

Pollock

This convincing biography of the memorable American “drip painter” was a long-time labor of love for Ed Harris, who worked to get *Pollock* (now on at area theaters) made for almost ten years. As producer, director and impersonator of the artist himself, it is definitely his show, and a compelling portrait it is.

Pollock’s story was better known in the 1950’s when the notoriety of his life and the shock of his painting were first well publicized (notably by a famous picture spread in a 1949 issue of *Life* magazine). His celebrity only increased with his abrupt, grim death in a car accident. His saga is of a rugged Westerner (raised in California and Arizona) who was trained by one of America’s most noted regionalists and realists (Thomas Hart Benton), then plugged along in his own Surreal style in New York City, until cracking the fame barrier with support from über-critic Clement Greenberg (played here by Jeffrey Tambor) and arts patron and society queen Peggy Guggenheim (Amy Madigan). After retiring from the city to a farmhouse on Long Island with his wife Lee Krasner (wonderfully portrayed by Marcia Gay Harden), he perfected his particular form of expressionism only to die--at the height of his fame--at 44.

The film traces the last 15 years of that trajectory, finding many of the telling moments but trying also to give space to understanding the artist. Here, Harris has taken on a formidable task, since the real Pollock, like many gifted plastic artists, was never a very articulate definer of his work: he just *did* it. Ed Harris must suggest Pollock’s genius through action, through his bodily struggle with paint and canvas. He does not--cannot--explain his work, but he knows when it works, when it is *good*. It’s an almost religious conviction--what Greenberg in the film calls “the one thing sacred to you--your art.” But his character must also mingle the artistic with the mundane, with the profane, because Jackson Pollock was also a bad drunk, a sullen friend, a crude Lothario. Harris does not pull back from these unattractive traits but mingles them inextricably with the fellow’s ache to make Art. He shows Pollock’s desperate drive to create contending with his almost equally desperate need for approval.

One could argue that the movies--requiring facile drama--simply don’t treat artists unless they are “tortured,” agonized souls whose talent may cost them their sanity or their lives. This is certainly true of painters in most popular films--Michelangelo, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, most especially a raving Kirk Douglas as the favorite artistic nut case, Vincent Van Gogh. *Pollock* might be criticized on these grounds, for it, too, is a profile of a man on the edge--and tipping. I think it transcends the stereotype because of the tireless integrity of Ed Harris’s performance. He may not make Pollock an admirable character, but he surely makes you begin to understand him.

The turning point of the film shows how Harris/Pollock reveals himself in action: it comes when the artist is in his cold barn confronting a massive bare canvas on the floor...an accidental spill from his paint can intrigues him with its slurred arabesque, so he flips another, and another until he is creating a lacy black complex beneath him, the genesis of the drip pictures. Like the artist himself, he begins working “inside the painting.” This moment is made palpable, and Harris--who has clearly studied the painter assiduously--does the work himself (no double), making it very believable and very real. I expect Pollock himself might honor this homage--probably by raising a glass..

(“Pollock” is rated “R” for mature language and themes.)

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