Art & Real World Taken to Task in Angular ‘The Square’

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Recently, the record for highest bid ever on a work of art was shattered – $450 million for Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘Salvador Mundi’ – and the ownership of a canvas, for the price of supporting a small country, calls into question the meaning of art and collecting. All of this, and everything more, is generated in the cinematic rendering of “The Square.”

There is not much of a plot as a series of vignettes that comment on each other. The director, Swedish director Ruben Östlund, paints a sensational follow up to his equally fascinating “Force Majeure” (2014), which explored the family dynamic. In a way, “The Square” does the same thing, but expands it into the family of man. Issues of class, gender, power, the current tech culture and of course art come into these character’s lives at different levels and truths, culminated by a long scene of put-upon confrontation, which is a piece of art in its own right. “The Square” won the top prize Palme d’Or at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, which in a sense is the final absurdity in a film reveling in them.

The film begins with an interview with Christian (Claes Bang), top curator at an unnamed art museum in Stockholm, by a somewhat clueless journalist named Anne (Elisabeth Moss). The museum is about to launch “The Square,” an high concept exhibit that “… is a sanctuary of trust and caring. Within it we all share equal rights and obligations.”



Director Ruben Östlund, Elisabeth Moss and Claes Bang of ‘The Square’
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

As this takes place, Christian also loses his wallet, as part of a public square con. Instead of writing it off, he tracks the phone to a middle class high-rise, and confronts all the occupants of the building with a threatening note. Miraculously, the wallet and phone are mailed back to him, but one family believes that their son was the culprit. The boy confronts Christian to make amends, while The Square’s opening night wealthy glitterati audience is confronted with a monkey-like performance artist (Terry Notary). Art meets life meets art.

The concept is king in “The Square” and the mixing of that concept with modern life is the lifeblood of the narrative. The events surrounding the opening of The Square exhibit feeds the soul of what the exhibit is, which is mind blowing within the borders of 142 minute movie. There is some superfluous stuff along the way – I personally think the monkey man confrontation runs too long – but the creative interaction of events are magnificent in its sovereignty.

Elisabeth Moss (Peggy from “Mad Men,” as a reference) is consistently challenging herself as an actor, and is stunning as the American journalist. The lovemaking scene between her Anne and curator Christian is both sensual and excruciating, a very weird and true combination… and there are a couple surprises thrown in for good measure. The “monkey man” in the confrontation scene is Terry Notary, a mime specializing in computer generated character performance. He has participated in the recent “Planet of the Apes” reboots, in yet another remarkable art meets life conceit of the film.



The Performance Artist (Terry Notary) and the One Percent of ‘The Square’
Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Christian is portrayed by Claes Bang, a Danish stage and screen actor making his major film debut. His curator is the glue of the film, cooly interloping within the various challenges before him. He is the “art” of the random series of events, and his decisions are the value “weight” given to these events. It is a one-of-a-kind performance, because it interacts with both societal norms/problems and the pretension of artistic interpretations of those “norms.” He creates an energy that fuels the often caustic fictional realities (an appropriate oxymoron).

“What a Piece of Work is Man” as the old standard tune from the Broadway musical “Hair” opines. Nobody is paying $450 mil for a individual’s personality or truth, they only pay for the manipulation of it. So yeah, anonymous bidder, enjoy your Da Vinci painting. We’re just laughing in the background.

”The Square” is currently in a limited release in theaters nationwide, including Chicago at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport Avenue until November 30th. See local listings for other screenings, theaters and show times. Featuring Claes Bang, Elisabeth Moss, Dominic West and Terry Notary. Written and directed by Ruben Östlund. Rated “PG”

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