

A great turn by Oscar Nominee John Hawkes

Earthwork

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...great images that range from portraits to Pepsi cans to the abstract, all of it made from flowers and other plants. Dubbed "earthwork" by the artist, the work is designed so that it can only be seen from above and so ephemeral that photographs are the only proof it ever existed. Writer/director Chris Ordal's debut feature is not a documentary nor is it precisely a biopic. Instead the drama captures the artist at a pivotal moment in time. The winner of two awards, including the audience prize at the 2009 Santa Fe Film Festival, arrives in theaters hoping to capitalize on star John Hawkes' new, higher profile. Certainly Hawkes' fans will want to see him demonstrate his range in a role that is the antithesis of his Oscar-nominated performance in *Winter's Bone*, but with limited distribution most will have to wait for DVD.

A short prologue shows how Herd connected with what would become his life's work when he was still just a child. Years later he's still at it, covering acres of Kansas farmland with his art-but there's no money in it and he has a family to support. Through a friend he hears that Donald Trump is weighing proposals to add art to an empty Manhattan lot that he is not yet ready to build on. Desperate for the exposure, Herd offers to do the project for nothing, gambling that work he gets out of the project will erase his debt and put him on the road to success.

While part of the film deals with his loving but tense relationship with his wife Jan (Laura Kirk) and his wide-eyed interactions with Trump's people and other upscale New Yorkers, the bulk of it is about the work. The field Herd toils in is adjacent to abandoned subway tunnels that homeless claim squatters' rights to, spending their days lolling in the lot. Herd befriends and recruits them to help him, his nonjudgmental amiability winning over even the most angry and suspicious among them.

Ordal certainly picked the right moment of Herd's career to memorialize, because while the tale seems to follow a predictable path, it eventually veers off into a different direction. This is one of many satisfying things about it. Others include Hawkes' sweet performance as an artist with more heart than sense and supporting turns by Zach Grenier, James McDaniel and Chris Bachand as Herd's homeless pals. Herd himself designed the film's spectacular title sequence. However fictionalized, the glimpse *Earthwork* gives into Herd's working methods is fascinating. Weighing against that is an uninspired visual style (made all the more glaring by the contrast with Herd's art) and a story that sometimes feels slight. But Ordal deserves a lot of credit for giving Hawkes a rare starring role and for celebrating the work of an unsung artist.

Distributor: Shadow Distribution

Cast: John Hawkes, Zach Grenier, Chris Bachand, James McDaniel, Laura Kirk, Brendon Glad, Sam Greenlee and Bruce MacVittie

Director/Screenwriter: Chris Ordal

Producer: Chris Ordal, Brendon Glad and Brad Roszell

Genre: Drama

Rating: PG for thematic elements, smoking and mild language.

Running time: 93 min

Release date: April 29 NY, May 20 LA