

‘Big Eyes’ Too Conventional to Generate Any Interest

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – What’s up with Tim Burton? His style is hardly present in the straightforward story of artists Margaret and Walter Keane, locked in a battle of creation over “Big Eyes” child paintings. There is nothing revelatory or even interesting in the process of their struggle of who-painted-what, maybe perhaps Burton – a collector of the art – wants to increase their value?

There is not much “there” there, as is said. It is established early that Margaret Keane was the real producer of the Big Eyes children, and then the rest of the film is the con perpetuated by Walter, that becomes less and less colorful the longer it drags on. Christoph Waltz as Walter is practically sweating blood to keep the character lively, and basically the script did him no favors. It’s hard to understand what to think of Walter, beyond that he was a liar. The paintings were done, the popularity was established, the money was made and lost. It was just not enough to sustain the 105 minute running time, and ends with a bizarre whimper rather than any bang.

Margaret Keane (Amy Adams) is a single mother who paints on the side. Her specialty is waif-like children with big eyes that overwhelm the visage of their faces. She meets Walter (Christoph Waltz), a fellow weekend painter and fervent self promoter. When they feature their paintings at a San Francisco nightclub, it is the “Big Eyes” paintings that patrons desire. At this point, Walter claims that he is the creator of the works, and when he marries Margaret she goes along with the charade.



Margaret Keane (Amy Adams) Applies Her Touch to ‘Big Eyes’

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

What nobody expected is that the paintings would become popular and profitable. Walter rides the wave fervently, and builds the brand into big business, much to the chagrin of gallery owner Ruben (Jason Schwartzman) and Margaret’s best friend DeeAnn (Krysten Ritter). DeeAnn wants Margaret to come clean, but the real artist is scared of revealing the lie, until Walter goes off the rails.

The brightness of the film is based in Tim Burton’s signature production design. The setting is the late 1950s to mid 1960s, and all the nightclubs, upper middle class homes and streets of San Francisco glimmer with the vibrant colors of Burton’s world. But beyond that design, it doesn’t seem like a Tim Burton movie. Maybe since this is history, and is personal to him as a collector of the paintings, that he held back from his usual twisted perspective. The story could have used it.

Amy Adams was content to let Waltz do most of the heavy dramatic lifting as Walter, and she lays back as the hammy performance unfolds. Margaret was supposed to be a capitulator, and Adams plays that appropriately, but that doesn’t give up much, as she represents half the film. Then a shift suddenly occurs – actually after Margaret finally broke from Walter – and it’s so abrupt that her character becomes someone else with 20 minutes left in the film.

There was one piece of intriguing business, which is enhanced with a little research on the couple. Margaret became a Jehovah’s Witness, and her immersion into it is only hinted at in the film. If Burton had chosen to go into that direction, the angle might have flipped the film’s perspective. But basically it’s otherwise forgotten when the last act begins, a court trial for the painting’s rights.



Walter (Christoph Waltz) Overshadows Margaret in 'Big Eyes'

Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

The popularity of the paintings says something about Kennedy-era America, but the film never makes that clear. Jason Schwartzman has a fab walk-on as a representative of the artistic elite, a gallery owner that nearly turns purple when the Big Eyes become popular. The debate as to what constitutes “art” has to do with popularity, and the value of original Big Eyes are currently in the five figure range. What it really represents is a time and place, and their value is based more on an innocent nostalgia for the kitsch angle, rather than the art itself. But as the film emphasizes, whatever sells can eventually be categorized as art.

This could be called a Tim Burton vanity project, because of his closeness to the subject. Despite the truth that Margaret was the Big Eyes producer, it may not even matter, except for the money and the estate. The real lesson might be to keep your “big eyes” peeled for the originals that might be still out there...and then immediately put them up for sale.

“Big Eyes” opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Amy Adams, Christoph Waltz, Jason Schwartzman, Danny Huston, Terrence Stamp and Krysten Ritter. Written by Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski. Directed by Tim Burton. Rated “PG-13”



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