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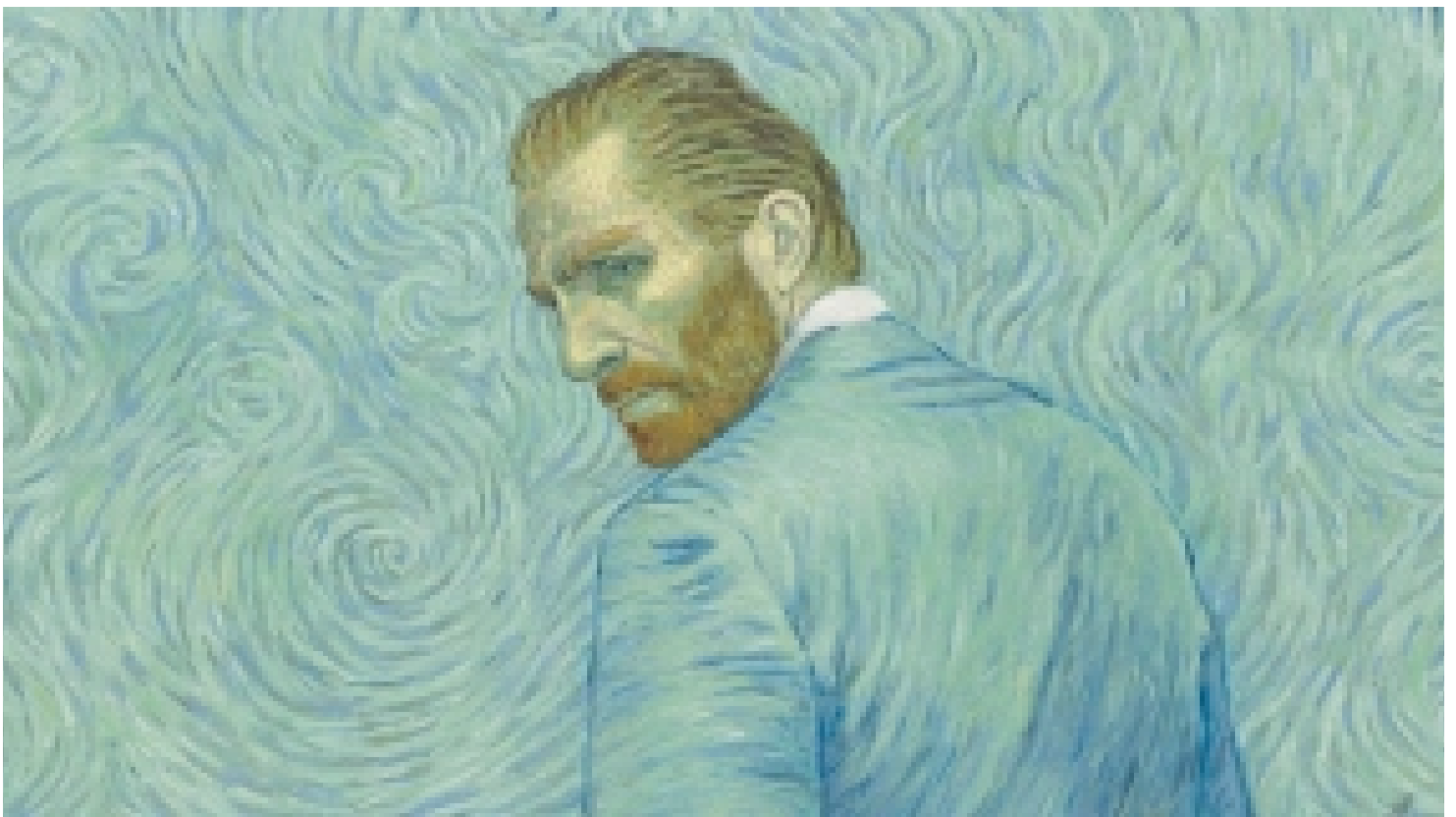
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Jun 18, 2017 3:46pm PT

Film Review: 'Loving Vincent'

This one-of-a-kind Vincent van Gogh biopic appropriates the artist's vibrant impasto style, using animated oil paintings to examine the mystery of his last days.

By **Peter Debruge** ▾



Stand in front of a painting by Vincent van Gogh for more than five minutes, and your brain starts to react in strange ways. Even today, more than a century after the artist's death, the brushstrokes pack an almost psychedelic energy, vibrating with an intensity that seems to have sprung directly from van Gogh's tortured personal life. Now imagine staring at one of these paintings for 90 minutes straight — or crazier still, watching a series of them actually start to move.

Such was the vision Polish animator [Dorota Kobiela](#) had for "Loving Vincent," a truly awe-inspiring portrait of the great Dutch artist that boasts the distinction of being "the world's first fully painted

feature film.” That means every one of the nearly 65,000 frames in this near-lunatic labor of love was rendered by hand with oil paints, following a style intended to mimic that of the master — which has precisely the effect you might imagine, pulling audiences into the delirious, hyper-sensual world suggested by van Gogh’s oeuvre.

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The artist himself has been dead a year when the story begins, so we aren’t seeing things through his eyes so much as in ersatz homage to his style, where bold colors and thick, energetic strokes of paint transform traditional live-action footage into living tableaux, rendered all the richer by Clint Mansell’s gorgeous score. It’s an impressive conceit, and one that allows us to float through van Gogh’s “Starry Night Over the Rhone” or pop in for a drink at the “Café Terrace at Night” — just two of nearly 130 actual paintings that Kobiela and co-writer/director Hugh Welchman weave into the relatively conventional detective story (of all things!) that frames this one-of-a-kind work of art.

