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Scene

Artist prefers one blonde

Billy Pappas, star of a documentary, spent eight years perfecting his work of Marilyn Monroe

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Billy Pappas spent nearly 8 1/2 years on one drawing. He knows about obsession.

"I can't just be an artist with modest success," he says about halfway through *Waiting for Hockney*, a documentary showing at this weekend's Maryland Film Festival, chronicling the near-decade he spent trying to commit a single image of Marilyn Monroe to paper. "I've got to be Michelangelo."

How well Pappas compares to Michelangelo is for others, and for posterity, to decide. But *Waiting for Hockney* certainly paints a portrait of an artist with a singular, unique vision, and Pappas was willing to endure almost anything to realize it.



To its great credit, director Julie Checkoway's film goes beyond the creative process. Its title refers to Pappas' quest for an audience with artist and art theorist David Hockney, who has spent years thinking and writing about art's ability to reflect reality. In the film, Pappas views an audience with Hockney as his grail, as the thing that will give him, and his Marilyn, instant credibility. To put it in terms the real Marilyn would have understood, meeting Hockney would make Billy Pappas a star.

Says Checkoway, a former English teacher at Gilman School now working as an arts reporter for the Salt Lake Tribune, "I wanted to find out, what would convince someone to devote himself so profoundly and without reservation to a cause that might or might not yield the result that he wished."

A native New Yorker, Pappas, 40, moved to the Baltimore area at age 9. The second child of loving parents who continue to support his dream of setting the art world on its ear (even if they admit to being befuddled by it occasionally), he is no raving lunatic with a pencil in his hand and a faraway look in his eyes, oblivious to everything but his own talent and mission. Personable if intense, he relishes talking about the challenge he took on, and stands back like a proud father whenever his Marilyn is being viewed.

It's a good thing he allows the viewer space, too, because his work does not lend itself to casual inspection. Extraordinarily detailed, each hair, each skin pore painstakingly captured, his drawing -- and drawing seems like such a weak description of what Pappas has produced -- seems almost three-dimensional. It's reality replicated, reproduced in a way that may truly be the next best thing to being there.

"My goal for this piece was to take realism, naturalism, and set a new precedent," Pappas says over the phone from New York, where the film premiered last weekend at the Tribeca Film Festival. Paintings, drawings, etchings, even photographs, he says, "were never realistic enough."

Earlier in the week, during a stopover in Baltimore, Pappas tried to explain what he was after. "What do I mean by not realistic enough?" he asks his audience of one, as Marilyn stares out from across a table. "If you would turn your head and look at me for a second."

He stares intently for a few moments. "When I look at you, I look at this part of your nose, the edge of your hair, the back of your hair. As I look at you, there is something I see. And I know that you see the same thing when you look at me."

"But translated into traditional, two-dimensional representation, I couldn't see that anymore. When I got close to the image, there was too much falling apart, and it became a clumsy assemblage of marks."

The goal, he says, was to take away the brushstrokes of conventional painting, the fine lines of traditional drawing, the dot patterns that come together to form even the highest-definition photography. Short of breaking it down to the cellular level, it's impossible to see anything in a real person's hair beyond hair. That's the sort of reality he hoped to capture in his work.

Not that he thought, at first, that it would take him eight years to do so. The Calvert Hall (Class of 1985) and Maryland Institute College of Art graduate had spent as many as two years before on single drawings. He suspected Marilyn, which he based on a famous Richard Avedon photo of an unsmiling, almost blank Monroe, might take a little longer.

But that was before he found himself spending hours, days, on a single strand of hair, before he started hiring models so he could study their faces in the minutest detail, before he had to invent a contraption that would help keep his arm in one place for the hours at a time he'd be working on a section of canvas the size of the letter your eye just passed over.

Waiting for Hockney captures all of that work, and more. Today, five years after completing his portrait, Billy Pappas and Marilyn are still an item. He has, he says, a few prospective buyers lined up (he won't say how much they're offering). He has, he believes, at least one more Marilyn in him; this time, he hopes to do a portrait on commission. Maybe he'll even be able to streamline the process.

"I think I should be able to do the next one in about six years," he says, adding with a laugh, "This is a young person's game."

"Waiting for Hockney" screens at 2:30 p.m. Saturday as part of the 10th annual Maryland Film Festival. Information: 410-752-8083 or md-filmfest.com.
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