

Steven Soderbergh's *The Christophers*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Not Very Important Person

David Walsh
18 June 2026

Prolific American filmmaker Steven Soderbergh's latest effort is *The Christophers* (written by Ed Solomon), about an aging artist, his conflicted assistant and his predatory children, with Ian McKellen, Michaela Coel, Jessica Gunning and James Corden.

Julian Sklar (McKellen) is a well-known painter in London who, in his own words, has done “nothing but shit in 30 years. Nothing at all in 20.” When he *was* doing serious work decades ago, he painted two series, “The Christophers,” inspired by his lover of the time—and a third set remains unfinished, stored in his attic.

His greedy and desperate son and daughter, Barnaby (Corden) and Sallie (Gunning), have apparently been cut out of Julian's will. In an effort to get something out of the old man, the pair hire Lori Butler (Coel), a painter and one-time successful forger, to “complete” the third Christopher series, which they plan to sell for a great deal of money after Sklar's death.

Lori has her own reasons for agreeing to the assignment, having once been—we later learn—sharply humiliated by Julian on a bizarre reality show, “Art Fight.”

Julian orders Lori to shred the unfinished Christopher paintings he has hidden away. Instead, she forges copies of the paintings and destroys them. By this time, the older man begins to recognize she is not as innocent as she seems. She confesses rather easily about her deal with his offspring, and also indicates her considerable knowledge about his technique and, ultimately, his artistic crisis. Julian and Lori become closer as a result. He orders her to burn the actual Christophers, which she refuses to do.

“You're not going to burn these. ... There is a reason you've kept them for 25 years. If you really didn't want them, you would've sold them.”

Julian decides to “finish” the paintings in question by adding feathers, glitter and glue and making them as unsaleable as possible. He also realizes that Lori is the same young woman he derided so cruelly years before on television. Visiting her studio, he sees some value in her work, after all.

To exclude the dreadful Barnaby and Sallie once and for all, Lori forges a letter from Julian giving sole ownership of the paintings to the individual who inspired them.

The Christophers is amusing at times. McKellen's “pyrotechnics” are entertaining, and Coel, Corden and Gunning do perfectly well. Soderbergh makes films (he also does the actual cinematography and editing) more stylish and “knowing” than the

norm.

But the film doesn't, in the end, add up to much. It impresses the critics because they are not difficult to impress.

In other words, it is doubtful that on viewing *The Christophers*, anyone's thoughts have been “enriched by something new,” or that new human types have been “engraved upon your heart.”

Indeed, if one digs a little deeper, the rather superficial, shabby character of the various elements comes into focus.

First of all, Sklar doesn't strike one as having the personality of a painter. He is glib and verbose, and to be brutally honest, he reminds one much more of an elderly, rather full of himself, actor or singer, armed with diverting witticisms and anecdotes.

Moreover, this supposedly once-major figure never provides any meaningful insight into painting or modern art. What he does say tends toward the trite and banal.

For example: Julian earns money by making online video cameos for cash and in one of them, he tells the recipient-viewer,

Alisa, Julian Sklar here. Your mother would like me to tell you not to quit art school. Seriously though, do. Those clowns at Camberwell [Camberwell College of Arts] will poison you with their Sainsbury's aisles and ideas processed, packed in plastic. The stalest up front so that you buy into those first. Grow your own, I say. Go organic! Although I hear that's all rubbish too.

At one point, he mocks the possibility that Lori might claim he had been her inspiration to become a painter, “No, my dear. Your fucked-up childhood made you want to be an artist. I'm just what you tripped over as you scurried to freedom.”

Art, Sklar contends, is not about social or personal relationships, “No. It's a man alone in his room. Me in this room. I have a relationship with the canvas.”

What he can't stand about painting, he says, is that “you paint from the heart, from the soul... you give yourself to everything you can. You pour it onto the canvas... and then some bloody agent comes along and takes 45 percent.” Art “takes guts. It takes blood,” he adds further on. This is trite, conventional stuff.

