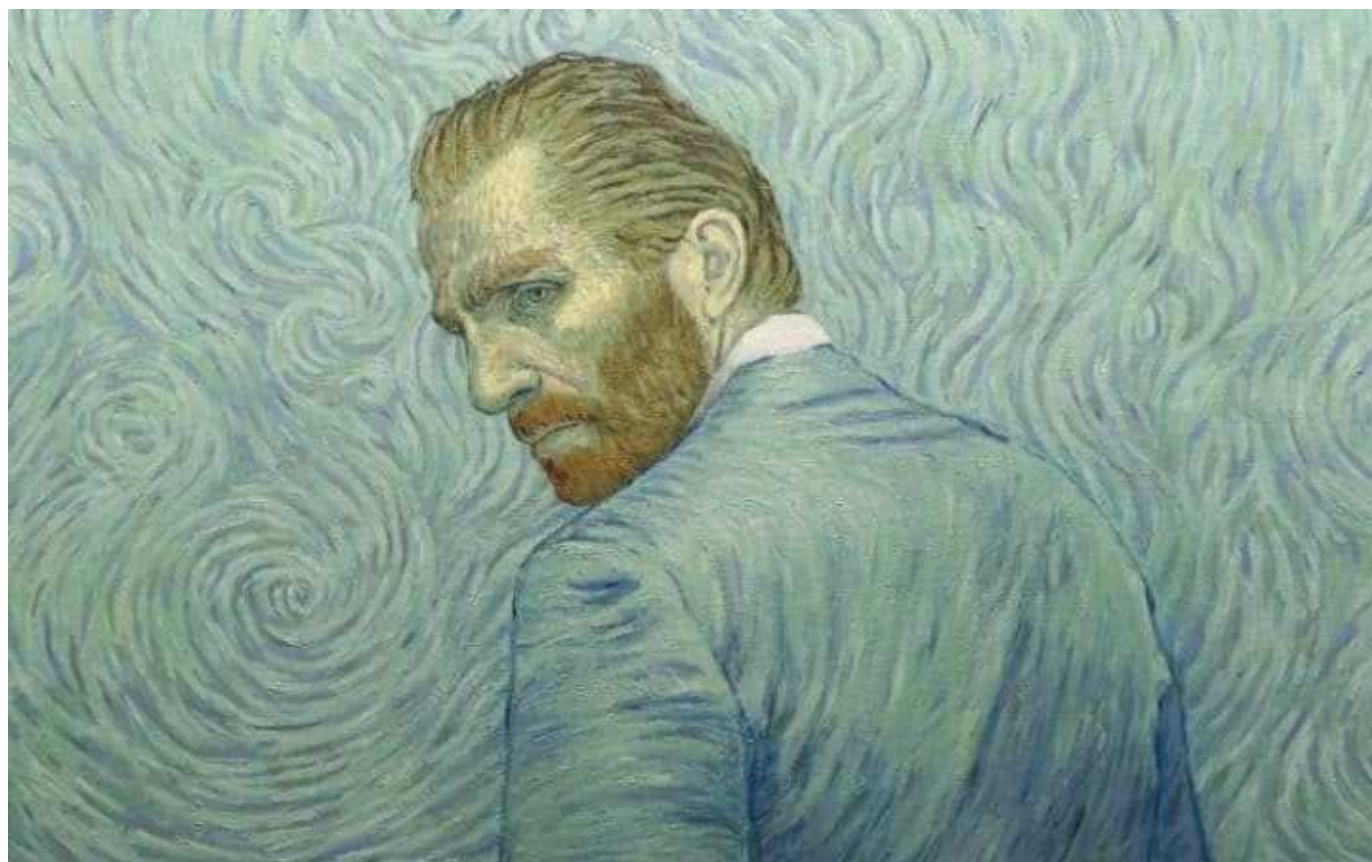


Van Gogh, a new film and a tantalising question: was Vincent murdered?

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An animated feature about Vincent van Gogh's mysterious suicide is in production

By [Florence Waters](#)

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If Van Gogh had made a movie, what would it have looked like? Florence Waters talks to the creators of a new film that tears up the rule book of animation

In a science park outside the Polish city of Gdansk, the Oscar-winning British animator Hugh Welchman is working on a film unlike any that has been seen before. All 52,400 frames in *Loving Vincent*, an animated feature about Vincent Van Gogh's mysterious suicide, will be hand-painted

in oils by a professional artists in the Dutchman's distinctive style.

Welchman – who won his Oscar in 2008 for the short *Peter and the Wolf* – says he knew from the outset that his vision for *Loving Vincent* was "completely insane". But six years on, it looks like he and his team of animators might actually pull it off.

