

My Kid Could Paint That

a film by Amir Bar-Lev



Official Selection 2007 Toronto Film Festival

Running Time: 83 minutes
Rated: PG-13

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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 things 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 Fraudinger,” 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.

THE DIRECTOR

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. It won 6 international awards, received "Two Thumbs Up" by Ebert and Roeper, and was called "Brilliant" by *The New Yorker*, "Enthralling" by *New York Times*, "Funniest film of the summer" by the *New York Post* and "one of the best documentaries of this year or any other" by *Rolling Stone*. *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 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.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR: 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 home town 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.

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 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, ever 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.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR CONT .

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 play 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.

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN QUOTES FROM THE FILM (THE NEW YORK TIMES CHIEF ART CRITIC)

"A case like Marla; because it touches on all sorts of deep rooted issues about whether modern art is real or not, it has a kind of strange hypnotic appeal to it. So I wrote something that appeared to me to be really about the complications of abstract art. Why people don't seem to feel there's really some way of judging what's good, what's bad. There's this large idea out there that abstract art and modern art in general has no standards, no truths. And if a child could do it, it pulls the veil off this con game. and shows you that somebody who's four years old can do something that is not only good, but as good as a famous artist who sells his pictures for millions of dollars." "That idea that art is not really about some truth, but it's about some lie being foisted on the public. There's a debunking quality to it. This seems genuine and honest. But abstract art and modern art in general are a kind of racket , a put on."

"If you take an artist like Pollock; everyone figured that this is the ultimate example of modern art gone crazy. This guy dripping, splashing paint. Pollock basically invented a whole new way of painting. And the photos of him dripping, splashing waling around these canvas' made it look that much more like he was not an artist." "If you put a paint brush in the hands of any animal that has the ability to produce something, it will produce something like abstract art. It's the ultimate joke, that a chimp could do it, that an elephant could do it. It's ridiculous." "People just think you have to be crazy to pay that amount for what looks to me like something anybody could do."

"One of the fundamental problems that people have with art, because a lot of it used to be transparently clear - it used to tell a story, that there's some assumption that art has an obligation to explain itself to you. And if it doesn't then it's the arts fault. But Modernism wanted to tell a variety of stories. Now it continues to tell stories - there's all sorts of art. If we're talking about abstract paintings, there are still stories being told. They may be about the characters who *made* these pictures - and that was the case with Pollock. He became this kind of mythic figure. Or in the case of Marla, they make cases about some child. And that story captures people's attention."

MICHAEL KIMMEL MAN QUOTES FROM THE FILM Cont.
(THE NEW YORK TIMES CHIEF ART CRITIC)

"The appeal of figure like Marla ties them to our bizarre obsession of child prodigies. This fascination we have with the child who somehow exceeds all conceivable human expectations. If they seem to be performing on an adult level, then it's like a magic trick. There's a spiritual level which appeals to people. This idea of innocent creation. People could read all sorts of things into her pictures. That there was some force at work, something larger than even Marla. This child's speaking almost as a medium. And her innocence also says something about the ultimate cynicism of the art world. There's a lot of art that's been made especially in the modern era which is about alienating its viewer-ship. This idea of actually sticking it to the very people that are patronizing it. Probably the worst thing you could say about an artist is that everything this artist does is joyous and wonderful and an open hearted and simple and free. In certain circles this might sound like you're not serious. I think probably some of the appeal though to a large public of the Marla world is that it seems pure innocent joy— no cynicism, no irony, no sarcasm, none of that stuff that goes along with modern art. You know, no one is saying fuck you in this picture. They're just saying 'I'm a happy girl who loves painting.'"

"Cartier-Bresson used to say that photographing people was appalling— that it was some sort of violation of them, that it was even barbaric. Because you were essentially stealing something from them, you were imposing something on them. He sensed the inherent unfairness in this transaction. All writers, all storytellers, are imposing their own narrative on something. All art in some way is a lie: it looks like a picture of something, but it isn't that thing, it's a representation of that thing. Your documentary on some level is going to be a lie; it's your version of things. I'll say that right now if you'd like. Your documentary will be a lie; it's how you've decided to tell a particular story."

THE CAST

Marla Olmstead

Marla was born in Binghamton NY in 2000, and began painting at age 2. At age 3, Andy Stevens, a family, suggested that the Olmsteads hang her pieces in his coffee shop. Her first sale went to coffee shop patron Tom Nemceck for \$250 dollars. Marla's abstract paintings are done with acrylic on canvas and uses brushes, squeeze tubes, spatulas and her hands. She is now 7 years old and continues to paint.