There's nothing apparently about the world or wider aspects of life that makes one a painter, no indication that having an important or insightful attitude toward reality counts for anything. These views are accepted as a given in artistic circles, it's not Soderbergh's or his screenwriter's fault as such.

For our part, the view of the 19th-century Russian writer N. A. Dobrolyubov is more appealing. He argued that "we shall never agree that a poet who wastes his talent on exemplary descriptions of leaf buds and brooks can be as important as an artist who is able with equal talent to reproduce, say, the phenomena of public life." It is not fashionable, but, yes, "the question of what the talent of an artist is spent on, of how it is expressed, is far more important than that of the degree and quality of the talent he possesses in himself, in the abstract, in potentiality."

Along these same lines, worse still, certain reviewers have suggested that Sklar reminds them of an "artist of the School of London variety" (*Guardian*). That trend of generally figurative (or semi-figurative) painters included Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, R. B. Kitaj and the recently deceased David Hockney.

Whatever one may conclude individually or collectively about this group of artists, they were formed by earthshaking, often traumatic events, the rise of fascism, Stalinism, the Second World War, the Holocaust, and they attempted to convey, directly or indirectly, the impact or influence of that in their art. The physical consequences of the century's traumas for the human body and face draw a good deal of their interest.

As the WSWS wrote in 2024 in a comment on the death of Auerbach,

The German-born British artist believed that "the purpose of art is to make us see things anew, to see the world in a way that it's difficult to describe in words" ... Although Auerbach was not overtly political, he was a deeply humanistic, socially aware and cultured individual totally immersed in his art.

Sklar, on the other hand, is simply rather foolish and floundering. "Sadly my art, not unlike my talent, departed this life long ago when, apparently, I was not paying attention." He is amiable and amusing, but why should we care terribly much about the fate of such a person?

His great contribution? "I was bisexual, Lori, when it actually cost something to say so." Identity politics, the default setting of modern filmmaking, intrudes fitfully in the course of the film. Out of the blue, Sklar puts in at one moment: "Over 75 percent of enrollment in the art schools is women. And my question was simply a question... why then are women not in 75 percent of museums, Lori?"

As for Lori herself, what is one to conclude about a supposedly serious artist who was put off showing her art in public for years because of one unfortunate appearance on a stupid reality television program? And what was she doing on "Art Fight" to

begin with?

And it is difficult to believe in Sallie and Barnaby as Sklar's children. There doesn't seem the slightest psychological, social or biological connection between the three of them.

The forgeries, non-forgeries, shredding, burning, deals with Sallie and Barnaby, no deals... there are too many red herrings, plot details that don't lead far.

Again, it's all a bit shabby. The filmmakers don't push themselves, they don't challenge their audience unduly. Everyone involved is rather pleased with him or herself for making something more sophisticated than the average film production, but it doesn't make a deep impression.

In vain one searches interviews with Soderbergh, an intelligent individual, for a comment about the state of the world or even the state of the cinema world. His remarks are devoted to secondary matters. Some time ago, he let the public know he was abandoning filmmaking for painting. Then he decided it would take too long, "five years of continuous work to result, by my standards, in something showable." He returned to film, "And once I got back on set, I realized that I like this job. I just really hate the business."

Fair enough, but little of that "hatred" or strong feelings of any kind come through. Soderbergh has complained in the past about the failure of some of his films, blaming their lack of success on the public and, presumably, its backwardness or philistinism. He goes on, year after year, making clever and articulate films of a generally all too inconsequential character. If the films do not acquire a mass audience, it is because nothing about them genuinely grips or engages a mass audience.

This is not a personal failing, as noted, but a broader problem. Artists of Soderbergh's generation were cut off at the knees, so to speak, by the reactionary atmosphere of the 1980s and 1990s. Instinctively and initially radical, they found unfavorable conditions for opposition, and set it aside. They turned non-committal, amused, ironic, sometimes darkly cynical. "Improve the world, social betterment? That's merely embarrassing, let's change the subject..."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact