

Velvet Buzzsaw: The horror of the art world

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Dan Gilroy

Dan Gilroy is one of the more interesting American filmmakers currently working.

He has now followed upon his *Nightcrawler* (2014), about the unscrupulous news gathering business, and *Roman J. Israel, Esq.* (2017), centered on an idealistic lawyer and his challenges, with *Velvet Buzzsaw*, about the contemporary art world.

Gilroy fictionally savages the corruption, careerism and vacuousness that pervades this field, including its most prestigious exhibitions, galleries, museums and journals and the thoughts and opinions of its leading figures. The critical treatment is fully deserved and long overdue.

Velvet Buzzsaw, produced and distributed by Netflix, drops us immediately into the center of the art exhibition and criticism “business” at the for-profit and privately owned Art Basel fair in Miami Beach, one of the largest such events in the world. Much of the art work on display appears sterile and lifeless, and entirely indifferent to social realities.

The self-important Morf Vandewalt (Jake Gyllenhaal), an influential critic, arrives. The first work he comes upon is *Hoboman*, a homeless man as an animatronic art piece, who intones, “Have you ever felt invisible?,” along with a line from the Depression-era song, “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” (“Once I built a railroad ...”).

Morf dismisses the piece as “an iteration... No originality. No courage.” The artist’s representative counters grandly that the work “encompasses on a global scale. There’s just such a sense of now and in your face, which speaks to pop and cinema and economics. I mean, you can feel the winds of the apocalypse... We have a four-million-dollar hold, a major buyer in Shanghai.”

Rhodora Haze (Rene Russo), a powerful, hardboiled gallery operator, is busy trying to promote her current artists and attract future ones. Asked about the cost of a “groundbreaking” piece, Rhodora replies, with relief, “So much easier to talk about money than art.”

A rival gallerist, Jon Dondon (the wonderful Tom Sturridge), a South African, is meanwhile attempting to “poach” veteran, cantankerous artist Piers (John Malkovich) from Rhodora, after 17 years of her showing him, with market-babble: “If you come with me, our gallery has cutting-edge analytics to maximize deal flow and global demand ... In an attention economy, celebrity is art form.”

Rhodora attempts to impress a young African-American artist, Damrish (Daveed Diggs), who was “living on the street, showing

on the sidewalk” only six months earlier, with her cool frankness: “All this ... it’s just a safari to hunt the next new thing and eat it.”

Rhodora too had her rebellious phase, in a punk band, Velvet Buzzsaw, but, she explains, “I’ve gone from anarchist to purveyor of good taste.”

With everyone now back in Los Angeles, Morf takes up with Josephina (Zawe Ashton), an employee at Rhodora’s gallery, who has just found out her new boyfriend is cheating on her. (“I’m through dating artists. They’re already in a relationship.”) Morf is having his “own major second thoughts about Ed,” his live-in partner.

Gilroy’s film treats with withering scorn Gretchen (Toni Collette), a one-time art museum official who has just accepted a position as “an adviser for a private buyer,” someone fabulously wealthy. “I will be making enough to afford a terribly lovely car and garden,” she coyly says. Justifying her sell-out, Gretchen observes, “I came to the museum because I wanted to change the world through art. But the wealthy vacuum up everything, except crumbs. The best work is only enjoyed by a tiny few. And they buy what they’re told. So, why not join the party?”

She offers Morf “a generous, untraceable reward” for any art work he might be able to steer her to “in the realm of undervalued, pre-review, perhaps,” i.e., she wants tips on favorable reviews before they appear, a type of “insider trading.”

At Josephina’s request, Morf savagely pans a show by her ex-lover (whom the critic actually admires). The artist in question thereupon gets drunk and crashes his car, nearly killing himself.

Events take a dramatic turn when Josephina stumbles upon the art work of a recently deceased upstairs neighbor. As opposed to the empty efforts the galleries are displaying, the dead man’s paintings are figurative works, full of haunting human faces and bodies. The artist, Vetril Dease, lived entirely “off the grid” for decades and never attempted to exhibit or sell a single work. In fact, it turns out, he left strict instructions that his drawings and paintings were to be destroyed at his death.

Josephina takes ownership, publicly claiming she found Dease’s work in a dumpster. Rhodora, who inevitably sniffs out the find, insists on a partnership with Josephina: “You can engage me in an endless lawsuit, or ... you can become rich and famous and successful. Which is what we both know you’ve always wanted.”

