



My Kid Could Paint That

2007

**San Francisco Film Society
Education Program
Study Guide**

Developed by  JUST THINK

MY KID COULD PAINT THAT

FILM SYNOPSIS

In the span of only a few months, 4-year-old Marla Olmstead rocketed from total obscurity into international renown – and sold over \$300,000 dollars worth of paintings. She was compared to Kandinsky and Pollock, and called “a budding Picasso.” Inside Edition, The Jane Pauley Show, and NPR did pieces, and The Today Show and Good Morning America got in a bidding war over an appearance by the bashful toddler. There was talk of corporate sponsorship, with the family fielding calls from The Gap and Crayola.

But not all of the attention was positive. From the beginning, many faulted her parents for exposing Marla to the glare of the media and accused the couple of exploiting their daughter for financial gain. Others felt her work was, in fact, comparable to the great Abstract Expressionists – but saw this as emblematic of the meaninglessness of Modern Art. “She is painting exactly as all the adult paintings have been in the past 50 years, but painting like a child, too. That is what everybody thinks but they don’t dare to say it,” said Oggi, the leading Italian weekly. Through no intention of her own, Marla revived the age-old question, ‘what is art?’

And then, five months into Marla’s new life as a celebrity and just short of her fifth birthday, a bombshell dropped. CBS’ 60 Minutes aired an exposé suggesting strongly that the paintings were painted by her father, himself an amateur painter. As quickly as the public built Marla up, they tore her down. The New York Post asked whether “the juvenile Jackson Pollock may actually be a full-fledged Willem de Frauding,” the Olmsteads were barraged with hate mail, ostracized around town, sales of the paintings dried up, and Marla’s art dealer considered moving out of Binghamton. Embattled, the Olmsteads turned to the filmmaker to clear their name. Torn between his own responsibility as a journalist and the family’s desire to see their integrity restored, the director finds himself drawn deeper and deeper into a situation that can’t possibly end well for him and them, and could easily end badly for both.

*MY KID COULD PAINT THAT***FILMMAKER****Amir Bar-Lev (Producer/Director)**

My Kid Could Paint That is Amir Bar-Lev's second feature film. His directorial debut, *Fighter* (2001) was named one of the top documentaries of the year by Newsweek, The Rolling Stone, The Village Voice and several other major publications and won 6 international awards. *Fighter* was released theatrically in the fall of 2001, and aired on the Independent Film Channel.

After *Fighter* and before beginning *My Kid Could Paint That*, Bar-Lev served as a creator and Executive Producer on several pilots, including *Remix*, a DJ competition show for SpikeTV, and VH1's *Party Crashing in Cannes*, which saw his *Fighter* partner, Alex Mamlet (aka Kid Protocol) joining Nicole Kidman on the Cannes Film Festival's famous red carpet. Bar-Lev also produced and helped develop VH-1's *Fabulous Life* and the Weather Channel's series, *It Could Happen Tomorrow*. The pilot episode focused on the hurricane danger facing New Orleans and was shot only a few months before Hurricane Katrina.

Bar-Lev has also directed several short films. Geoff Hoyle starred in *Chris Donahoe: Independent Filmmaker*, a faux documentary in the vein of independent filmmaking. *New Orleans Furlough*, a documentary short, captures a Louisiana National Guardsman as he returns from Baghdad to New Orleans nine days after Katrina.

Before directing, Bar-Lev was an AVID editor. As a teenager growing up in Berkeley, California, Bar-Lev's first work in media was as a liquid light show artist, where he worked on light shows for Bill Graham Presents and The Grateful Dead. Bar-Lev graduated with majors in Film (Modern Culture and Media) and Religious Studies from Brown University in 1994.

Film Synopsis and Biography information taken from www.sonyclassics.com/mykidcouldpaintthat

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Amir Bar-Lev

When I first approached Mark and Laura Olmstead about doing a film about their daughter Marla, they asked me a very simple question: "Why would anyone agree to have a documentary made about them?" Overnight, their lives had been turned upside down by the media, with news crews from around the world descending on their hometown and jostling one another for a clear shot of their 4 year old. One week of this had exhausted them – and the thought of a total stranger gaining access to their family life for a year or so was daunting. Their question stumped me. I knew that I certainly would never let someone make a documentary about me. I remember grasping for a response, something like, "I don't know, I guess a documentary may get at a deeper truth that these news crews might miss – something you might like Marla to have 20 years from now." After thinking about it for only a few minutes, Mark and Laura agreed to make the film.

