increasing pessimism and depression, brought on by age, but also by events (two world wars, the rise of fascism), Cros has turned against life to a certain

extent. When Mercè asks him, "Will the war end soon?", his reply is "Men are savages." He wants nothing to do with events, or the Resistance, it's all futile and a distraction from his art. "The best a man to do," Cros asserts, is find "a quiet corner in which to live."

Mercè is very active, in every sense. She helps smuggle refugees, including Jews, across the border and shelters a partisan. At first, Cros responds angrily. "All I wanted to do was work. ... Now I'm harboring refugees." The situation becomes dangerous when an admirer of his, a German officer (a professor of art in civilian life) comes to visit and discuss his treatise on Cros.

In the end, the girl, the struggle against oppression and the demands of art combine to revive Cros. He finishes his exquisite final work, the war is over, Mercè is going to leave. He tells her, "When one begins to understand things, it's time to move on." The implication is clear.

The film is a tribute to the struggle for life and reality in art. Whether it is intended as such or not, *The Artist and the Model* is a rebuke to much of what we see today in the art world, either open charlatantry or tiresome self-absorption and trivia.



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