As for Morf, he offers Josephina his opinion that Dease’s paintings are “visionary. Mesmeric. An absolute incredible ... mix of mediums. I’m ensorcelled.” Josephine: “Do you think there’s a market for it?” Morf: “Massive. Beyond.” Piers and Damrish,

genuine artists, for all their difficulties, are awestruck in the face of the apparent authenticity of the art.

Once Rhodora begins to implement her “extensive marketing plans,” she confers with Morf, who opines pretentiously (in one of the film’s sharpest satirical moments!), “Critique is so limiting and emotionally draining. I’ve always wanted to do something long-form, beyond opinion. Dip my toe into an exploration of origin and essence. A metamorphosis of spirit into reality. I’ve ... I’ve never had the vehicle until now. An artist toiling in the recesses, discovered in death.” Later, Morf goes on, “Well, I’m willing to write the exhibit brochure ... And in return, I want exclusive rights to a book and several pieces.”

To this point, *Velvet Buzzsaw* has struck almost entirely the right note. The official art world is false, greedy and stupid. The artists are paralyzed and largely at its mercy. (Piers has one large painting of two drip-like shapes to show for a year’s output. “Ideas come,” he tells Dondon, his new artistic agent, “but they kill themselves as soon as they appear. This is a slaughterhouse. Welcome aboard.”) The appearance of work that sets out to genuinely use painting’s expressive possibilities comes as a revelation, a thunderbolt, even an indictment. (It’s clearly not accidental that a self-portrait by Lucian Freud, the figurative British painter, makes an appearance later in the work.)

Unfortunately, in my view, Gilroy then goes off on a wrong direction. The dead painter, Dease, horribly abused as a child, we learn, became something of a psychopath, with violent crimes to his name. Morf explains, in a voiceover, “The artist battled for decades with his personal demons. The result is an epic saga of violence and madness. A howl for answers and a resolution that never comes.”

The Dease show is a great success, his paintings go for premium prices. But the artist’s “spirit” sets about, as Morf realizes too late, revenging itself gruesomely, on “any of us who profited” from the work.

Gilroy’s disgust with the art trade is understandable, as is even the desire for some sort of dramatic “settling of accounts” with all the scoundrels involved. The quasi-supernatural element, however, becomes something of a distraction, and a detraction, something of an easy way out. (Aside from the fact that it is misleading, to say the least, to suggest that an untrained madman could produce significant art.)

It’s not an “art world horror story,” but the true “story of the art world’s horror” that, above all, needs to be told.

In any event, even taking into account *Velvet Buzzsaw*’s missteps, it is a cut above nearly everything else currently available. Again, as far as it goes, its picture of opportunism (Morf=morph=to undergo transformation), greed and disorientation is *entirely* on the mark. Various critics, using the film’s problems as an excuse, have responded with obvious anger and dismay at the unflattering portrait of America’s “creative class.”

In 2017, the art market, according to the Art Market 2018 report, published—ironically—by Art Basel and UBS, “rebounded after two years of decline, with the total sales reaching USD 63.7 billion ...

The United States remains the largest market worldwide, followed by China, which has superseded the United Kingdom and is now in second position ... The top three markets—the US, China, and the UK—accounted for 83 percent of total sales by value. At 42 percent the US is the undisputed global market leader. China is now just ahead of the UK at 21 percent versus 20 percent. This is explained by the presence of the major auction houses in New York, London, and Beijing.”

In an interview with Art Basel, economist Dr. Clare McAndrew noted that the “gap between the high-end and the rest of the market has become more pronounced in recent years.” McAndrew continued: “Works with prices above USD 10 million have outperformed other markets. There is a narrow focus on a small number of artists and the people who are selling their work, and this has had a big effect on sales. There are various reasons for it. Buying a work of art is a very large, infrequent, high-risk purchase for many people, and a way to reduce this risk is to look at what everybody else is doing, and consume what others are consuming. This creates a focus around a few artists at the high-end. As it becomes more concentrated, new buyers start to think that that’s all the art market is.”

Whether the buyers are making expensive investments or merely wish to possess works of art for their own selfish enjoyment, this is an obscene form of human-artistic trafficking.

Gilroy, the son of playwright Frank Gilroy (*The Subject Was Roses*, 1965) and the brother of screenwriter and director Tony Gilroy (*Michael Clayton*, 2007), told an interviewer that “contemporary art was a movement that really began to challenge and to provoke, and it’s been co-opted by big business and money. And I saw it as a world off its axis ... The quality of a work shouldn’t be judged by the first weekend of box office or the number of people who’ve seen it online or the amount paid at Sotheby’s. Success doesn’t diminish your work, but it doesn’t define it either.”

One only hopes that Gilroy will continue and deepen his “definite and important feeling for the world.”



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