From that moment on the Olmsteads treated me not as a journalist, but as a friend. Part of the reason for this was that I had a fun, rompous "friendship" with Marla and her little brother Zane. From the beginning, I quickly learned it was absurd trying to turn a 4 year old into a documentary subject. I had initially expected that if I spent enough time with Marla, I would, at some point, be able to document her genius. The reality was that once I got past Marla's shyness, she was interested in playing with me, not with talking about art. Since I didn't envision being a part of the film, this made gathering even the most basic b-roll challenging. I would run circles around the Olmstead's back yard, hiding behind the cameraman, hoping that the kids would forget about me and I could shoot the kind of idealized, "kids lost in their own reverie" footage I thought the film needed. Countless shots were ruined by the kids "breaking the fourth wall" to ask me to play with them or intervene in a dispute.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

- The "fourth wall", originally a theatre term, referred to the invisible wall between actors on the stage and the audience.
- Breaking the fourth wall occurs when a character shows awareness of an audience. In the case of a documentary film, it occurs when an observed subject takes notice of the filmmaking process by either acknowledging the camera or filmmaker.

One theme I tried to get at in the film was the malleable nature of meaning – how one person can look at a painting and see the work of a genius, and another can look at the same canvas and see a mess. Similarly, when I first heard 60 Minutes II's allegations that Marla wasn't doing the paintings, all I could think of was that I had already filmed Marla painting several months earlier. However, when I revisited the footage which I had remembered as showing Marla painting, I began

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to wonder whether my camera had captured something that my own eyes had seen but my brain somehow hadn't processed.

The bewilderment only deepened as I began to turn over the possibilities. If Marla wasn't doing the paintings, why would Mark and Laura ever have allowed 60 Minutes to do a piece? Why would they have invited me to make a documentary?

Especially given my "deeper truth" speech upon our agreement? Marla had done one sub-par painting – what did that prove? Was it really conceivable that Marla had been propped up in front of a bunch of paintings that she hadn't done – and hadn't ever said anything about it? And was it really possible that Mark could hide this from his wife – it would mean that, mysteriously, every time a painting was completed, Laura was out of the house? I had to conclude that the Olmsteads' version of events was the most likely – or rather, in retrospect, I chose to conclude that – it was far more comfortable than the other, darker scenarios.

Other films that feature child prodigies:

- *Little Man Tate* (1991)
- *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993)
- *Shine* (1996)
- *Good Will Hunting* (1997)
- *Finding Forrester* (2000)
- *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)

When I first began shooting, there was a steady parade of news crews and cameramen wanting to come in and shoot Marla painting. Laura laid down a rule: "no strangers in the house." Myself and my cameraman were exempt, because Marla felt comfortable with us. But one year later, this comfort level became a liability – every time we tried to film Marla painting, she was distracted, preferring to pay with us or goof off. Laura and I agreed that I would replace my cameraman with

someone new, who would not be introduced to the kids, and who would not interact with them nor be warm or playful. I would stay in the car so that the kids wouldn't know I was in town. In one year, the situation had turned 180 degrees, from the Olmsteads not wanting anyone around their kids who wouldn't be warm, to keeping away anyone who would be warm – all in an attempt to gather the footage of Marla being a genius that would exonerate them. Towards the end of the film, Marla's art dealer Anthony Brunelli says, "everybody's trying to shape the story into something that they want it to be – and not letting the story be what it is." I hope that *My Kid Could Paint That* is, in part an answer to this admonishment. Ultimately, I disagree with Tony's line. There is no story without a storyteller. As a journalist, I could no more "let the story be what it is" than I could hover around Marla with a camera crew and somehow capture innocence incarnate on videotape.