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On the day that I visit, Welchman's studio is home to an army of neo-Van Goghs, working flat out to finish the film in time for an anticipated Christmas release. It's not the hi-tech, computer-centric animation factory you might expect. Instead I find myself walking, stunned, along monastic rows of oil and linseed-infused cells, each one a little artist's atelier in which exquisite labours of love are being committed to canvas.

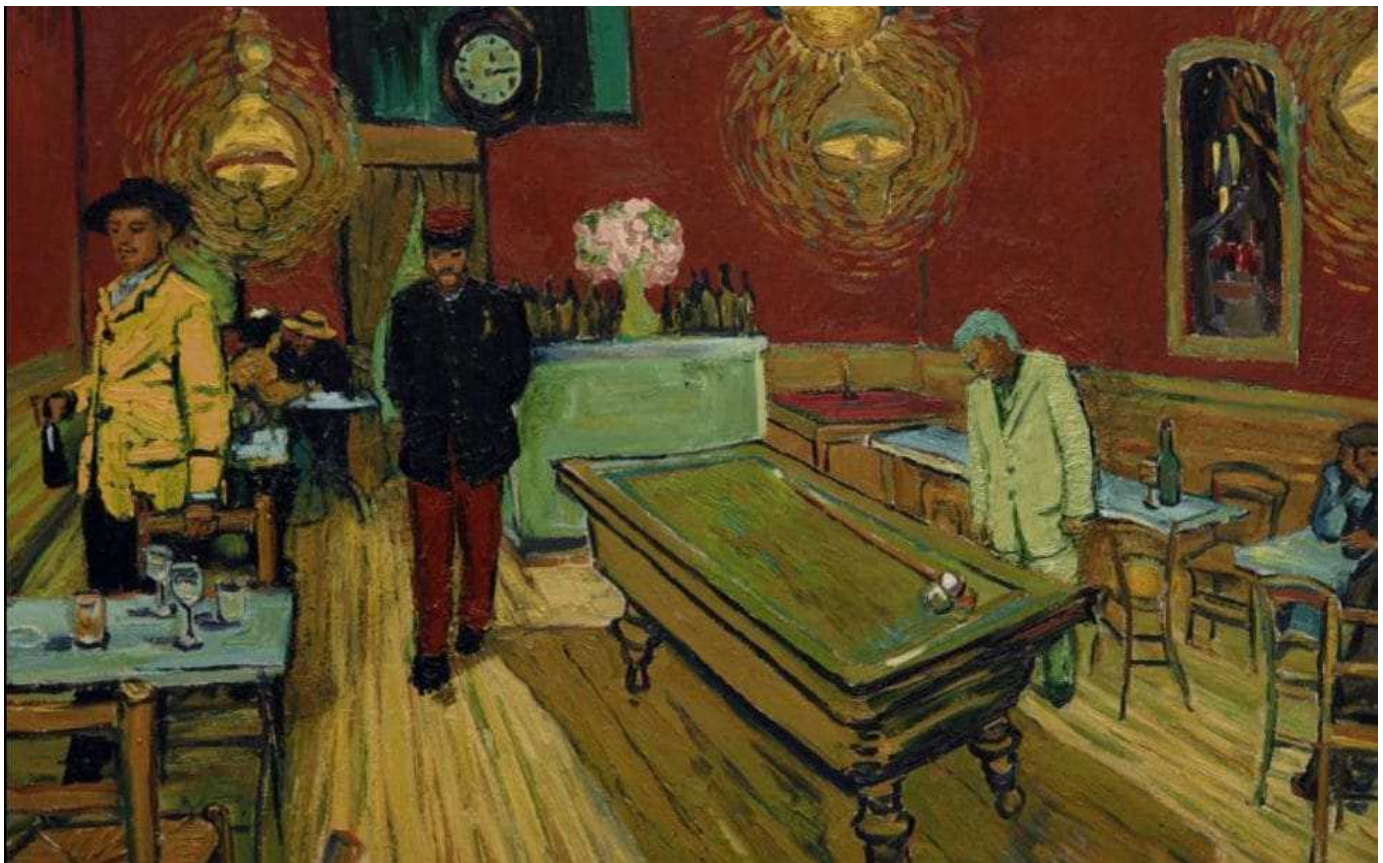
“One artist proudly shows me his past four months' work: eight seconds of film”

Inside one, I find Polish artist Bartosz Armusieicz working on a copy of *Starry Night*, one of the most immediately recognisable of the 130 Van Gogh paintings that will feature in the film. The opening scene, Armusieicz explains, will swoop down from the heavens, past the moon and stars, through the swirling blue and violet clouds of *Starry Night*, and eventually home in on a house in Arles, where a fight is taking place. By the time it is completed, the creation of this single sequence will have taken him and two other artists a year and a half to create.





