

Focus on Film

Chasing Portraits

Documentary
Holocaust

Thursday, May 9, 2019 @ 1:00 p.m.

Director: Elizabeth Rynecki, 2018 USA

Running time: 77 minutes English

Chasing Portraits beautifully depicts filmmaker and author Elizabeth Rynecki's (book by the same name) quest to uncover her great-grandfather's paintings after he was murdered in the Holocaust. Rynecki's very personal and emotional journey takes place throughout North America, Poland and Israel as she seeks to uncover his lost paintings in museums and in personal collections. Although this compelling documentary focuses on searching for lost art, this film also visually connects viewers to the past vibrant world of Polish-Jewish culture through the striking oil paintings by Moshe Rynecki.

After the Nazis invade Poland in 1939, artist Moshe Rynecki realizes that his over 800 paintings are at risk of being destroyed so he wraps up his art collection in bundles and gives them to gentile friends. Working mostly in oil on paper, Moshe Rynecki creates striking paintings of intimate domestic and religious Polish-Jewish scenes detailing the everyday lives of Polish Jews in the 1920s and 1930s. When Moshe is given the chance to leave the Warsaw ghetto, he refuses to deny his Jewish heritage by escaping and living under false Christian papers. Moshe dies in Majdanek, a Nazi extermination camp, while his wife, Perla, and their son and his family narrowly escape the Holocaust with the help of Roman

Catholic friends. His surviving family is able to locate and save only a single bundle of 100 paintings. After the war, the Ryneckis move to the United States where George Rynecki, Moshe's son, promotes his father's art with exhibits in his home. Following "Grandpa George's" death in 1992, Elizabeth resumes the "honor and obligation" to find all of her great-grandfather's artwork.

Taking place over three decades of Elizabeth's life, *Chasing Portraits* reveals Elizabeth's poignant reactions as she sees for the first time many of Moshe's paintings. She also discovers, to her astonishment, that her great-grandfather's paintings are not just beloved family heirlooms but are highly regarded pieces of art by museums and collectors. Her decision to not seek reparation but rather to act as a historian to help promote her great-grandfather's paintings frees Elizabeth to relish her findings. *Chasing Portraits* is a deeply moving documentary of a celebration of Moshe Rynecki's art, the lasting consequences of war over many generations and the power of one woman's perseverance.

Reviewed by Gail Fisher

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