from www.sonyclassics.com/mykidcouldpaintthat

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TIMELINE OF EVENTS

February, 2000	Marla Olmstead is born in Binghamton, NY
Early, 2002	Marla Olmstead begins to paint
October, 2003	Coffee Talk exhibition, Binghamton, NY
May, 2004	Gallery owner Anthony Brunelli approaches the Olmsteads about putting on an exhibition.
August 4, 2004	First article by Elizabeth Cohen in <i>Press and Sun Bulletin</i> Stuart Simpson reads Cohen article, buys two paintings and a drawing.
August, 2004	First exhibition at Brunelli Fine Arts Director Amir Bar-Lev begins shooting with the Olmstead Family
September 28, 2004	New York Times Article "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl."
October, 2004	Second exhibition at Brunelli Fine Arts, Binghamton, NY
February 23, 2005	60 Minutes II report
March, 2005	Marla's west coast debut at Stu-Art Gallery, Encino
July, 2005	"Five" Exhibition, Brunelli Fine Arts, Binghamton NY "Ocean" DVD released to the public
June 24 – August 20, 2006	"6" Exhibition, Stu-Art Gallery Encino, CA
August 17, 2005	Last day of shooting with the Olmstead Family
September, 2006	Stu-Art closes its Encino Gallery

from www.sonyclassics.com/mykidcouldpaintthat

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What is a documentary?

- A documentary is a non-fiction work such as a film or TV program that presents political, social or historical subject matter in a factual and informative manner.

(from the American Heritage Dictionary)

Short History of the Documentary

- The term was coined by film critic John Grierson in 1926 while reviewing Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*.
- Grierson defined the documentary as "creative treatment of actuality."
- Robert Flaherty, an American prospector, is widely considered the "father of the documentary." His feature length documentary, *Nanook of the North (1922)* follows the struggle of an Eskimo family.
- Prior to this, nonfiction cinema had existed for over two decades. The earliest works were shorts called "actuality films" which were often single shots or moments captured on film. An example

SCREENING WITH MEANING

Media Literacy is the ability to analyze, evaluate and understand media messages.

The following concepts and questions provide a foundation for evaluating films (and other forms of media) with your students.

Core Concepts of Media Analysis

1. All media messages are constructed

Questions to ask: *Who is the producer of the message? Who is the message constructed for? (Who is the target audience?) How do you know?*

Media messages are created by producers, and everything that you see in a media message – the size, shape, and color of the actors, the camera angles, the sounds, the fonts – have been selected by the producers to achieve a desired effect. And those same producers are bringing their own views and personal histories into that message, whether they do it deliberately or not.

2. Media messages are created with a purpose

Question to ask: *Why is this message being sent?*

Media messages can: express an opinion or point of view, educate through factual content and information, persuade an audience to buy a product or act in a certain way, or entertain.

3. Media messages are constructed use a unique language

Question to ask: *What methods or techniques are used to attract and hold my attention?*

of this type of film is *Workers Emerging from a Factory* (1894) by Louis and Auguste Lumière.

What is cinéma vérité?

- A style of filmmaking that attempts to convey candid realism.
- It employs naturalistic techniques such as the use of real people (nonactors), natural locations and unscripted and unrehearsed situations.

Discussion Questions

- How are documentary films different than fiction films?
- How are they different than the news?
- How is watching a film about a social issue different than reading about it?

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Very specific techniques are used in the creation of media. These techniques (lighting, sound, talent, editing choices, camera angle, design, etc.) are used to relay the intention (or purpose) of the creator/producer of the message.

4. Media messages are representations

Questions to ask: *What has been left out of the message? What information, perspective, or representation is absent? Who might benefit or be harmed by this message?*

It is impossible to represent an experience, perspective or any part of reality in its totality. As a result media messages are generalizations of an experience or point of view. Often times this leads to misinformation, over-generalizations, and stereotypes.

5. Different people experience the same media messages in different ways.

Question to ask: *How might different people understand this message differently than I do?*

You get out of a media message what you bring to it. Who you are (your age, race, class, experience) greatly affects your point of view and how you will interpret any given media.

