

“Waste Land”

Vik Muniz is a Brazilian born New York artist whose philosophy of art is expressed early in the film when he explains how to look at a painting. If you stand back from a painting you see the image, be it a landscape or a portrait. But as you move in much closer you become aware of the materials and texture which make up that image. This is exemplified by a series of paintings Muniz did of young children of plantation workers in the Caribbean. He notes how sweet their childhood is but how harsh their life will become once they go to work in the fields. Upon close inspection of the paintings you see how the material he used to portray the children makes the point of how their lives will change.

Muniz’s use of non-traditional materials in expressing his artistic vision is the subject of “Waste Land”, a chronicle of the nearly three years he spent in Rio de Janeiro photographing and interviewing workers who toil daily in Jardim Gramacho, South America’s largest landfill. It is a nightmarish world. Hundreds of workers in sweltering heat swarm over towering mounds of garbage, picking out items which can be recycled as countless avian scavengers circle above them. Not what you would ordinarily think of as a venue for artistic expression. But Muniz has a plan.

One day an old bathtub is in a load of trash and Muniz has an inspiration. He has Tiao, the chief of the worker’s organization, pose in the tub. It is a replication of John-Luis David’s famous painting of the “Death of Marat”. This leads to more workers posing for pictures based on art works found on the walls of art museums. What Muniz then does with these photographs is startling original. Large sheets are placed on the floor of his studio and the photographs are projected onto them. Then every detail of the painting is reproduced using materials from the landfill. With bottles, cans, old shoes, bottle caps, discarded costumes from Rio’s famous carnival and old children’s toys, garbage is turned into art. The resulting work is then photographed and the art world is due for a surprise.

Some of the things that make “Waste Land” such an involving experience are:

The infectious personality of Vic Muniz. A man in love with life.

The searing portrayal of the “favelas” (slums) of Rio. Like their counterparts in Nairobi, Mumbai, Lagos and countless other places, it is a collection of garbage strewn dirt roads, flimsy shacks, primitive sanitation and rampant crime. The thought of having to live in such squalor is unimaginable but the landfill workers have no choice but to make their homes there.

The workers whose histories we learn over the course of the film. Some of them have been working in the landfill since they were 11 years old. They range from Taio, to Zumbi who has educated himself by reading classic books salvaged from the trash, to Irma, a regal Afro-Brazilian woman who cooks meals for the workers. Life may have dealt them a bad hand but it has not eroded their dignity.

Tiao’s trip to London with Muniz where his photograph as Marat is up for sale at a leading auction house. As the bidding steadily goes up Tiao’s face is wreathed in joy and tears stream down his face. You may find yourself similarly moved.

The showing of the photos at Rio’s Museum of Modern Art. Over a million people attended the show, attendance only exceeded by an earlier Picasso exhibit. Seeing the workers looking at their portraits on the wall is a validation of their lives that they could have never imagined.

The Epilogue which recounts what happened to the workers once the project was completed.

(Amazon Prime)