From life to oil: footage of actors being filmed in a studio for 'Love Vincent' is then projected on to boards and then painted over



Owing to the complex pattern of brushstrokes that make up Van Gogh's sky, Armusieicz explains, he cannot simply adapt an existing painting in order to create the film's next frame. To maintain the clarity of the lines, and for them to move in a believable way, each frame has to be created from scratch. Overall, the film will use more than 3,000 litres of oil paint.

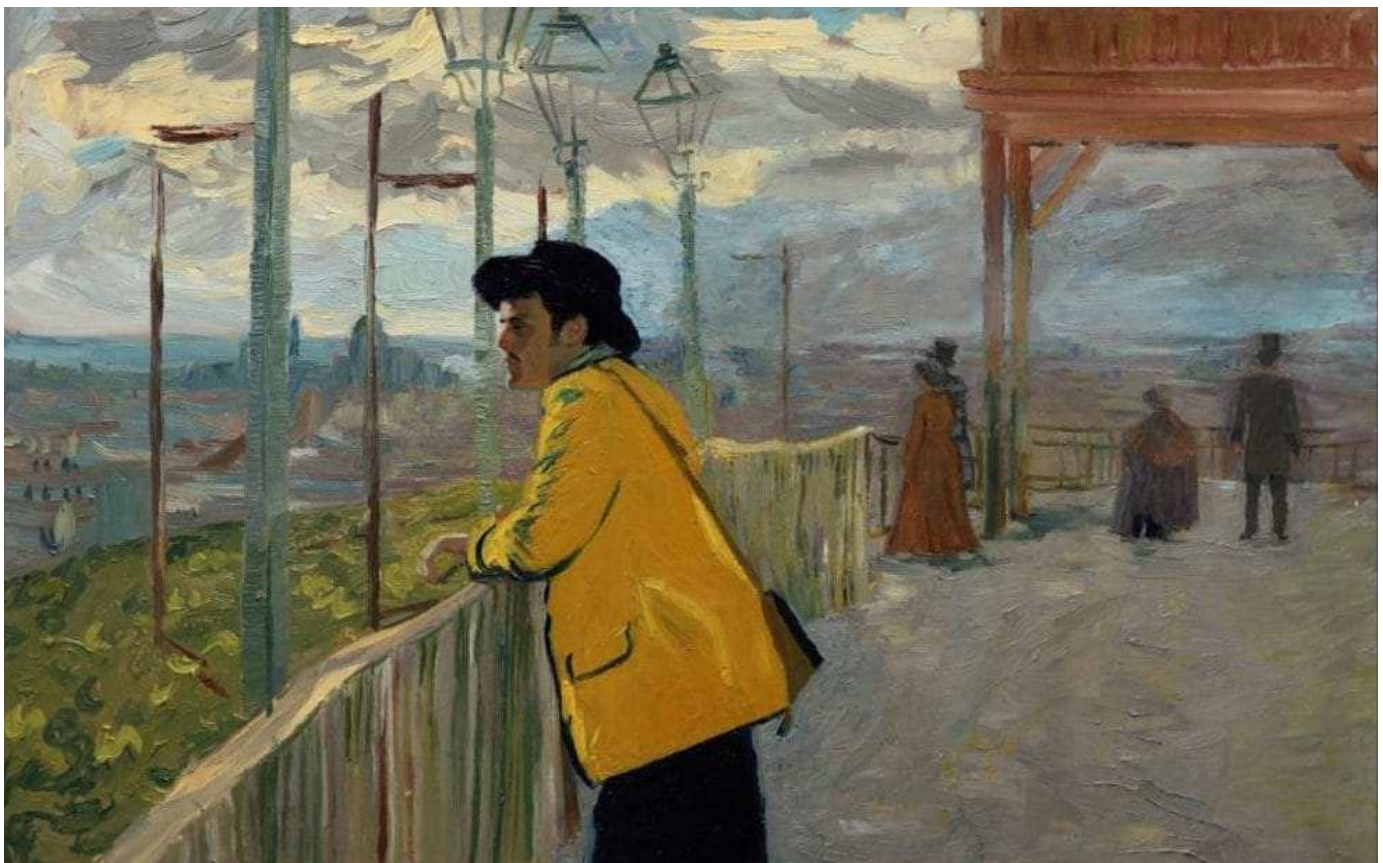
Proudly, Armusieicz shows me his past four months' work (about eight seconds of footage). The camera moves fluidly through the landscape, but the light catches here and there, animating the scene in a delightfully staccato way – it feels reassuringly solid, yet alive. I've not experienced anything like it before.

