

Parker Young

Van Gogh at Work

They made a movie about Vincent Van Gogh, animated by a team of painters in the style of Van Gogh's paintings. It's called *Loving Vincent*. The world's first completely painted movie. Sounded like a gimmick to me, but my father-in-law played it the day after Christmas, when we were all sitting in his living room, recovering from a disastrous *Jeopardy!* viewing experience, by which I mean my wife's brother named a pornographic actress in an attempt to answer a question regarding a Steven Soderbergh movie. He was thinking of the wrong Soderbergh movie, but my wife's father said, "Who?" and googled her name on his phone. A taut silence filled the room. My father-in-law spent years in therapy recovering from what he always called "sexual addiction."

So we were all in a strange mood when the Van Gogh movie came on, feeling slightly displaced and out-of-sync with the passage of time. It proved to be a savvy choice. Something about the old-fashioned artificiality of the movie's renderings calmed us. I suppose I can only speak for myself — maybe everyone else went on feeling vaguely panicked while the movie played, while I got lost in the dancing, sour yellows and speckled blues of the imitation Van Goghs.

The main question the movie asks is, did Van Gogh really shoot himself in the chest, out in the countryside, before one of his canvasses? It's a detective movie. The man from Van Gogh's portrait with the yellow jacket and pencil-thin moustache plays the detective; in the process of trying to deliver a letter to Vincent's brother (already deceased, it turns out), he becomes fascinated by the discrepancies in local accounts of Vincent's death. Was it murder or suicide? Or some strange combination of the two? It occurred to me that this may have truly become an urgent question for the people making the movie, specifically the hired painters. Perhaps they felt that, by spending countless hours imitating Van Gogh, they were not just loving him, as the title suggests, but actually *becoming* him. And when you're in the process of becoming someone else, it's important to know if that person killed himself in the middle of the very same work you're attempting to duplicate.

Now the movie became much less relaxing; the oil paint washed across the screen at a desperate pace, and whenever I

saw red, I became nervous it would turn out to be blood, the blood of the animators, who had reached a breaking point, same as Van Gogh. I noticed that the moment of the gunshot is never actually animated. Be reasonable, I thought, it's nothing more than an example of noble restraint. But I couldn't help but imagine that although it was in the script, they couldn't keep the animators assigned to paint it alive. They dropped dead by the dozen, I thought, infected by their hero Van Gogh. Killed by the feeling they were simultaneously making the best and worst paintings of their lives.

I squeezed my wife's hand, but she was asleep. Everyone was dead asleep but me. I married into a family of easy sleepers. My family is the opposite. Nobody knows how to sleep. My mom watches television at all hours of the night because she can't sleep, and my dad has sleep apnea. His sleep apnea is a symptom of asbestosis, the result of breathing in too many asbestos fibers. He got it from doing mechanical work at a nuclear power station in Oconee, South Carolina, a short drive from our house. By this point in time, everyone understood the danger of asbestos exposure, his supervisors included. But they needed the work done anyway.

Parker Young lives in Chicago. His writing has appeared in *Hobart*, *Miracle Monocle*, and *Oyez Review*.