The Artist's Wife: A portrait of the artist as an aging semi-entrepreneur

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Directed by Tom Dolby, written by Dolby, Nicole Brending, and Abdi Nazemian

A recent American film, *The Artist's Wife*, looks at a painter's life. The artistic personality continues to fascinate the public. But does the film shed much light on the phenomenon?

Directed by Tom Dolby, son of Ray Dolby, famed inventor of the noise-reducing system, *The Artist's Wife* was scripted by Dolby, Nicole Brending and Abdi Nazemian.

Celebrated painter Richard Smythson (played by 84-year-old Bruce Dern) lives in an architecturally gorgeous house in the Hamptons, an upscale portion of Long Island, New York. He is experiencing the onset of dementia, which is presumably responsible for his "painter's block." His wife, Claire (Lena Olin), who loves him deeply, has put up with Richard's irascible, cantankerous personality for decades. "I create the art," says Richard in a television interview, "She creates the rest of my life."

As Richard's worst traits are exacerbated by his developing illness, Claire feels the need to reach out to her husband's estranged daughter Angela (Juliet Rylance), from a previous marriage, and Angela's young son, Diego (Ravi Cabot-Conyers). Claire's plan has mixed results.

The painter's fears and frustrations pile up in advance of an upcoming Manhattan exhibition. Meanwhile, he is also fired from a college where he teaches for being abusive to his students. As Claire tries to hold things together, she goes back to her own roots as a talented painter and finds temporary solace with Angela's male caretaker (Avan Jogia). In the end, Claire's loving efforts on Richard's behalf yield a positive outcome on the personal and professional fronts.

The Artist's Wife has a certain intelligence and sensitivity, but in general, the actors' personalities are stronger than the film. Olin, Dern and Rylance negotiate the turbulent waters with skill.

Nonetheless, the most troubling aspect of the movie—and what truly stands out for a critical reviewer—is what it takes for granted about the contemporary art world. For one thing, what we see of the latter is affluent and fashionable. The Hamptons (a series of seaside villages, sprinkled with mansions) are home to many millionaires today, and Richard and Claire apparently belong in that category.

Richard's principal problem—and the couple's, increasingly—is an unavoidable physiological one, a misfortune that might befall anyone. Aside from that affliction, apparently, his existence would be a terrestrial paradise. Claire's decision to subordinate her life to her husband's might be questioned but, again, that is a matter lying outside the production of art.

The Manhattan gallery that will show Richard's upcoming exhibition features innocuous contemporary work, such as that of performance artist Ada Risi (Stefanie Powers) who proudly displays her naked body and its double mastectomy!

Moreover, there is no hint that Richard has ever had to enter into a conflict with society, the critics, public taste, artistic materials or anything else, except perhaps his own peevishness. All in all, unhappily, *The Artist's Wife* is the portrait of an artist as an aging semi-entrepreneur. In that sense, it does say something about the current "fashionable" and bloated, money-driven New York art scene, inadvertently (and all too accurately) depicted as complacent, cold and indifferent to popular distress. Far too often, it is an assembly line for the creation of works destined to decorate the offices of bankers and lawyers.

The artist is not an empty machine for creating form, nor is the viewer an empty machine for appreciating it. They are living people, existing under definite social, historical conditions. Their interests and needs, including their interest in and need for art, are bound up with those conditions. Art without urgency, art without purpose, art without commitment is only “art” by the narrowest of definitions. The artist, to borrow a phrase from Marx, considers his or her works “as ends in themselves.” Indeed, “so little are they a means” either for him or herself, or for others, that, if necessary, he or she sacrifices his or her own existence “to their existence.”

The picture of the artist in Dolby’s film has very little to do with the history of genuine art, which involves immense sacrifice, suffering and struggle, and protest. Even to mention certain names is to bring to the reader’s mind battles—external and internal—of various kinds, and even torment: Gustave Courbet, Auguste Rodin, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, Amadeo Modigliani, Chaim Soutine, Arshile Gorky and many others. And the serious artist does not find contentment even with critical or financial success. One has only to consider the fate of various Abstract Expressionists in the US, most of whom died prematurely, such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and David Smith.

The art and the lives in Dolby’s films are ultimately rather vacuous.