



My Kid Could Paint That Discussion Guide

Director: Amir Bar-Lev

Year: 2007

Time: 82 min

You might know this director from:

Happy Valley (2014)

12-12-12 (2013)

Re:Generation (2011)

The Tillman Story (2010)

Fighter (2000)

FILM SUMMARY

“What is art?” is a question for the ages. A masterpiece to one person may appear a canvas of scrap to another, and many schools of thought have sprung up around the notion of what defines art. When Marla Olmstead, a four-year-old from Binghamton, New York, exploded onto the contemporary art scene in 2004, she reignited the art world’s debate and had everyone from her gallerist to the filmmaker questioning which way was up.

Director Amir Bar-Lev first read about Marla in a “New York Times” article, and the subject matter (more than the subject herself) had him questioning the field of abstract art. When he contacted her parents about making a documentary on their daughter’s art and the effect it was having on the international art community, he set out to dig beneath the surface of the pandemonium surrounding little Marla.

Events transpired quickly. Marla went from her kitchen table to the galleries of New York City, swept up in a media storm at whirlwind speed. Bar-Lev became a trusted member of the family amidst the blindingly rapid rise to fame, a trust he never imagined would be tested, as he documented her journey.

But the bubble soon popped, with the media questioning the authenticity of Marla’s art in a piece on “60 Minutes.” In the words of journalist Elizabeth Cohen, [The media] is like a hungry monster. It can’t get fed enough.” Thus devouring the reputation and future success of Marla that monster tore her family down as quickly as it had built them up, with Bar-Lev struggling to right the wrongs and clean up a sticky situation.

Left to decipher the truth, Bar-Lev produces an emotionally charged documentary, tripping through the multi-colored world of contemporary art and the media machine that drives it, questioning his own work along the way.

FILM THEMES

A regular kid from Anywhere, U.S.A., Marla set the art world on fire when she began exhibiting at the age of 3, raising questions on the nature of art, the power of media, and the role of the documentary filmmaker.

WHAT IS ART?

When a four-year-old girl blasts onto the international art scene and is swiftly compared to Picasso, questions arise. Just what is art? What bestows a certain painting with an astronomical value, while others are left by the wayside? If a young child is capable of creating an artwork fit to hang beside the work of masters, what are the standards of modern art and who is drawing the lines worth millions? With her childish painting sessions and playful indifference, Marla sparked a heated debate, reigniting the fiery divide between the old and new schools of thought.

CHILD PRODIGY

The moment the art community took an interest in her work, Marla was branded a “child prodigy,” a heavily loaded label that functions as both a blessing and a curse. How fascinated we are with the notion of a child masquerading as an adult, capable of creating what only the very capable of us can manage. Through her innocence, her unadulterated concept of the world and all it can, could, and should behold, Marla shone a light on the values perpetrated in the grown-up world. Likewise, the glory that accompanied the prodigy title was also accompanied by a flip side, a destructive monster robbing Marla of, what journalist Elizabeth Cohen called, “one of those inalienable rights to just be a child.” Being great came at a great cost.

MANIPULATIVE MEDIA

Journalist Elizabeth Cohen explained, “The New York Times picked up the story. It was like somebody had ignited a match under a fuse and it started to burn.” But just what did the media pick up? The story of Marla Olmstead, a young girl from a certain town in a certain state with a certain family constellation and a knack for painting. The media gnashed its greedy teeth not into the art, but rather scrapped around for a sensational story line, an attractive tale to fill on-screen minutes and newspaper columns. The media thrives on the incredulous, and in order to maintain public interest must ensure the story shifts, as “60 Minutes” so craftily displayed.

THE DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

Once the “60 Minutes” episode aired and doubt had been injected into Marla’s credibility, director Bar-Lev declared, “This documentary has become something different.” Rather than being able to maintain a playful distance, displaying the story free from personal conjecture, he was forced to adopt an angle. The story had taken on two distinct sides, and Bar-Lev could no longer remain an innocent bystander capturing events on film. What is the role of the documentarian: to capture a story or tell a story? Every person has their own authenticity, their angle, their hunt for the truth, and the storyteller is as much a part of the story as the subjects themselves, coloring the events with his particular lens.

“Once you measure something, you alter it.”

Laura Olmstead, mother

“There is some assumption that art has an obligation to explain itself to you. If it doesn’t, somehow it’s the art’s fault.”

Michael Kimmelman, journalist

“Money is the ultimate distorting thing.”

Michael Kimmelman, journalist

FILM FACTS:

- MY KID COULD PAINT THAT premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.
- Director Bar-Lev first read about Marla Olmstead in a “New York Times” article in 2004, and contacted her parents on the telephone, stating that he was interested in making a film on the nature of modern art and what constitutes art in general. The first footage he shot for the film was at Marla’s opening exhibition at Brunelli Fine Arts in Binghamton, New York, in late August 2004. The “60 Minutes” piece that turned the story on its head appeared in February 2005. Bar-Lev shot the last footage for the film in August 2005, just one year after Marla’s first gallery exhibition.
- Bar-Lev had a playful relationship with Marla and her brother Zane and stated that many shots were ruined when the children “broke the fourth wall” between subject and filmmaker.
- During the film’s premiere at Sundance, director Bar-Lev borrowed six of Marla’s paintings from collectors and hung them in a gallery in Park City. After the film was screened, people offered record-breaking prices for the pieces, up to \$40,000 each.
- The Olmsteads considered Bar-Lev a friend, the only journalist they welcomed into their home. Towards the end of filming, Bar-Lev hired a new cameraman to film Marla and remained in the car so that she wouldn’t be distracted.
- As of 2015, the most to have ever been paid for a single painting is \$300 million, for Paul Gauguin’s “When Will You Marry.” The most to have been paid for a Jackson Pollock painting is \$140 million, when his “No.5, 1948” sold in 2006. During her 2004–05 rise to fame, Marla sold more than \$300,000 worth of paintings.
- According to child psychology research, the definition of a child prodigy is a child under the age of 10 who produces work at the level of an adult expert. The term “Wunderkind” (wonder child in German) is sometimes used to refer to a child prodigy. Famous child prodigies include Pablo Picasso, who painted “Picador” at the age of 8, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who had his musical debut at the age of 4, and Blaise Pascal, who wrote a mathematical treatise at 9.
- Marla Olmstead’s paintings classified as abstract expressionist works of art. The field of abstract expressionism developed in the 1940s in New York City and was the first specific American art movement to achieve notoriety on the international scene.
- Jackson Pollock was a major figure in the field of abstract expressionism. Born in Wyoming in 1912, he died in a car accident in 1956. His wife, Lee Krasner, was also an artist, and maintained his legacy long after his death.
- Anthony Brunelli continues painting and running his gallery in Binghamton, New York.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Explore** director Bar-Lev’s style of documentary filmmaking by watching one of his other films, including TROUBLE THE WATER which he co-produced, and THE TILLMAN STORY, which he directed.
2. **Read** “The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Art of Life and Vice Versa,” a book by Michael Kimmelman, the New York Times’ art critic featured in the film, in which he addresses the life lessons we access through art.
3. **Learn** how to get involved with the [New York Foundation for the Arts](#) (NYFA) that offers financial support to emerging artists.
4. **Donate** to the continued work of [Kartemquin Films](#): “a revered resource within the film community on issues of fair use, ethics, story and civic discourse.”

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.