Mark and Laura Olmstead

Marla's parents gave Marla her name as a derivation of their first two names. Laura works in a peritonitis's office, and Mark is a manager in a Frito Lay plant. Mark is an amateur figurative painter who took up painting as a hobby a year before Marla was born. Mark and Laura have taken over sales of Marla's paintings.

Zane Olmstead

Zane Olmstead, Marla's little brother is less bashful than his older sister. At one point in *My Kid Could Paint That*, the prodigiously funny 2 year old boasts that he began painting at an even younger age than his famous sister: "When I was in mommy's tummy."

Anthony Brunelli

Anthony Brunelli is a Binghamton native, a photorealist painter, and gallery owner. He first saw Marla's work in spring 2004 at a friends house, and became her dealer that Summer. Mr. Brunelli and the Olmsteads parted ways in 2005.

Stuart Simpson

Stuart is a collector who never liked abstract work until he saw one of Marla's paintings on a visit to Binghamton in 2004. He credits Marla with inspiring him to fulfill a life long dream of opening his own gallery. In March 2005, A Stu Art Gallery opened, but the *60 Minutes II* expose on Marla severely impacted Sales. Although the Encino Gallery closed its doors in September 2006, Stu-Art maintains its online presence and for a period of time represented Marla's work.

Michael Kimmelman

Michael Kimmelman is chief art critic at The New York Times and a contributor to The New York Review of Books. A native New Yorker, he was educated at Yale and Harvard, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and is the author *Portraits: Talking with Artists at the Met, The Modern, the Louvre and Elsewhere*, which was named as a notable book of the year by the Times and The Washington Post. He also authored the book, *The Accidental Masterpiece: On the Art of Life and Vice Versa*. Kimmelman wrote about Marla in the Week in Review Section of the New York Times a week after her first show at Anthony Brunelli Fine Arts.

Elizabeth Cohen

Elizabeth Cohen is a reporter at the Press and Sun Bulletin, the author of several books including *The Family on Beartown Road*, and the mother of Ava Van Pelt, who would like everyone to know she is a very gifted artist too. Elizabeth was the first journalist to write about Marla.

THE CREW

John Battsek and Andrew Ruhemann (Executive Producer/Co- Executive Producer)

John Battsek and Andrew Ruemann run Passion Pictures, one of the UK's leading feature documentary production companies. In 1999 they conceived and produced *One Day in September*, which won an Academy Award in 2000 and an Emmy in 2001, since when they have been responsible for a variety of high profile feature documentaries all of which have been theatrically released across the globe. These include *Live Forever* (selected for the 2005 London Film Festival), *Once in a Lifetime* (Nominated for the 2006 IDA award and selected for 2006 Berlin Film Festival). They co-produced *Black Sun* (Winner 2004 RTS Best Sports Doc Award), and *In the Shadow of the Moon* (selected 2007 Sundance Film Fest World Documentary Competition).

Stephen Dunn (Co- Producer)

My Kid Could Paint That is Stephen Dunn's first film as a producer. He graduated in 2005 from Brown University with a degree in film.

John Walter (Editor)

John Walter directed and edited *How to Draw a Bunny*, which won a Special Jury Prize at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and was an Independent Spirit Award nominee for Best Documentary. *How to Draw a Bunny*, was theatrically distributed and was released by Palm Pictures in fall 2006. He has edited and directed projects for Comedy Central, the Independent Film Channel, the Sundance Channel and PBS.

Michael Levine (Editor)

Michael Levine's credits editing credits include *The Cruise*, *The Boys of Second Street Park*, *Ring of Fire*, *The Emile Griffith Story* and *Factory Girl* among many others.

