



Toni Collette and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Velvet Buzzsaw*.

Courtesy of Netflix

***Velvet Buzzsaw* Uses Miami to Establish Its Cheap Art Scene Premise**

HANS MORGENSTERN | JANUARY 31, 2019 | 8:30AM

Opening with an establishing shot of Art Basel Miami Beach, Dan Gilroy's new Netflix movie, *Velvet Buzzsaw*, which recently premiered at Sundance Film Festival, sets up its premise by cheapening Miami's art scene in the predictable manner you'd expect from a California-based filmmaker. Miami is there to provide a colorful, superficial backdrop to establish the disenchantment and cynicism of a rich, pansexual art critic named Morf Vandewalt (Jake Gyllenhaal). During a brief montage outside the Miami Beach Convention Center, hordes of the great unwashed take selfies with a ring-smoke-puffing art installation. The camera pans past them and into the convention center, where Morf, with a scrappy bowl cut and thick-framed glasses, skips the line, past an older couple haggling for entry.

Once inside, Morf is stalked by colorfully dressed gallerists hounding him for positive press. He's bored and unenthused by everything. The only person he tolerates is anarchist punk rocker-turned-dealer Rhodora Haze (Rene Russo) and her giant humming silver sphere (titled *Sphere*) with orifices into which people can insert their arms for surprising sensations. Morf is taken aback.

"This wasn't in the catalog," he says.

"It's about choice, desires, sex," she says.

Ain't that the perfect sort of art piece to debut in Miami?

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Then, back in Los Angeles, reclining in a patio chair in the backyard of her mansion overlooking Mulholland Drive, Rhodora dictates a text expressing her disappointment in Art Basel: "My God, Miami was really not a very great thriving art market." *Velvet Buzzsaw*, which is a reference to the punk band Rhodora once fronted, is absolutely about the commercial side of art. It's sad to see Miami, portrayed with the usual, stereotypical shots of beachfront property and Ocean Drive, used as the butt of the joke to establish the film's thesis that commercializing art is bad. Worse, Gilroy never does anything to raise his thesis beyond schlock. This is ultimately a slasher film in which morally compromised people are killed by the art they covet for reasons of capitalism and stature.

For his third film as a director, Gilroy reteams with Gyllenhaal, who gave a stunning performance in the filmmaker's directorial debut, *Nightcrawler* (2014). That film examined the salacious notion that local news thrives on late-night footage of violence collected by freelance newsmen. *Velvet Buzzsaw* examines the commercial aspects of the art world and how it might quite literally take the souls of those with greedy intentions. Gilroy, the progeny of Pulitzer-winning playwright Frank D. Gilroy and sculptor/writer Ruth Dorothy, knows something about the art world. Apparently, it was a lonely night in the basement of a New York art gallery that inspired the creepy notion of art attacking and killing the viewer. But the director never elevates the satire higher than a sly wink that these people deserve to die.

Swedish filmmaker Ruben Östlund's 2017 film *The Square* tackled this subject so much better and more profoundly without relying on supernatural gimmicks. He didn't need the supernatural to make his point. In fact, he based some of it on real-life performance art turning against the rich, self-involved patrons. In a way, *Velvet Buzzsaw* is akin to *Nightcrawler*, a movie that reinforced simple notions that local news is nothing but stories where "if it bleeds, it leads." *Velvet Buzzsaw* does the same with the art world. If you think art is just a sham to make money on high concepts and you're looking for some superficial catharsis to reinforce that point of view, this is your movie. Otherwise, this film is a self-satisfied critique that does nothing to raise art to levels of appreciation, selling itself out as hypocritically as its own thesis.

Velvet Buzzsaw debuts on Netflix Friday, February 1.

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