

# CLIPPED WINGS

Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* is a sparkling but half-baked flight of fancy

Alejandro González Iñárritu hasn't directed a feature film since 2010's *Biutiful*, an agonizing, overworked downer made bearable by Javier Bardem's mournful performance. His latest, *Birdman*, also rests squarely on the shoulders of one put-upon fellow, but this one has a different set of problems: Actor-writer-director Riggin Thomson (Michael Keaton) is struggling to open a Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." He's got all the normal problems — needy actors, budgetary concerns — as well as an alter ego that speaks to him in the form of Birdman, the superhero character with which he made his name (as Keaton himself did with *Batman*) years ago.

Foul-mouthed and hateful, Birdman is that voice in your ear that tells you you're a failure, a fraud, washed-up, worn-out, worthless — that this arty stuff isn't what anyone cares about. (It's not exactly *Black Swan*, though some of the feathers seem familiar.) But the false dichotomy of art versus entertainment is just a distraction, a spare idea the film tosses in and then leaves alone. The only conflict it's really interested in is one man versus himself: the part that soars and the part that's always looking down, aware how far there is to fall.

There are, woven into the overstuffed *Birdman*, interesting ideas like this one, hints of deeper characters (if only Emma Stone got to

stay as angry as she is in her first scene!) and a less gimmicky tale of self-doubt. But Iñárritu has made, unexpectedly, a flash-and-dazzle art-house film, a mashup of technical beauty and half-baked clichés that never gets to the level of feeling it needs to evoke in order to gel. His cleverness is held together by Emmanuel Lubezki's cinematography, which, via seamless editing, creates the illusion of a (nearly) endless take.



MICHAEL KEATON IS BIRDMAN

The camera slides down hallways and through windows, pans up to the sky and down again to the next day, finds impossible space in cramped dressing rooms. Narrow corridors and magical camera movements, combined with a jittery, percussive score, go a long way toward creating a claustrophobic tension — but also make you aware that the tension is manufactured. The characters are sketches; the movie feints limply at satire; Riggin's insistence that he's risking everything feels forced, his self-centeredness a drum he can't stop beating. Why is his self-doubt more relevant than anyone else's? If Iñárritu's *Biutiful* couldn't let up with the ugly horrors of life, this one can't pause to inject some actual humanity into the neuroses of the artist. ■



## DEAR WHITE PEOPLE

Dear readers: Go see this movie. No film in recent memory addresses racial tensions in the U.S. with the contemporary candor and humor of *Dear White People*, a debut for director Justin Simien. Set smack in the middle of a brewing race war at the fictional Ivy League Winchester University, the dark comedy's reluctant leader Samantha hosts campus radio show "Dear White People" (which doles out advice like "the minimum requirement of black friends needed to not seem racist has just been raised to two"). And it's sure making some white folks uncomfortable, including the university president's son Kurt. Kurt acts out by throwing a "black-themed" party for Halloween complete with "blackface" and watermelon. A shit storm ensues. Simien makes it easy to laugh at these seemingly cartoonish examples of racism. But how cartoonish are they? Instances of blackface and other bigotry are all too common in Oregon. While the film feels unfocused at points, it tackles the big white elephant in the room — and the politics of sexuality and class — with grace and wit. (*Bijou Metro*)



MAYA LIN

# ARTSHOUND

Sniffing out what you shouldn't miss in the arts this week

You may not know the artist, but you know the art: The Memorial Wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. **Maya Lin** was a 21-year-old Yale undergrad when her design was selected for the memorial in 1981. In the decades since, the artist and architect has gone on to create other monumental works such as the 11-acre installation "Wave Field," composed of grassy manmade hills that undulate like waves and, closer to home, The Confluence Project, "six public art installations at significant points along the Columbia River system," for which Lin is working with regional tribes as well as Oregon and Washington civil groups. One of the Oregon installations, Sandy River Delta in Troutdale, is complete and a second, Celilo Park near The Dalles, is in progress.

Hear Lin give the **2014–15 O'Fallon Lecture in Art and American Culture** about the project and her other ongoing work "What Is Missing?" — a multi-platform interactive piece about environmental threats — at 7:30 pm Thursday, Nov. 20, at the EMU Ballroom; free.

Another renowned artist and Yale alum is coming to the UO campus Nov. 20 for a free talk — **Rico Gatson**, who specializes in sculpture, painting and video drawing inspiration from the history of racial injustice in the U.S. While *The New York Times* has called his work "didactic," *EW* is going to have to disagree with The Grey Lady. Gatson's portfolio is filled with bold graphic imagery continuing the much-needed visual dialogue that Black Panther Party Minister of Culture Emory Douglas started in the late '60s. Gatson will speak 6 pm Thursday, Nov. 20, in Lawrence Hall, room 115.