



ARTIST TYRUS WONG AT WORK

BAMBI'S SECRET

Tyrus, screening at the DisOrient Film Festival, looks at the revolutionary artist behind the iconic film who transcended Disney's racism and disenfranchisement

Still very much with us, the 105-year-old Chinese-born painter Tyrus Wong is quite possibly the most influential American artist you've never heard of — until now, that is.

As the sole inspiration for the expressionistic animated style of Disney's *Bambi* (more on that in a moment), Wong's elegant and economical style, a melding of traditional Asiatic ink-and-brush painting and Western modernist influences, has literally suffused American culture, from dishware and Hollywood to Hallmark cards and museums everywhere.

Written and directed by Pamela Tom, the documentary *Tyrus* — the centerpiece of this year's DisOrient Film Festival — unfolds the epic life of this criminally unrecognized artist. Brought to the U.S. by his father in 1919 (his mother was left in China, and he never saw her again), young Tyrus Wong came of age amid the poverty and racism of L.A., where he survived almost exclusively on wit and talent, scraping to survive with piecemeal art jobs until he was saved by Roosevelt's WPA program for artists.

As part of a burgeoning California Orientalist art scene, Wong's art eventually came to the attention of Walt Disney studios, where he was thrown in the "inbetween pool" doing grunt work polishing animated cells. Eventually, his work caught the attention of Disney himself, who commanded his entire art department to "cleave" (in the words of one of the film's narrators) to Wong's style in creating *Bambi*. It is Wong's gorgeous minimalism, along with his revolutionary use of color, which defines that Disney classic.

Disney, of course, once again proves himself the Leni Riefenstahl of American culture: Wong was fired before the film

was completed, and to this day he is only credited among a dozen others for being a mere background artist on *Bambi*.

And so it goes, as Wong, ever-revealing a generous knack for making do, plows headfirst with his art through a series of insidiously racist scenarios.

And yet this is no tragic tale. It is Wong's abundant, forgiving spirit and his exquisite talent that triumphs in the end, as he builds his monumental resume: his art design for Warner Bros. and other Hollywood studios, where he worked on such legendary films as *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Rio Bravo* and *The Wild Bunch*; his calligraphic blue-on-white dishware designs, now in hipster cupboards everywhere; and his bestselling Christmas card signature for Hallmark. Not to mention his paintings, which are stunning visions of fluid simplicity.

"If you can do a painting with five strokes instead of 10," Wong says, "you can make your painting sing," and director Tom takes this advice to heart. Her documentary is pared-down and straightforward, leaning heavily on Wong's art, which is breathtakingly beautiful, as well as tons of footage of the man himself, who has entered his second century of life with an undying twinkle in his eye.

Tyrus opens the DisOrient Film Festival with a 6 pm screening Friday, April 29, at Bijou Art Cinemas, with an appearance by filmmaker Pamela Tom; the festival runs through the weekend at Bijou and Broadway Metro, April 29 through May 1, with a slew of screenings and premieres, and more than 25 filmmakers and actors in attendance. ■

For a full schedule and further information, visit disorient.org.

Miles Ahead

Actor Don Cheadle has a rare gift: He is intense and gritty yet intimately approachable, and his performances carry equal parts explosive threat and casual humor, drawing viewers into the edgy territories his characters typically inhabit. Cheadle turns these qualities to fantastic use in his new film, an offbeat biopic about legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis. Co-written and directed by Cheadle, who also stars as the man himself, *Miles Ahead* plays fast and loose with the staid formula of the biopic. Taking his cues from the wild improvisations that characterized Davis' mid-career work, Cheadle gangsterizes the story, which opens in the mid-'70s with *Rolling Stone* reporter Dave Brill (Ewan McGregor) interviewing the coke-addled legend. By sidestepping the typical pitfalls of biopics, Cheadle offers a deeper, richer understanding of what drove Davis: his loves, his hates, his demons, his desires. *[Broadway Metro]*

Midnight Special

Writer and director Jeff Nichols latest film is a wonderfully taut sci-fi thriller that eventually unravels under the strain of its own visionary ambitions. The story of *Midnight Special* is fable-simple, but Nichols spools it out as a series of reveals that leave you guessing at the truth. With the help of a renegade state trooper (Joel Edgerton), Roy (Michael Shannon) kidnaps his son, Alton Meyer (Jaeden Lieberher), from a Texas cult led by Calvin Meyer (Sam Shepard), who believes the boy holds mystical properties that will protect "the Ranch" from the coming end of the world. The premise is thrilling and brave. The great cast, however, is underused, the characters slightly undeveloped. The movie bites off so much that it remains, oddly, at the level of the theoretical and speculative. And yet despite its flaws, *Midnight Special* is well worth a look. *[Broadway Metro]*

Embrace of the Serpent

Shot in lavish black-and-white, *Embrace of the Serpent* drops you immediately into the humid nightmare of colonial devastation. Directed by Columbian-born Ciro Guerra, the film borrows heavily from past works on colonialism, most notably Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. What makes this film so extraordinary is that — unlike Conrad's tales, where the indigenous inhabitants remain cloaked in racist incomprehension — this film humanizes everyone involved, giving a full, three-dimensional portrait not only of the whites but of the natives as well, whose perspective of a world being drained of its dreams fuels the narrative. The message of the film is complicated and universal. Whatever the causes and effects of colonialism, the healing must be across the board. *[Broadway Metro]*

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