Interview: Director Don Argott Chronicles ‘The Art of the Steal’

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CHICAGO – “The Art of the Steal” is a very telling title. The “art” refers to a multi-billion dollar cache in Philadelphia and the “steal” refers to the powerful government, societal and territorial forces that desire the art. Director Don Argott made the documentary.

Albert C. Barnes was a Philadelphia-based visionary when it came to collecting the art of post-modern impressionism in the early 20th century. Having made a fortune as a drug manufacturer, Barnes turned to art and began to collect the works of Renoir, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and other impressionism masters, long before they became the most valuable and prized items in the art world.

Barnes preferred not to break up his collection and wanted it displayed in a certain way in his small educational foundation in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, several miles from the epicenter of the art scene in Philadephia. This began the struggle, as the wealthy in Philadelphia desired the collection, now worth much more than anyone expected, to reside in the art museums there.

Barnes died in a automobile accident in 1951, and the titanic conflict between the legal wishes of an art collector versus the caretaker, government and monetary forces that desire to move the works elsewhere intensified. Don Argott made a documentary about this conundrum, and in the meantime raises questions regarding the true value of both art and our interactive souls.

Art for Art’s Sake: Albert C. Barnes poses with His Collection from ‘The Art of the Steal’
Photo Credit: MAJ Productions, An IFC Films Release

HollywoodChicago.com interviewed Argott recently, and he shined a light on many of the issues within his film, The Art of the Steal.

HollywoodChicago.com: Albert Barnes was a true visionary who tweaked oligarchs. What would he have thought about the modern day process to steal his artistic collection? I speak specifically of his enemies enabling the support of the state.

Don Argott: He’s rolling over right now. One of the great ironies in this film is that the very people that Barnes despised – the Philadelphia

elite, the cultural elite – are now the very same people that are in control of his art and are basically trying to dismantle it.

HC: The fight over this art is essentially about ownership. What particular madness in culture, in your opinion, has made the ownership of art a property right?

DA: I think there is an entitlement that we have here in America about ownership. It always comes down to 'who owns it?' 'who controls it?' The argument is always that art should be for the masses and response is why isn't it for the masses? The Barnes Foundation is open to the public, it might not be open to the public at the times you want to go, but tough sh*t.

If Albert Barnes said in his will, after I die seal the door and no one else can come in, then I can see where people would have issue with that, wouldn't it be for the greater good if all could see the collection. But the reality is he never intended for people not to see it. He was just serious about his art education philosophy, and he wanted to maintain that, and for the time being it's still being maintained. You can see it. This idea that just because it's not down the street from another big art museum, doesn't mean it's not available to you.

HC: What spark got you involved in this project? Was it an article or other outlet?

DA: Lenny Feinberg, who is the executive producer of the film, came to me. He was a student of the Barnes Foundation about twenty years ago. He's been following the story for years, and I was intrigued by the richness of the situation. He had the idea it would make a great documentary, and he found us to help his carry out that idea.

HC: So Barnes the man was an unusual and extraordinary individual for his times. How do you think his presence in this whole charade contributes to the karma of those in power who seek to destroy people of his ilk?

DA: He was not liked by the wealthy class of Philadelphia, because he frankly didn't like them. He had his own wealth, and what you find with people who have extreme wealth is that they tend to have their own opinions and say whatever they want. And he did. He had a different set of world views, and in a way it was a Republican/Democratic issue, even back then.

Barnes never kept his mouth shut and made very powerful enemies. In a way, that's what came back to haunt him, because after he passed away his longtime nemesis Walter Annenberg came into the picture to say that Barnes was violating his tax status as a non-profit, and we should make it open to the public. If Walter Annenberg and Albert Barnes were great friends, I wouldn't be sitting here, because that was the start of the whole episode.

Don Argott and Patrick McDonald, March 1st, 2010
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HC: This film was also about power struggles within smaller subsets of the community associated with the Barnes collection. What can we learn about the Lincoln University's ambitious individuals [the university was the benefactor of the Foundation after Barnes death] and the institution's eventual sell-out to the state?

DA: Not enough people have been critical of Lincoln University's role in this situation. Maybe that's the fault of those surrounding this and the film, to make them look more like victims. They were taken advantage of by more powerful people, but they were also a state funded school that wasn't getting enough funding. But oh, you have this thing that can eventually be valuable to us. Let's make a deal.

What happened is pretty apparent and the university was in a tough place, and it shows how it all comes down to leadership. If certain foundation members don't die, then the whole scenario is different. There are probably ten moments in this whole story if that things had taken a path of lesser resistance, the story wouldn't be what it is, and I probably wouldn't be here telling it.

If Lincoln University understood what they had, and took full advantage of it, they wouldn't have been susceptible to have the decisions about the collection being essentially taken over.

HC: What can we learn about territorialism when it involves the state vs. an individual wishes long after his death?

DA: It comes back to leadership. If the Barnes Foundation was committed to keeping it in Montgomery County, they could make it work. The mission became the move. And there were no more conversations after it got on that path. What we lose is the intimate experience of the Barnes, and how the collector wanted that experience to be, for the sake of tourism and dollars.

HC: One of the more astounding interviews/images of the film was with Richard Feigen, the art dealer, as he toured Southeby's during a major auction. It seems everyone wants to attach a value to everything associated with the sensate subjectiveness of art. Does a price make something more valuable, in your opinion?

DA: Yes, that was the point of the scene. It has gotten out of control. People don't see paint on a canvas anymore, they fixate on the 25 billion dollar value of the Barnes collection. That is the reality. And that is the antithesis of what the Barnes is. It strips away the names and the values away from the paintings and let's your experience with them speak for itself.

Art is so subjective but we've almost been trained to 'like' certain names like Matisse and Picasso. And that is baggage, because if you look at a painting and it has one of those names on it seems much more 'important.' When you walk into the Barnes, you view it for what it is, and in a sense the whole place is a work of art. It messes with your preconceived notions of art. And that will be lost when it moves.

"The Art of the Steal" continues its limited release nationwide in Chicago on March 12th. Check local listings for theater locations. Directed by Don Argott.

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