Most people know that van Gogh cut off his own ear, but fewer recall — and no one knows for certain — the precise explanation for his death. In 1890, while staying in Auvers-sur-Oise, France, the tormented artist died of complications to a (likely self-inflicted) gunshot wound to the stomach. Van Gogh is reported to have taken credit for shooting himself, insisting, “Do not accuse anybody, it is I that wished to commit suicide,” but there have always been doubts: Was he covering for someone else? Could the curious injury have been an accident? And if it truly had been a suicide attempt, what pushed him to such a desperate act?

Needless to say, Kobiela and Welchman won’t be the ones to solve this mystery, and yet, they enlist a handsome young man — Armand Roulin (Douglas Booth), son of the postmaster with the wild-bramble beard (Chris O’Dowd), both of whom sat for several van Gogh portraits — to serve as a sort of amateur detective. Clad in the same bright yellow blazer forever immortalized on canvas, Armand becomes improbably infatuated with the case, setting out to answer the question, “How does a man go from being absolutely calm to suicidal in six weeks?”

Traveling from Arles (the French city where van Gogh’s madness nearly got the better of him) to Auvers-sur-Oise (where he died) to interview anyone who might have insight into the artist’s death, Armand has been tasked with delivering an envelope from the artist to his brother, Theo van Gogh, though the tragedy deepens when he learns that Theo also passed away. Although history immortalizes Vincent van Gogh as a kind of mad genius, the filmmakers literally try to craft a more nuanced and sensitive portrait of the artist, who often signed his letters, “Your loving Vincent” — from which the movie’s title derives.

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But “Loving Vincent” could just as easily describe the state of runaway fanaticism it takes to inspire such a tribute, which demanded nearly seven years of painstaking work to pull off. The resulting portrait playfully reinterprets the idea of Impressionism, synthesizing the often contradictory angles

from which his acquaintances saw the artist (or vice versa) into a kind of composite that ranges from the wild, fantastic colors used to capture paint supplier Pere Tanguy (John Sessions) to the delicate pastels he used to render the enigmatic young Marguerite (Saoirse Ronan), daughter of Doctor Gachet (Jerome Flynn), the man Armand is most desperate to interview. (Actor Bill Thomas plays another physician, the borderline-silly Dr. Mazery, who introduces biographers Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith’s controversial theory that someone else shot van Gogh.)

Mere photography couldn’t possibly capture van Gogh’s paradoxical nature, and indeed, previous biopics have tended to pick one facet and stick to it. By contrast, this one embraces his complexity, withholding a clear view of Vincent (played by Robert Gulaczyk) until the very end — a tactic that reinforces the notion that we can only truly understand him through the work he left behind.

And yet, lovely as the animated-painting technique is to behold, the way they go about it introduces a peculiar problem: The filmmakers have cast real actors, many of them recognizable, to bring these characters to life, and because their approach involves a kind of rotoscoping (where the frames are painted over live-action footage — a variation on the way Richard Linklater tackled “Waking Life,” or Walt Disney modeled Snow White’s dancing), the style of painting it requires is philosophically the *opposite* of van Gogh’s.

Although this technique isn’t “cheating” per se, it shackles the crew of 120-odd oil painters to what the camera sees, functioning as a kind of high-end PhotoShop filter as the individual artists are tasked with applying a van Gogh-like impasto to the underlying reference footage. In so doing, the directors settle for superficial texture, while sacrificing the playfulness that van Gogh applied to framing, perspective and capturing the luminous, almost radioactive aura of his subjects. Even stranger are the flashback scenes, which are painted in shades of black and white, when another approach — such as loose, draft-like pencil sketches — might have been more intuitive.

With any luck, audiences won’t dwell overly on the particulars of how the effect was achieved, concentrating instead on the content of the story, which brings a poetic sense of tragedy to the last act of van Gogh’s life, and fresh insight into the kind of man he was. “Loving Vincent” may exist as a showcase for its technique, but it’s the sensitivity the film shows toward its subject that ultimately distinguishes this particular *oeuvre* from the countless bad copies that already litter the world’s flea markets. To the extent that van Gogh’s style permitted him to capture a deeper sense of truth, he makes a noble model for the filmmakers to follow.

COMMENTS

Reviewed at Annecy Intl. Animation Film Festival (competing), June 14, 2017. Running time: 95 MIN.

Production: (U.K.-Poland — Animated) A Good Deed Entertainment (in U.S.) release of a RBF Prods. presentation of a Breakthru Films, Trademark Films production, with the support of CETA, Odra Film, Silver Reel, Cinema and Management Group, European Capital of Culture Wrocław 2016, MEDIA. Producers: Hugh Welchman, Sean M. Bobbitt, Ivan Mactaggart. Executive producers: David Parfitt, Laurie Ubben, Charlotte Ubben.

Crew: Directors, writers: Dorota Kobiela, Hugh Welchman. Camera (color): Tristan Oliver, Lukasz Zal. Editors: Justyna Wierszynska, Kobiela. Music: Clint Mansell.

With: Douglas Booth, Robert Gulaczyk, Eleanor Tomlinson, Jerome Flynn, Saoirse Ronan, Chris O'Dowd, John Sessions, Aidan Turner, Helen McCrory.

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