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## It's 'Rocky' With An Easel

### Outsiders on the Silver Screen



An untitled piece on recycled material by outsider artist Lois Wilson. Courtesy Branyon Productions, Ltd.

By  Christian House

freelance arts and books writer for the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph

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Capra, Spielberg or Kubrick could have come up with the concept of the outsider artist. It's the classic tale of the talented interloper struggling against the odds—just played out in the art world. It's *Rocky with an easel*.

Numerous dramas and documentaries have captured their tortured stories. Perhaps, the most famous film about an outsider artist is Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, about an artificial man who lives in the rafters of a ruined mansion and has blades for fingers (which he uses to great effect on the local shrubbery). This Michelangelo of the box hedge—a pasty-faced Johnny Depp—finds love while snipping away at his surreal privets. He's so haunted and hounded. But oh, what topiary!



Steve Carrell as Mark Hogancamp in *Welcome to Marwen* (2018). Image © Universal Pictures and DreamWorks Pictures

Caroline Thompson, the writer of *Edward Scissorhands*, also scripted Robert Zemeckis's *Welcome to Marwen* (2018), which blends outsider art with toys and is based on a true story. Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and memory loss after being attacked by a gang of men who beat him up after he revealed he liked cross-dressing, New Yorker Mark Hogancamp (played by Steve Carell) created a 1:6 scale model wartime-era Belgian village in his yard as therapy. He colonized it with gun-toting Barbie dolls—altered to look like people he knew.

Hogancamp's photographs of this vast diorama became a sensation. The film, based on Jeff Malmberg's documentary *Marwencol* (2010)—the name of the fictitious village—looks at the artist through the aperture of his own rabbit hole, immersing the viewer in an alternative reality. CGI brings the dolls to life. It's pretty art-house for a movie by the director of *Back to the Future*.

## Social lepers



Nicole Kidman as Diane Arbus in *Fur* (2006). Image © Picturehouse/Kobal/REX/Shutterstock

Outsider art is oxymoronic—aren't artists meant to have unconventional perceptions? The term is rooted in a cocktail of snobbery, misogyny, racism, canonical thinking and vested interests. To have outsiders you need insiders. And, of course, Hollywood does like to take on the establishment.

In *Fur* (2006), Nicole Kidman plays Diane Arbus, the outsiders' outsider, a photographer who snapped every outcast imaginable, from giants and dwarves to the mad, bad and dead. Arbus was the daughter of a wealthy Manhattan retail magnate, the wife of an advertising photographer and, privately, a fan of society's fringes.

*Fur* is not a biopic but rather an "imaginary portrait". The director Steven Shainberg eroticizes Arbus, having her fall for a hairy circus performer who has moved in upstairs (a very downy Robert Downey Jr). It's kind of a burlesque *Beauty and the Beast*.

On film, autodidactic artists tend to live in attics, cabins and hovels. The fictitious painter in Phil Morrison's *Junebug* (2005) works out of a shed in rural North Carolina, where the old curmudgeon produces grotesque scenes of the American Civil War—"a sort of Hieronymus Bosch meets LS Lowry", observed Peter Bradshaw in *The Guardian*. The gallerist who wants to sign him—a crisp Embeth Davidtz—soon realizes that her discovery is borderline deranged. Sometimes they are outsiders for a reason.

## No pain, no gain

You don't get much more marginalized than if you're rural, female, poor and ill. But, as two biopics of real-life artists highlight, talent can still triumph (if only briefly).



Maud Lewis, *Chickadees* Date N/A. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, all rights reserved.

In *Séraphine* (2008), Yolande Moreau plays Séraphine Louis, the French housekeeper turned naïve painter who used pig's blood to create the distinctive rouge in her fantastical floral compositions. Briefly feted in the 1920s, she ended her days in a psychiatric hospital. Martin Provost's dramatization won seven César awards—the French Oscars—including for best film of the year.

A one-room hut on the coast of Nova Scotia—complete with chickens—is a long way from the art districts of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. Yet this is where Maud Lewis created some of the most celebrated Canadian folk art of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a story deftly told in *Maudie* (2016), directed by Aisling Walsh.

Sally Hawkins plays the chronically arthritic artist who married a fish peddler (Ethan Hawke) to escape her claustrophobic family. Lewis painted almost every surface in their simple home with images of nature that were Technicolor in their hues. Hawkins, herself a painter, immersed herself in the role. “The beauty of her performance is that soon you see only Maud,” noted *The New York Times*.

## Posthumously Inside

Obscure during their lifetime, many outsider artists have made a posthumous mark. Alexandra Branyon's documentary *Treasures from the Rubble* (2011) is a fascinating portrait of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Alabama folk artist and collector Lois Wilson. She was born and remained in poverty throughout her life, both in the Deep South and in New York, all the while creating assemblages out of found objects and furniture, painting on table legs, drawers and toilet seats.

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“I no longer will allow myself to be a ditto artist, copying other artists' concepts and styles,” Wilson stated. The film captures a rebellious spirit. And one which left a fabulous legacy: her collection of works is now housed in the Fayette Art Museum.





A Vivian Maier self-portrait, from *Finding Vivian Maier* (2014). Courtesy of the Maloof Collection and Sundance Selects.

More puzzling is the story of Vivian Maier, the Chicago nanny whose secret life as a street photographer was only exposed after her death in 2009. With an eye for the tragicomic she photographed the vagabonds, cops, shoppers and hawkers. The feature documentary *Finding Vivian Maier* (2013), directed by John Maloof and Charlie Siskel, explores how she kept her obsession to herself (stashing her film away undeveloped).

How does a director untangle an enigma? By turning it into a detective—or perhaps ghost—story. The film follows the trail of the collector who bought a hoard of 30,000 of Maier's negatives that had been boxed-up at a storage facility sale. Gradually, he realizes the enormity of what he has unearthed.

Maier's character was slippery but it allowed her to focus on her sidewalk subjects. Being an outsider has its benefits. As an admirer tells Edward Scissorhands: "If you had regular hands, you'd be like everyone else."