

Shared Darkness

Earthwork

Wiry and kind of owlsh at the same time, looking a bit like the physical model for the animated character of Scrat from the *Ice Age* films, John Hawkes is a bonafide character actor — someone whose face a lot of filmgoers might recognize, but not quite be able to place. That's in the process of changing.



Hawkes has had success and glowing media notices before (Miranda July's *Me and You and Everyone We Know* was the darling of the 2005 Sundance Film Festival), but achieved **a whole new level of breakout attention** last year with his turn in *Winter's Bone*, for which he was eventually nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award. Another small festival film, shot in 2008 but only now winding its way to theaters, the stirring *Earthwork* affords Hawkes the opportunity to showcase his talents front and center, as a leading man. If there's justice, this unfussy drama will entice a sizeable arthouse audience, and perhaps as a result help pave the way for more lead roles for Hawkes.

Based on a true story, and set mostly in the 1990s, the film focuses on Kansas "crop artist" Stan Heard (Hawkes, above), whose unique, living canvases can sometimes encompass hundreds of acres. Despite being costly, the other major dilemma such temporary art presents is that it almost always requires aerial assistance to be seen properly, meaning that the only way Stan can monetize his work is through photographs. Struggling to support his wife Jan (Laura Kirk) and seven-year-old son, Stan decides to take one last roll of the dice, hoping that **a no-cost bid to clean and beautify a property owned by Donald Trump** in New York City will bring him the sort of national publicity that could put he and his family on financial terra firma. He wins the contract.

Taking out a second mortgage on his home, Stan relocates for a couple months to his new work site, an abandoned lot on the Upper West Side. There, he discovers a group of homeless squatters, inclusive of a troubled schizophrenic known only as Lone Wolf (James McDaniel). They regard him with **squirelly confusion** at first, but eventually their curiosity gets the better of them, and they join Stan, helping in his work of art. Even with their occasional assistance, though, Stan's success is far from guaranteed. Financial setbacks, home pressures and the uncertainty of any

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wider recognition funnel towards a finale that is at once heartrending and uplifting.

[Earthwork](#) is somewhat of a piece with the early films of David Gordon Green, *George Washington* and *All The Real Girls*. (It also recalls the criminally underseen topiary documentary [A Man Named Pearl](#).) It's not quite as steeped in ephemeral arthouse postures, but it's gorgeously photographed, by Bruce Francis Cole, and **its unhurried yet confident rhythms indicate a powerful and fortifying belief in the material**, and the universality of its emotional connection. Using a cast peppered with a few non-professional and/or neophyte actors, writer-director Chris Ordal does something a lot of young filmmakers either can't do, or consciously try to avoid — tell a simple story, simply, and without overindulging in stylistic gimmicks or emotional manipulation. For the full, original review, from ShockYa, [click here](#). **(Shadow Distribution, PG, 93 minutes)**



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