

*Art Bastard.*

Directed by Victor Kanefsky.

Concannon Productions, 2016.

84 minutes. DVD format, color.

*Art Bastard* opens with details of satirical painter Robert Cenedella's colorfully cluttered urban scenes, somewhat reminiscent of Ralph Fasanella's busy communities and factories or the chaos of a work by Hieronymus Bosch. These painted segments are interwoven with footage of the New York, past and present, that Cenedella, who was born in 1940, has found endlessly fascinating. The artist, whose most famous painting is *Le Cirque—The First Generation*, walks through subways and down streets with no voice-over, letting the relationship between the artwork and the cityscape speak for itself before his voice enters to describe how, as a child, he looked at the city from a rooftop vantage point and found inspiration in his environment. The film's title sets up the story that follows in several ways, intimating Cenedella's personal tale as well as his attitude and reception (or lack thereof) by the New York art scene.

The film's early biographical elements provide some of the most interesting parts of the narrative, including a family history tied to Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusades and a lot of family drama, which pushed the young Cenedella to seek refuge in art museums even before he started painting. For him, art was a means of seeing "the world above the gutter." In his artwork one immediately notes the echoes of artists made famous for depicting the masses and the grotesque, such as Pieter Bruegel and George Grosz. Viewers are then pleasantly surprised to learn that Cenedella was mentored by Grosz at the Art Students League of New York, and the camera's panning across images of Grosz's work from the 1930s and 1940s establishes his influence on Cenedella's depictions of the human body and approach to social commentary. We see the Grosz-inspired irreverence played out in Cenedella's work outside the realm of fine art, too, and gain insight into the unknown operator behind such 1960s and 1970s pop-culture phenomena as "I Like Ludwig" buttons and "Hostility" dartboards with presidents' faces on them.

Making creative attempts to represent the energy of the artwork, the cinematographer uses techniques like a shaky handheld camera while focused on details of the subway paintings *Subway Cats* (1963) and *Fun City Express* (1979) and quick passing shots to capture the variety of ways a passerby might experience a work of art in a flash. Certainly a documentary about two-dimensional art faces the built-in challenge of how to get beyond simply pointing a lens at a painting. At times, hearing the artist explain the works in detail offers less to our understanding of their meaning than simply following the way the camera lingers on faces, objects, signage, and actions. The filming of the art in

quick cuts and tiny details allows us to look carefully at Cenedella's technique and satirical elements. However, the viewer who has not seen his work outside of these depictions ultimately may not leave the screening with a sense of what the paintings look like in full.

The director, Victor Kanefsky, lets the artist quite thoroughly say his piece, allowing viewers to decide how they feel about Cenedella and his artwork. Ultimately, this may leave some viewers ambivalent; the painter is admirably committed to his principles and a prolific artist, but he is also repeatedly quite vocally resentful about not receiving his due. The film presents some inherent contradictions that make it a little hard to get an objective sense of the artist. For example, Cenedella repeatedly refers to the sardonic view and irony within his paintings, yet a critic offers the opinion that in fact Cenedella is too sincere and that sincerity is perhaps what has caused him to be dismissed by the art establishment. The selection of visuals, interview segments, and editing style reinforce a tendency toward the autobiographical and self-analytical, toward a romanticized notion of the inseparable nature of the art and the artist. In the end, the film offers a study of Cenedella's personality and his conception of his own art more than it provides any new or surprising perspectives on the modern art world itself—despite the film's evident desire to address this subject matter.

Apart from the obligatory scene of making the family recipe red sauce, the film's treatment of Italian American identity is fairly minor. On a couple of occasions the artist questions his connections to that identity through physiognomic assumptions when he claims he has “never been accused of looking Italian” and through his troubled relationship with his father, an Italian American who turns out not to have been his biological father (hence, one explanation for the “bastard” in the film's title). Likewise, his sister Joan, a fiction writer, does not focus much on ethnic identity in her work. Some of this absence may be attributed to the fact that it was “unfashionable” to claim ethnic heritage for many of their generation, though their troubled family history seems to be a more immediate source of the siblings' disconnect from the Italian diaspora. Nor do they discuss on screen the sense of unity provided by an ethnic enclave; the artist's depictions of crowded neighborhood streets tend to depict schism more than anything—much different in tone than Fasanella's visual celebrations of community. For example, where Fasanella's groups typically work harmoniously in a factory or gather at a meal or public event, Cenedella's crowds are often comprised of shouting faces, bodies in aggressively bawdy postures or violent movement, or eyes looking indifferently away from aggression. Oddly enough, his mother's ethnic heritage is never mentioned, but his discussion of the family dynamic certainly raises questions about whether we can negotiate ethnic identity based on the biological and emotional histories within our families. Ultimately, questions of nature versus nurture regarding

claims to ethnic identity seem to be of less interest to Cenedella than other issues that inflect his sense of self, like his mother's relationship history, his father's politics, and family secrets in general. We come to realize that he saw Grosz as a kind of adoptive father and as a source of lifelong inspiration more than anyone else in his biography, sharing perhaps even Grosz's sense of alienation from the ethnic or national home as a source of identity.

One cannot help but note the artist's relative success, despite his good-humored but sometimes bitter remarks regarding his difficulties in making it as an artist. Compared to many who set out to earn a living in the arts, he has clearly succeeded to some extent. That is, he obviously has admirers and those who want his pieces in their collections, and he seems to make an income from his work. Cenedella can be quite insightful and makes valid points about what gets acquired and what is left out of galleries and museums, but he falls short of making a fully persuasive case that his own work is worthy of the type of admiration, institutional legitimacy, and respect he seems to have craved for many years.

The film ends where one might expect, with critics offering perspectives on his work, on how his career trajectory has evolved, and on the nature of the art market—who “makes it,” who does not, and why. The story also lands nicely full circle, in the very Art League classrooms where he met Georg Grosz, where Bob Cenedella has much to offer other aspiring artists in his later career as a teacher

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