



Film Review: Humble Beauty

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"Not everyone can become a great artist. But great art can come from anywhere." – Ratatouille

The finest proof of that belief is embodied by the artists on Los Angeles' Skid Row, profiled in "Humble Beauty," a first-rate, profound documentary that took four years to make. Those four years, distilled into an hour, demonstrate seamless, unobtrusive filmmaking that at the same time encourages viewers to widen their world view and see the different pieces of Skid Row that aren't noticeable when clumped together as it usually is in the media.

Led into this world by well-written, detailed narration that could easily become an article in one of L.A.'s newspapers (apart from the ones shown onscreen), we're introduced to many of the artists whose paintings help them rise above Skid Row. As explained in the narration and as evidenced by piercing shots of the area, it's where you can easily lose all hope if you don't have something to keep you going. Tents are erected nightly, cardboard boxes become beds, and there's even children about, which drives artist Manuel "OG Man" Compito to try to engage the children and keep them away from what they're exposed to every day, by creating a coloring book that can help them express their imagination. In the pages of this book, he sees his dog and cat creations as the Crips and the Bloods and hopes that one day, they can get along. But that's not all that makes him remarkable. He served a prison sentence for armed robbery, yet he doesn't let that color who he is. He's just trying to live a life of contribution, to give to this saddened, makeshift community. His own art creations are astonishing, particularly one piece where the inhabitants of Skid Row look like gray ghosts wandering the streets amidst the tents and other sidewalk homes.

There's a lot to care for deeply in "Humble Beauty," such as what's offered by Rory White, the director of the Lamp Art Project, who says that homelessness doesn't exist only because people didn't want to try. Many of these people have tried. Barbara Aduwa, seated in front of a canvas across from the Los Angeles Mission, was a bus driver all around Southern California, driving 97 routes over time. She was injured, then laid off, and evicted from her apartment. She had never been to Skid Row, never knew what it was, and the first time, she was angry at ending up there. Now she sits in a crowded park, painting her observations.

Mental illness is also a factor, continually affecting those who live on Skid Row who know that something's wrong inside. There's also those mentally ill people who don't know, with that moment of reportage reminding viewers, at least those in the L.A. area, when hospitals were dumping mentally ill patients on the street, highlighted by surveillance footage and brief shots of pertinent newspaper articles. There's a sobering mix of people here, and the insensitivity surrounding them is horrific.

But there is hope on Skid Row. A long look at the art created shows that there are better lives in progress. One of my favorite artists here is Enrique Marquez, who paints his happy childhood in vivid colors, never letting a corner of his work go without a bright blue or a celebratory yellow. Another favorite is Joaquin Roebuck, who shows off the most stunning painting of the entire film. He talks about having spent a few years traversing the 48 states on the mainland, from California to Maine, and in this painting of white lines set against a black background, he put buildings from Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities together on one street. That is one painting I would spend a lot to buy, much more than I probably would for one painting.

It's been so long since I've felt so much for a documentary, and I hope "Humble Beauty" gains more attention than these words alone. I hope some people who may see it are so inspired by these artists that they donate a heavy stream of art supplies, or perhaps feature these artists in venues outside of L.A. Moreover, PBS and the Docurama DVD label should see to it that "Humble Beauty" becomes part of their programming and DVD line, respectively. It's impossible to let this masterful film fade away.