



FRAZETTA: PAINTING WITH FIRE

DIRECTED BY LANCE LASPINA
 VHS, 96 MINUTES, \$29.95
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Lance Laspina's new "must-see" documentary is an eagerly awaited look at the life and art of renowned fantasy illustrator Frank Frazetta. Shot from the perspective of a true fan, the film is a loving tribute to the artist, including interviews with admirers as diverse as filmmakers John Milius and Ralph Bakshi, *Famous Monsters* creator Forry Ackerman, heavy-metal rocker Glenn Danzig, artists John Buscema, Mark Schultz, and even Bo Derek! There are no attempts at shocking revelations or controversy in this film. This is simply the story of a down-to-earth guy from Brooklyn who loved playing baseball and drawing, who grew up to become one of the most famous and imitated artists of his generation.

The film begins by tracing Frazetta's life from his youth in Brooklyn, where he was a tough and athletic kid who loved to play baseball and hang out with the guys (in this case, friends Al Williamson, Nick Meglin, and Roy Krenkel!) Frazetta was a prodigy, an exceptionally gifted boy with parents who encouraged his natural ability. Though he loved sports, and played baseball well enough to catch the attention of the major leagues, he decided not to sign up for the pros and instead stuck to art—at the time a more sensible career move. This is a deep regret for him today...If he could do it all over again, he would have played for the Dodgers!

This history of athleticism informs his art, and Frazetta's work has an action and an inner life that is obvious even in his earliest pictures. The film revels in this lush imagery and the diversity is astonishing. As Frazetta says in the film, "Everything I drew, I drew well." Humility notwithstanding, I have to agree with him. We see drawings and paintings from every phase of his career, intercut with commentary from his many admirers and fellow illustrators. There are dozens of his "barbarians-and-broads" oil paintings from the later years, but it is refreshing to also see pages from his "Snowman" character strip, "funny animal" comic book pages, Western comics, as well as his collaborations with Al Williamson for a number of E.C. horror comics of the 1950s.

Throughout the film, the pictures jump off the video screen, and seeing some of the artwork in close-up reveals Frazetta's facile draftsmanship. In many cases, however, the pictures "come to life" in a way that is heavy handed and unnecessary. Many of the pictures are manipulated and animated, with "multi-plane camera" effects, streaks of light emerging from the canvas, and elements of the paintings (birds, bats, etc.) flying around inside of the pictures. At one point, Frazetta himself seems to walk into the landscape of one of his own paintings! While these are clever gimmicks, and the production team realizes these effects in a thoroughly slick and professional manner, the unfortunate decision to treat the art in this way undermines any attempt at framing Frazetta as a "serious" artist. But this is a very minor complaint in an otherwise expertly crafted film.

For a number of years, Frazetta has been plagued by health problems, and the film looks at this troubling period with an unflinching eye. We learn that a thyroid condition developed from overexposure to turpentine, and for a while he was near death (and suicide, by his own admission.) For almost 10 years, from 1986 to 1994, the condition affected his ability to create, and caused him great physical and mental anguish. Now 75 years old, he has suffered from a number of debilitating strokes which have affected his ability to draw, but even so, Frank's spirit remains indomitable. The film shows him painting and drawing today with his left, rather than right, hand.

Frazetta: Painting With Fire is a captivating documentary on the life and art of one of the most remarkable illustrators of our time, and a loving tribute to his achievements from some of his biggest fans. 🍷

—Dan Zimmer

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