

Tim Burton's *Big Eyes*: Kitsch has never helped anyone yet

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Directed by Tim Burton; screenplay by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski

Director Tim Burton's new film *Big Eyes* tells the story of Margaret Keane, the American artist and pop culture icon, who created "big-eye art." Keane's paintings of waifs whose doe-like eyes were several times the normal human size, became a mass-marketing sensation in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s.

Burton treats her art, justifiably derided by critics as "kitsch" and the "lowest common denominator," as legitimate. In fact, his film begins with a quote from Andy Warhol (1928-1987), the Pop artist and sometime painter of soup cans: "It has to be good. If it were bad, so many people wouldn't like it."

The tale of how Margaret Keane's art, purchased by figures as disparate as Madame Chiang Kai-shek and Marilyn Manson, and even by Burton himself, came to prominence is an interesting one.

The movie opens in 1958 in Northern California. Margaret (Amy Adams), with young daughter in tow, is leaving her first husband. Born in Nashville, Tennessee and trained at an art school in Memphis, Margaret eventually ends up in San Francisco and starts to peddle her portraits and paintings at an outdoor art fair. Next to her booth is one belonging to Walter Keane (Christoph Waltz), a painter of Parisian street scenes who mentions he studied in Europe.

Walter earns a living as a realtor ("Any blockhead can arrange a sublet"), but wants to "walk away from the bourgeois scene." Margaret, now a single mother with a child to support, is susceptible to Walter's syrupy charms. They marry in paradise (Hawaii). Walter recognizes something in Margaret's paintings of vulnerable-looking, big-eyed children.

His indefatigable skills as a hustler and con artist eventually pay off. Margaret's paintings are simply signed "Keane." So when her work starts to be noticed, and the question is asked, "Who is the artist?" Walter opportunistically answers, "I am." Margaret objects, but Walter counters that "people don't buy lady art" and

convinces her to go along with the hoax.

Stashed away in a smoke- and turpentine fume-filled attic where she churns out one sentimental picture after another, Margaret carefully guards her secret from everyone, including her daughter and her best friend Dee Ann (Krysten Ritter). "If you tell anyone, this empire collapses," threatens Walter. As her work becomes wildly popular, Walter starts mass producing it. Local journalist Dick Nolan (Danny Huston) writes puff pieces about Walter's ever-rising stardom.

But Keane's oeuvre is not warmly received by reputable art critics. Terence Stamp, in a brief but effective appearance as John Canaday, the real-life *New York Times* critic, calls the large Keane piece, "Tomorrow Forever," done for the 1964 New York World's Fair, "the very definition of tasteless hack work."

Meanwhile, Walter becomes more tyrannical and abusive toward Margaret, who ultimately ends the marriage and leaves for Hawaii. In 1970, spurred on by an encounter with the Jehovah's Witnesses religious group, Margaret reveals that she painted all the "Big Eyes." Besides inventing himself as a painter, Walter has made up the inspiration for "his" paintings: the destructive impact of World War II and its reflection in the sad eyes of the orphaned children. Conversely, his wife, the real artist, offers a more mundane account: that a brief period of deafness as a child made her focus on "the windows of the world."

When Walter refuses to admit the fraud, the couple face off in 1986 in a Honolulu courtroom. The judge orders each of them to create a work on the spot (a real event). Margaret finishes her painting of a saucer-eyed waif in 53 minutes, while Walter sits before a blank canvas, complaining about a sore shoulder. The "authorship" issue is settled once and for all.

Bathing his movie in gentle, bright colors, Burton is able to impart to *Big Eyes* his trademark hyper-real quality. In one scene set in a grocery store, all the patrons are curiously endowed with "big eyes," creating a disturbing tableau. Adams is appealing as the delicate, soft-spoken Margaret,

while Waltz turns up the volume in an often irritating manner. Huston, a fine actor, provides unnecessary narration and is not fully integrated into the storyline.

The movie has merit as a depiction of an unusual episode in art history. Unfortunately, the director does not probe the incident in any depth, and what he does make of it is largely wrong.

Burton's film has a certain feminist coloration—Margaret's soul is being destroyed by the theft of her art through gross intimidation and violence. However, the director's primary aim seems to be an attack on so-called "high art" and its proponents. *Big Eyes* is essentially an implied defense of Keane's kitsch in the name of egalitarianism and anti-elitism. Opposition to Keane's art (and the sort of outlook expressed in Warhol's statement referred to above) is attributed to intellectual snobbery, personified by both the Canaday character ("Mr. Keane is why society needs critics to protect them against such atrocities") and Ruben (Jason Schwartzman), the gallery owner who caters to the rich with pricey abstract art.

Ironically, undermining the filmmaker's claim to be a genuine admirer of Keane's work is the fact that his own movie is artistically (within the limits of his talent) and knowingly made. This was also the case with his far more compelling film, *Ed Wood* (1994), in which the director took a relatively worked out and psychologically consistent approach to his characters. That is, he made a perceptive and humane film about an eccentric artist who created schlock. So too in *Big Eyes*, Burton's artistry is at odds with his supposed favoring of a populist, low-brow trend.

The extreme divide between low- and high-brow art is a social and historical problem, not something fixed and inevitable. When Canaday-Stamp observes that "Art should elevate, not pander," he is merely repeating an elementary truth, which would have been widely accepted for most of the 20th century by artists and critics alike.

Behind Burton's aesthetic stance lie decades of postmodernist and other damaging trends taught at the universities and art schools—or imbibed one way or another by up-and-coming artists. (Burton attended the California Institute of the Arts in the late 1970s and from there went directly to working for Disney as an animator and storyboard artist.)

In his 1990 work, *Post-modernism: The Twilight of the Real*, Neville Wakefield provided a revealing comment. He wrote: "What has emerged over the past few years is not so much a redefinition of the aesthetic, but rather a more general consensus of opinion pointing to a decline of faith in the *transformative* powers of the arts—in the plausibility of distinctions between art and advertising, traditionally cast in terms of distinctions between high and low, or authorised

and popular culture (unauthorised in the sense of being without discernible pedigree or genealogy) ... It is a phase marked by a new sort of promiscuity in which the various strands of human activity jostle, intermingle, and exchange amongst one another."

In November 2009, as part of an exhibition of Burton's work organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the museum's assistant curator, Ron Magliozzi, noted approvingly that the director was "an artist and filmmaker who shares much with his contemporaries in the post-modern generation who have taken their inspiration from pop culture. In Burton's case he was influenced by newspaper and magazine comics, cartoon animation and children's literature, toys and TV, Japanese monster movies, carnival sideshows and performance art, cinema Expressionism and science fiction films alike." These influences, treated uncritically, do not necessarily add up to anything positive. Burton and others like him, in fact, have accommodated themselves to cultural confusion and retrogression.

In truth, Margaret Keane's work emerged in a largely stagnant and reactionary cultural climate. To a certain extent, the almost complete abandonment of figurative work by far more talented and profound artists helped create a space in the 1950s and 1960s for Keane's terribly limited paintings.

With *Big Eyes*, Burton has added his seventeenth feature to his extremely uneven body of work, which ranges from the dreadful *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007) and *Planet of the Apes* (2001) at one pole to the laudable *Ed Wood* at the other. The new film is not cause for great optimism.



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