

‘Loving Vincent’ and ‘I’m OK’: two approaches to documenting the life of an artist

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Image: ‘Im OK’ by Elizabeth Hobbs

While still in production, there was a lot of talk among art lovers about the 2017 animated documentary *Loving Vincent*. ‘It is completely hand-painted’, ‘an army of artists has been employed for its production’, ‘it will look like a moving painting’ (see Frizzell, 2017; Mottram, 2017; Vollenbroek, 2017)... I was in suspense for its release and fascinated by all the hype surrounding it. When I finally got to watch the film, I could not help but feel a bit let down. Yet, I could not understand the reasons behind this disenchantment. The imagery imitated van Gogh’s style flawlessly, the storyline dealing with the circumstances of the artist’s death was interesting enough, and as far as I could tell, the acting was good. What was it then? Why was I feeling like I wanted to see more?

Part of me felt that my art education was to blame, an education that was perhaps wrongly distinguishing and discriminating between art and craft. I could not see the point behind this repetitive exercise of recreating an art style whose value lay in being different, in being original and unique. The recreation seemed like a copy, an imitation and therefore to me, of less value. It seemed no further away from art than a printed reproduction of the original painting. It seemed almost futile, unnecessary, a bit kitschy. The story could hold its weight without the hand-painted stylization, and the stylization might have had a stronger effect without a storyline. However, I remembered how art students and apprentices used to study images –and still do to some extent– by copying the masters. This film employed over one hundred artists who worked painstakingly to recreate the footage in Van

Gogh's style. Keeping in mind this tradition of learning art, it seems like *Loving Vincent* acted as an apprenticeship for them. An homage to the technique of this master of modernism. To me, it is a performance that pays tribute to this great artist, not so much in its completed form, the final film, as by the painstaking process of its production. And that change in perspective elevates a rather good film to a masterpiece.

In her short film *I'm OK*, Elizabeth Hobbs (2018), took a completely different approach in depicting the life and work of the Austrian Expressionist artist Oskar Kokoschka. Despite some loose references to his work here and there, Hobbs did not try to emulate Kokoschka's style, nor did she have a script and employ actors and rotoscoping. Using expressive, playful lines and bright colours on paper, the animator highlights aspects of Kokoschka's life. She specifically focuses on the time when the artist volunteered for service during WWI, after being rejected by a lover. Although Hobbs communicates well the message of heartbreak, war and pain, unless a viewer is already familiar with the life and work of Kokoschka, it is unlikely that they would gain an education of the artist merely by watching the film. This, however, does not seem to be the priority of the short. Instead, it acts as a loose interpretation of the life of an artist.

These two examples are very different approaches to document the life of an artist through animation. Both films take advantage of the medium to simulate an aspect of creation that van Gogh and Kokoschka were using. *Loving Vincent* partially employs rotoscoping in the form of hand-painted live-action footage but remains confined within the indexical qualities of the recording. It takes advantage of van Gogh's painterly aesthetics and simultaneously maintains a strong relation to 'reality'. *I'm OK*, on the other hand, does not involve the tracing over live-footage and without this strong and recorded initial connection to the world, it recreates Hobbs' own version of it from scratch. *I'm OK* applies an expressive approach with emotive brushstrokes, music, use of colour and symbolism to tell a story while highlighting the animator's unique perspective and is without any pretence of presenting 'the real'. Hobbs refers to Kokoschka's style not by directly emulating his art, but by adopting a similarly expressive aesthetic while maintaining her artistic voice. Hobbs's film is not only an homage to an artist. It is much more than that, as it is, at least in my humble opinion, a work of art in its own right.

References

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