



Cutie and the Boxer Discussion Guide

Director: Zachary Heinzerling

Year: 2013

Time: 82 min

You might know this director from:

CUTIE AND THE BOXER is Zachary Heinzerling's first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

Oscar-nominated CUTIE AND THE BOXER presents Ushio and Noriko Shinohara, two artists who've been together for almost 40 years. Ushio was once the star of the Japanese avant-garde, known for his action paintings, created by ferociously boxing paint onto a canvas. He came to New York in 1969 and was part of the vibrant and raucous Soho art scene. Noriko, a 19-year old art student from Japan, met him in his studio and became enthralled with the artist. A love affair soon began, and within months, Noriko became pregnant. She put aside her own artistic ambitions to become mother and wife and de facto assistant to Ushio.

The film captures how their relationship, tested by the demands of art and all the necessary sacrifices, has evolved into what it is now. They live in cramped conditions, with the history of their lives cluttering every surface, but they work in large studios and in outdoor spaces to create their art. Ushio, at age 80, is still fighting to secure his legacy. And at 59, Noriko is finally emerging from her husband's shadow. She comes into her own with her "Cutie" comic-style illustrations which will soon be displayed in an exhibit alongside her husband.

With raw archival footage of the artists in their youth and tender, evocative animations of the Cutie drawings rippling through the film, CUTIE AND THE BOXER is a compelling and honest exploration of a relationship, tested by rivalry and the sacrifices of pursuing one's passions, and strengthened by a fierce loyalty to each other and a steadfast devotion to art.

FILM THEMES

CUTIE AND THE BOXER is a portrait of two artists and how their relationship to each other and to their art has evolved over decades.

AGE AND SUCCESS

Some people experience a late blossoming as they age, while others grapple with disappointments or regrets when life does not play out as they expected. Noriko, always an artist, didn't come into her own until later in life, but she acknowledges that her Cutie series could not have existed without the frustrations, sadness, and resentment of her past. Ushio, in contrast, experienced a career peak early in life but has failed to gain the recognition he feels he deserves. In a way, Ushio is still chasing the life of success promised by his early fame.

MARITAL BONDS

Relationship and power dynamics within a family can shift and evolve over time. Some may think that Noriko is slowly becoming more powerful, while others will see that she has always been the stronger one, as she was the one to support, manage, and care for Ushio's career and their family. What is shifting, perhaps, is Ushio's recognition. Or maybe he's known all along that Noriko had talent, but now he must now share the spotlight with his wife. Though they frequently tease and even insult each other, their forty years together is a testament to their loyalty and to their commitment to their art.

SACRIFICE AND COMMITMENT

Noriko sacrificed her artistic career while being wife, mother, and assistant to Ushio. But both have made great sacrifices in order to live their artistic lifestyle. They have no financial security. Their identities as artists depend on other people's valuation of what great art is. Noriko may get her due by the film's end, but Ushio has been pursuing recognition for decades. One scene shows him pontificating on art, then suddenly breaking down into wretched sobs about all he has given, and yet, "I have nothing." Despite this moment of despair captured many years ago, at 80 he is still fighting. And at 50, Noriko is claiming a larger canvas of gallery walls to tell her story.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND CREATIVITY

Ushio drank heavily for decades, partying with his friends. In an interview, he says the film's most honest scene is when he drunkenly breaks down, even though he doesn't remember it. Artists are thought to be associated with substance abuse for various reasons: it allows them to access deeper emotions and blot out their reality, it reflects their spirit of excess and hedonism, and because the creative mind is more prone to both creation and destruction. It's tricky to untangle the link between artists and substance abuse because what drives the creative mind is unknown, though neuroscientists and psychologists have attempted to examine it in recent decades.

“Life is wonderful. Life should be positive. When it’s blown to pieces, that’s when it becomes art. Art is messy and dirty when it pours out of you.”

Ushio Shinohara

“We are like two flowers in one pot. It’s difficult. Sometimes we don’t get enough nutrients for both of us. But when everything goes well, we become two beautiful flowers.”

Noriko Shinohara

FILM FACTS:

- Director Zachary Heinzerling visited Ushio and Noriko over 100 times to film their lives.
- Noriko and Ushio speak Japanese throughout most of the film, but director Zachary Heinzerling speaks no Japanese. This allowed him to act more like a fly on the wall. He only understood the conversations once they were translated.
- Zachary Heinzerling spent 5 years making the film, but only really used footage from the last year of filming. By then, the Shinoharas had become more comfortable with the camera, so their reactions were more authentic than in earlier interviews.
- Ushio has been featured in exhibitions nearly every year since his career-making 1955 Tokyo Metropolitan Museum show. Most of his solo exhibitions have been in Japanese galleries, with group shows at galleries in New York, LA, and parts of Europe. His work has been chosen for the public collections of dozens of museums in Japan, as well the MOMA in New York.
- In 1973 when Ushio and Noriko met, he was a rising star in the art-world, a heavy drinker, and not yet divorced from a woman in Japan who was raising their two sons. He was so poor he had to work with discarded cardboard and had trouble paying his \$100 monthly rent.
- Ushio is 21 years older than Noriko, and Noriko is 21 years older than their son, Alex. She became pregnant soon after meeting Ushio.
- Just after giving birth, Noriko would carry Alex around while negotiating the rent with their landlord. “Our landlord would be smoking a cigar and acting big, but he would be putty in the hands of this woman holding her baby.”
- Since Noriko’s U.S. visa had expired, marrying Ushio was a way of legalizing her immigrant status. She did so and became trapped in his tumultuous life. “I could have had ‘happily ever after,’” she said.
- Cutie began to appear in Noriko’s drawings around 2003, after someone called her “Cutie” at a grocery store. She’d just started wearing her hair in braids, as she does in the film.
- The Shinoharas’ apartment and studio are located in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY. DUMBO stands for “Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass.”
- CUTIE AND THE BOXER won a number of awards, including the Best Director at Sundance Film Festival 2013, 2nd place in the Audience Awards at Tribeca Film Festival 2013, and was nominated for an Oscar in 2014 for Best Documentary Feature Film.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be moved by Noriko and Ushio’s story and discuss the joys and challenges of love and self-expression.
2. Research the backgrounds of artists or creative individuals who inspire you. What unique story do their lives tell, and how can their stories impact your life?
3. Consider if there are any passions you have not given time or space to because life or family took over. Give yourself some time to explore those interests once again. You might discover untapped potential.
4. Tell your own story in a way that you find inspiring and true to who you are. You can write it down or make a painting, movie, or song. Noriko felt she truly found her voice when she started Cutie series.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.