



Unrein Goes to the Movies

By Jennifer Landes | October 13, 2011 - 9:14am

With their sweeping gestural brushstrokes and vibrant yet subdued coloring, Suzanne Unrein's paintings are ripe for interpretation. And interpretation is what they receive in a short film called "Hands and Eyes," which will be shown as part of the Scream Out Loud: Comedic Shorts category tomorrow and Sunday during the Hamptons International Film Festival.



Suzanne Unrein's oil painting "The Blue Rudy" from 2010 is featured in the short film "Hands and Eyes" at the Hamptons International Film Festival

The film is a humorous riff on what happens when a gasbag critic visits an artist in his studio. The actors in this single-scene short are Hampton Fancher and Richard Edson, but it is Ms. Unrein's paintings, the subject of their banter, that steal the show.

To tie into the screening, Karen Boltax, who has a gallery on Shelter Island that has shown Ms. Unrein's work, will exhibit her paintings this weekend in a pop-up gallery in the Design Within Reach store on Park Place in East Hampton.

Ms. Unrein's art is her own take on the Old Master style of painting by Peter Paul Rubens, Nicholas Poussin, Raphael, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. But this writer sees some Michelangelo thrown in as well. Almost all of the groupings are reminiscent of scenes in "The Last Judgment." But at least by most art historical accounts, those of Giorgio Vasari included, everyone was influenced by Michelangelo — back then, anyway.

It was a Rubens painting that first caught Ms. Unrein's eye at the National Gallery in London. "From across the room, I saw it as a beautiful abstraction and decided to paint it that way," she has said. As she added other artists' works to her pool of influence, she began to mix their subjects and gestures together into a somewhat gooey melting pot of suggested figures, bravura foreshortening, and operatic posturing.

They work well in a film that is about the act of viewing art. The paintings are very in your face as the action takes place in the foreground. In fact, there is very little in the way of background, mostly cloudy or shadowy atmosphere. The swirls of clustered figures indicate violence, passion, pathos, and even doom. They are not works that are ambivalent or passive. They command a reaction.

And so the critic in the movie does respond. As played by Mr. Fancher, he is harried and abrupt, questioning, but opinionated and all-knowing. As depicted, he promotes the idea of a parasitic relationship between the viewer and those whose objects are viewed. Without a host to feed on, the critic has no function or source of nourishment.

After what is essentially a three-minute monologue that mostly demonstrates his own education, prejudices, concerns, and insights, the critic provokes a runic interjection from the artist, declares the work acceptable, and is on his way.

There will be a reception for the artist and filmmakers tomorrow from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., prior to the first screening of the shorts program at the East Hampton movie theater.