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FRAZETTA: PAINTING WITH FIRE**Director:** Lance Laspina**Cast:** Frank Frazetta, Al Williamson, John Milius, Ralph Bakshi, John Buscema, Dave Stevens, Michael Kaluta, Bernie Wrightson, Neal Adams, Simon Bisley, Kevin Eastman, Glenn Danzig, Bo Derek
(Cinemachine, 2003) Rated: Not ratedby **John G. Nettles**

PopMatters Film and Book Critic

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Mighty Thews

There is an uncomfortable sequence toward the end of Lance Laspina's documentary *Frazetta: Painting with Fire*, where the subject turns to whether fantasy illustrator Frank Frazetta's body of work may be considered "art." It's uncomfortable because, after 90 minutes of interviews with the artist and lavish praise by some of the most respected names in fantasy and sequential art, suddenly the tone becomes strident and defensive. Frazetta's disciples become apologists not only for Frazetta, but also for fantasy illustration itself and, by extension, their own vocations. One devotee compares Frazetta to Michelangelo as another painter whose most celebrated works were drawn from a book -- *The Book*, in fact -- and who worked on commission.

The sequence is unfortunate, undercutting an otherwise convincing argument of Frazetta's value made by the rest of the film. It is also unnecessary as, after a career spanning 50-plus years, the still very active Frazetta needs no reassuring.

Frank Frazetta is best known for his paintings of Robert E. Howard's quintessential sword-and-sorcery hero, Conan the Barbarian, which graced the covers of Conan's paperback adventures in the '60s and '70s. Howard had created the hero for the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in the 1930s, and though Conan had been a popular character among the pulp's readership during Howard's short lifetime, the grim warrior's popularity exploded once Frazetta's visuals were added to the paperback reprints. The Conan of the *Weird Tales* covers was a rather bland-looking milquetoast; Frazetta's hero is a wild-eyed berserker just rippling with the "mighty thews" of Howard's purple prose.

According to the late John Buscema, the primary artist on the hugely successful Marvel comic, and John Milius, who directed the film with Arnold Schwarzenegger, it was Frazetta who single-handedly turned Howard's creation from a lurid curiosity to a cottage industry. In turn, Frazetta became the fantasy genre's premier artist, a prolific worker in a variety of media whose art began to appear on book and magazine covers, album jackets, and during the time when it was fashionable, was faithfully reproduced on the sides of custom vans everywhere.

Today, a Frazetta oil painting can fetch up to a quarter of a million dollars on the open market, and it's easy to see why. As *Painting with Fire's* commentators and loving visuals demonstrate, Frazetta's work is detailed and intricate, depicting his fantastic warriors, nightmarish ghouls, and swooning, barely clothed maidens with fluidity, power, and immediacy unusual even in the work of his closest contemporaries in the field, such as Boris Vallejo. Even more unusual is that Frazetta worked without models or photographs, spinning his otherworldly visions from whole cloth, often in mere hours. Laspina's film lingers on the artist's unique combination of intuition, imagination, and skill with the attention of the true fan.

Painting with Fire is not only a love letter to the art but to the artist as well, tracing Frazetta's life from his Brooklyn boyhood, where he was a superb athlete once scouted by professional

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+ + + +

The Lizzie McGuire Movie | "Goodbye Lizzie McGuire, hello Fabulous!" Lizzie exults, as if there's a difference between the two.
+ + + +

The Real Cancún | There are a few laughs at the expense of some of the more enthusiastically foolish men, but for the most part, the film is weirdly free of irony.
+ + + +

Soulsville | Motown then meant Marvin Gaye, the Temptations, the Supremes

baseball, to the present, specifically the April 2003 opening of the Frank Frazetta Museum in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. Fans of comics and of Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* will enjoy the overview of Frazetta's early career in the funnybook game, and it is fascinating to see the breadth of his output in retrospective, from Disneyesque funny-animal comics to the EC horror comics he worked on with his boyhood friend, the great Al Williamson.

But while Frazetta certainly enjoys his work, he appears to regard it as nothing more than just that, something he does because he can do it well. When asked, he states his primary profession as "sportsman." Laspina takes care to focus on the other aspects of his subject's life, showing us Frazetta the father of four and the lover of games.

Also depicted is the Frazetta still burning with anger after a dark period from 1986 to 1994, when prolonged exposure to low-grade turpentine resulted in a severe thyroid malfunction that was misdiagnosed as mental illness, endangering his life and subjecting him for a time to psychiatric hospitalization. And we see Frazetta's indomitable will at the age of 75 as, after suffering two strokes that impaired his drawing arm, he taught himself to draw and paint with his left hand. The film is a full portrait of an artist with remarkable ability.

Painting with Fire really doesn't need to be any more than that, which is why the strident defense of Frazetta as a "serious" artist seems so out of place here. It certainly will not convince any skeptics or art snobs to change their minds -- after all, a beautiful rendering of an axe-wielding barbarian is still a rendering of an axe-wielding barbarian, and even Frazetta cops to the charges of gratuitous brutality and near-pornographic cheesecake which critics have leveled at his images over the years.

Laspina and his interviewees come off much better when preaching to the choir, Frazetta's fans and emulators. This is not *Crumb*; there are no warts-and-all revelations, no plumbing of Frazetta's psyche, and his family appears as wholesome and loving a bunch as could be imagined. Rather, Laspina's film gives long overdue props to an artist whose influence reaches farther than most of his more "mainstream" contemporaries ever will.

— 5 May 2003

-- polished, innocuous, and radio-friendly. The Stax sound, by contrast, sweltered; it was raw and personal.

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THIS WEEK'S DVD REVIEWS

It Came From Beneath the Sea | "The mind of man had thought of everything -- except that which was beyond his comprehension!"

+ + + +

Drumline | Throughout his smart and entertaining commentary, Charles Stone III underscores not only his intentions, but also his full-on affection for his subjects.

+ + + +

Frazetta: Painting with Fire | Lance Laspina's film gives long overdue props to an artist whose influence reaches farther than most of his more "mainstream" contemporaries ever will.

+ + + +

The Man From Elysian Fields | Despite much swirling and swooping of the camera, it winds up looking like a moderately well directed TV movie.

+ + + +

Married With Children, Volume 1 | It's smart as hell, its writers are sharper than a set of Ginsu knives, and its actors have impeccable timing.

+ + + +

The Mystery of Picasso | Clouzot seeks to uncover nothing less than the "mystery", not merely of Picasso's process of painting, but of artistic production itself.

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