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SCREENING ROOM

Indie fest plays with fire in art and politics

By Kevin Thomas
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The American Cinematheque's Alternative Screen independent film showcase presents Lance Laspina's "**Frazetta: Painting With Fire**," a splendid example of a documentary that makes full use of the rich potentials of the form. It is a comprehensive survey of the life and work of Frank Frazetta, the fantasy illustrator and painter perhaps most widely known for his covers for the "Conan the Barbarian" novels that inspired the look of the 1982 Arnold Schwarzenegger movie.

With an awe-inspiring vibrancy and the illustrative skills of an N.C. Wyeth or Maxfield Parrish, Frazetta creates indelible images of heroes, of ancient fantasy worlds with heroes as muscular as Schwarzenegger and with comparably voluptuous heroines menaced by mythological monsters. Frazetta considers himself a creative artist rather than just a fantasy illustrator, and Laspina does a fine job of heightening our appreciation of Frazetta's undeniable, indeed, prodigious talent of wide-ranging influence and then makes a solid case for him as a serious, major artist.

Laspina also is a skilled biographer, tracing Frazetta's Brooklyn upbringing, the emergence of his talent during childhood, his apprenticeship illustrating comic strips and his breakthrough as a paperback cover illustrator, a Hollywood poster designer and an artist as at home in pen-and-ink drawings and watercolor as he is in oils.

A solid family man and versatile athlete who turned down a chance to play baseball professionally, Frazetta remained ruggedly handsome into his 50s until laid low by a hard-to-diagnose thyroid ailment and, in more recent years, a series of strokes. Still, the hearty and unpretentious Frazetta has proved as sturdy and tenacious as one of his heroes and is back again at his easel.

Aryana Farshad's "**Mystic Iran: The Unseen World**," another exemplary documentary, finds Farshad returning to her native country after a 25-year absence to explore ancient spiritual rituals practiced at sacred sites across the country. She comes away encouraged that through the practice of their faith, the Iranian people draw the strength to endure and transcend restrictions in their daily lives.

She believes Iranians live in constant struggle between the tastes and desires of the West and the laws and rules of the East and turn to their religion to resolve this contradiction. She visits the awesome Great Mosque of Qum, where men and women, in vast separate chambers ablaze with mirrored mosaic walls and domes, come to pray.

She proceeds to Kashan, the land of Zarathustra, and onto the mountains of Kurdistan for a long and mesmerizing sequence of male and female dervishes and their various ceremonies and trances. This beautiful, stirring film screens

Saturday in connection with LACMA's "Legacy of Genghis Khan" exhibit.

Yet another provocative documentary, Jens Meurer's "**Public Enemy**," launches the Goethe Institute's Europe Watches America series Tuesday. Meurer catches up with Black Panthers co-founder Bobby Seale and three other prominent members: law professor Kathleen Cleaver, widow of Eldridge Cleaver; playwright Jamal Joseph; and musician Nile Rodgers. The film is a portrait of four dynamic, fiercely articulate survivors determined to keep alive the Panthers' commitment to full employment and decent housing for African Americans and the abolishment of racism.

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Screenings

"Frazetta: Painting With Fire": Tonight, 7:30, American Cinematheque at the Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood. (323) 466-FILM.

"Mystic Iran: The Unseen World": Saturday, 2 p.m., Leo S.

Bing Theater, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. (323) 857-6010.

"Public Enemy": Tuesday, 7 p.m., Goethe Institute, 5750 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 100, Los Angeles. (323) 525-3388.

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