6. Media have embedded values and perspective.

Question to ask: *What values, lifestyles or points of view does this message reinforce or support?*

No media message is completely objective. The author or producer of any message is going to be influenced by his/her own point of view, beliefs, and value system.

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The Nation; Which Was Painted By a Child?**By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN**

A 4-YEAR-OLD in Binghamton, N.Y., whose splattery paintings have been selling for \$6,000, is the latest child to raise the question: What is art?

The painter is Marla Olmstead. Her preferred medium is acrylic on canvas. She gives titles like "Dinosaur" to cheerful smears of blue and red with dark squiggles on top. Her break came at 3 when a family friend hung her art in a local coffee shop. Now collectors are lapping it up.

The art market operates according to its own logic. In truth, all art by children looks great when it isn't olive drab. Modern art has accustomed us to appreciate untutored spontaneity and blithe enthusiasm. That enthusiasm can lead most children to mix too many colors and end up with mud. The child who, by intuition or instruction, knows when to stop looks like a genius.

But prodigy is a label without real meaning, ultimately. How young do you have to be? How good? Who's to say? Abstract art amplifies the confusion.

The crack that somebody's child could have made a Jackson Pollock entirely misses the point of what Pollock was about -- which was to upend modern painting -- but it stumbles onto the essential mystery of formal eloquence: abstraction can be meaningful and look beautiful for reasons that have nothing to do with whether a dinosaur resembles a dinosaur.

Its ambiguity is a rich subject for heady painters today like Gerhard Richter, who switch-hits between realism and abstraction, in the process asking whether abstractions say anything at all.

A 4-year-old's costly daubings suggest that they do. They tell us innocence is priceless.

From The New York Times, Published October 3, 2004

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CLASSROOM USE

To enrich the students' experience, we recommend pre-viewing and post-viewing activities for **My Kid Could Paint That**. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the study guide to meet their own learning objectives for their students.

Grade Levels

This film is recommended for middle and high school students.

Subject Areas

Language Arts

Media Studies

Visual Arts

Pre-Viewing

You can share the film synopsis and introduce information from Screening with Meaning.

Post-Viewing Discussion

To help facilitate discussion, the following questions are broken up into 3 categories: thinking/feeling questions, knowledge questions, and media literacy questions.

Thinking/Feeling Questions:

- How do you feel about Marla and her family at the end of the film?
- Why do you think people were drawn to Marla's work?
- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to end the film the way he did?

Knowledge Questions:

- What is the definition of a prodigy? Who are other well-known prodigies either real or fictional?
- Marla's work was compared to the works of abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. What defines abstract art? Who are other abstract artists? Compare abstract art with photorealism (Anthony Brunelli, Marla's art dealer, was a photorealist painter).
- What is the definition of celebrity? What are some different ways people can achieve celebrity status?

Media Literacy Questions:

- The media (particularly the news media) could be considered another character in this film. What role did it play? (e.g. created desire for paintings, made Marla

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- a celebrity, revived art debate, vilified parents)
- Art Critic Michael Kimmelman says in the film “All art in some way is a lie...your documentary on some level is going to be a lie...”
What does he mean?
 - At one point in the film, the filmmaker turns the camera on himself? Why does he do this? What is its significance in the film?

Post-Viewing Activities

- As Michael Kimmelman writes in the *New York Times*, Marla’s work raises the questions “What is art?” Using that question as the central theme, set up two groups to debate whether or not Marla’s work is art. Encourage students to use visual examples and cite relevant sources. As an option, students can write opinion pieces on their position.
- Art appraising is an art in itself and has gained popularity with television shows like *Antiques Roadshow* and online auctions. But how do you put a value on art? Students should research how artists price artwork and the ways in which artwork can increase/decrease in value.

Hold an art auction in class. Choose photos of artwork from artists and periods studied in class. Have the photos with relevant information (artists’ name, date created, medium) out for viewing prior to auction. (Do not disclose known value of the art.)

From their research, students should have an idea of the value of the works up for auction. Let the bidding begin! (Make sure to establish rules for the auction). At the end of the auction, compare the sold price of the art to the current known value of the work.