The film's production process, pioneered by the 46-year-old Welchman, is many-layered. The first step was to shoot in Britain against a green-screen background with a cast of actors – among them

Helen McCrory, Douglas Booth, Poldark's Aidan Turner, Saoirse Ronan, Chris O'Dowd and Jerome Flynn – chosen because of their resemblance to real-life figures that Van Gogh painted. The footage is then projected frameby-frame onto an artist's board, painted over in the style of Van Gogh and then photographed before the board is scraped clean for the next frame.

It was Welchman's wife, the Polish animator Dorota Kobiela, who first came up with the idea for the film. Kobiela had been interested in Van Gogh since her college days studying painting in Warsaw, and was particularly curious about the many conflicting accounts of the Dutchman's last days. On July 29 1890, two days after shooting himself in the abdomen in the fields of Auvers-sur-Oise, a suburb of Paris, Van Gogh died from his injuries.

Why did this ambitious young artist kill himself just as he was creating some of his finest work? What was the state of his mental health, and what was going on in his private life? "No one knows exactly why Van Gogh killed himself," Welchman, says. "And if anyone tells you they do, then they're being a one-eyed kid. He didn't leave a suicide note; he didn't write a letter; there's no first-hand evidence given by Doctor Gachet [his physician]. Vincent and his brother Theo spent several hours together before he died, and Vincent was fully lucid. But Theo never relayed in writing anything about the conversations that they had."



Kobiela first told Welchman about her ambition to paint a short animation about Van Gogh's last days in 2008, the year that they met. "I fell in love with Dorota, then I fell in love with her project," he says. So together they began to read every biography they could find of an artist Welchman describes as "a rock star, the Kurt Cobain of the 19th century".

"We had to have a good story," he adds. "If the story is no good, no matter how beautiful it is, people are going to resent sitting there for 90 minutes."

They came up with a noirish detective story (featuring real people Van Gogh knew), set a year after the artist's death. The film takes in the various conflicting accounts given by residents of Auvers. It also explores the not-impossible theory that Van Gogh was murdered by René Secrétan, a local 16 year-old who enjoyed ridiculing the quiet, anti-social artist, and went as far as admitting to having given him the gun.



Labour of love: some of the 91 artists working on the film's 52,400 frames

Welchman admits that finding artists with the necessary skills to pull off this feat of storytelling wasn't easy. Four thousand Polish painters applied for the job, but only a small fraction made the cut. The members of the current, 91-strong team come from all over the world and are spread out across three animation studios in Athens, Wroclaw and Gdansk.

Surely, I suggest, no one will notice if they end up generating one or two frames on a computer? "Of course they will," says Welchman, smiling. "Painters are individuals. Even the mistakes are not mistakes. They're variants in interpretations."

Experts from the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam have given the Loving Vincent team detailed insights into the artist's techniques – but being an exceptional artist isn't enough when it comes to making an animated film. "The painters also have to learn to act," says Welchman. "None of the painters in the team has any animation experience. They have to realise it's not a pretty painting,

it's a performance." He tells me that one of the team's most talented painters had to leave the project because "he was only painting individual paintings".

Loving Vincent - Trailer 2016 (web)



In 2012, Welchman and Kobiela spent a year working out their initial vision with four painters, then took some sample footage to Ivan Mactaggart and David Parfitt at Trademark Films, the production company behind such successes as *Shakespeare in Love* and *My Week with Marilyn*.

"I told them we don't do animation," says Mactaggart. "They said, 'Have a look at this trailer.' After which I said, 'All right, now we do animation. Where do we sign?' " Trademark helped Welchman develop the script, find a star cast and fund it on a budget of \$5.5 million (£3.8 million) – which is impressively modest when compared to the \$200 million (£140 million) budgets of computer animated animations such as Disney's *Frozen*. Mactaggart believes that the project has been helped at every step of the way by the quality of the painted footage.





"Saoirse Ronan said she'd never seen anything like it. Jerome Flynn agreed to come on board when I told him we're going to make his character look like a painting that sold for \$83 million [£58 million]." Public response has been encouraging, too. Earlier this year, when an unofficial trailer was leaked on Facebook, it was shared by two million people in 24 hours. Within a few weeks, the trailer had been watched 150 million times.

Although distribution deals have already been agreed for the film in both Asian and European territories, *Loving Vincent* is yet to secure a distributor – or, by extension, a release date – in this country. Welchman is not worried. All of that can wait until the last lick of paint is committed to film.



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