Carl Deal (Archival Producer)

Carl Deal was the Archival Producer and Field Producer for *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and also worked on Michael Moore's Oscar-winning documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*. Previously, Carl was a news producer for Worldwide Television News and the European Broadcasting Union, and has also contributed to numerous documentary productions. In 2005, Carl supervised the archival research for HBO's *Left of the Dial*, and Sundance's audience choice, *Murderball*.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT "MY KID COULD PAINT THAT"

SONY PICTURES CLASSICS WEBSITE FOR: "My Kid Could Paint That"

Link: <http://www.sonyclassics.com/mykidcouldpaintthat/>

MARLA OLMSTEAD'S OFFICIAL WEBSITE

Link: <http://www.marlaolmstead.com/>

WIKIPEDIA the free encyclopedia

Search: Marla Olmstead

Date: May 27, 2007

Link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marla_Olmstead

Excerpt: *Marla Olmstead (born 2000 in Binghamton, New York) is an artist, considered by some to be a child prodigy of abstract art. Olmstead began painting before her second birthday and by 2004 had attracted international media attention. Her abstract pieces have been as large as five feet (1.52m) square, hailed by critics as impressively complex, and have sold for tens of thousands of US dollars. Rarely has anyone but her parents witnessed her art during its creation.*

CBS NEWS.COM

Search: 60 Minutes II - "New Questions About Child Prodigy"

Date: February 23, 2005

Link: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/02/22/60II/main675522.shtml>

Excerpt: *In most ways, 4-year-old Marla Olmstead is just like any other child her age. She goes to pre-school, plays with dolls, and loves to draw and paint. But Marla paints unlike any other kid in the world. She's signed her name to dozens of works deemed breathtaking by fans of abstract art. She's garnered international attention, and her paintings are selling as fast as she can finish them - for as much as \$24,000. And that's where the mystery comes in: How is it possible that a girl so young and so small can create works of art that many say are so sophisticated and so complex? Correspondent Charlie Rose reports.*

ABC NEWS.COM: ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Search: ABC news prodigy artist Marla Olmstead

Date: January 28, 2007

Link: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/arts/articulate/200701/s1834939.htm>

Excerpt: *Could a young child really be the artist behind a series of paintings selling for thousands and said to be comparable to Pollacks and Picassos? In a documentary screened at the [Sundance Film Festival](#), director Amir Bar-Lev sets out to find the truth behind the media frenzy surrounding four-year-old Marla Olmstead, and whether her paintings are the product of a child prodigy or a hoax orchestrated by the art equivalent of pushy stage parents.*

T O L E A R N M O R E A B O U T
"MY KID COULD PAINT THAT" *Cont.*

T H E H O L L Y W O O D R E P O R T E R

Search: Sundance Film Festival Review on *My Kid Could Paint That*

Date: January 25, 2007

Link: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/awards_festivals/fest_reviews/article_display.jsp?&rid=8681

Excerpt: *PARK CITY - A 4-year-old girl who does world-class abstract paintings and becomes an international celebrity seems like a ripe subject for a penetrating documentary about the nature of art. However, "My Kid Could Paint That" is not that film. Instead, director Amir Bar-Lev stumbled on a juicier story about whether the young artist might not be the sole creator of her work. Picked up for distribution at Sundance by Sony Pictures Classics, the film and the controversy should generate interest at the box-office, but it's more a story about media manipulation and parental responsibility than art.*

T H E N E W Y O R K T I M E S

Search: "4-Year-Old Paints With Flair" by Michelle York

Date: September 28, 2004

Link: <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F70E16FA3C5C0C7B8EDDA00894DC404482>

Excerpt: *BINGHAMTON, New York—The hottest new abstract artist in town has reason to celebrate. This summer, she went from selling her work in a coffee shop to having her own gallery show. After a local newspaper's feature on her, about 2,000 people came for opening night -- everyone from serious collectors to the artist's preschool teacher. She earned more money than she could comprehend. The gallery owner said it was his most successful show ever and scheduled a second one for October. So celebrate, the artist did. During a recent visit, she climbed on a big bouncing ball shaped like a frog, grabbed the handles and bounced around the house with laughter peeling and pigtails flying. The artist is Marla Olmstead. She is 4.*

I N D I E W I R E . C O M

Search: Sundance Park City '07 Interview with Amir Bar-Lev

Date: January 23, 2007

Link: http://www.indiewire.com/people/2007/01/park_city_07_in_23.html

Excerpt: *Filmmaker Amir Bar-Lev has already directed numerous award-winning narrative and documentary films, including the feature length documentary "Fighter", which won six international awards. This year, Bar-Lev brings "My Kid Could Paint That" to Park City. The documentary questions whether four-year-old Marla Olmstead, who's sold more than \$300,000 worth of paintings, is really a child prodigy. At first, "her work captured the imagination of the world," according to the Sundance Film Festival, however, the media began to question the authenticity of Marla's work.*

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT
"MY KID COULD PAINT THAT" *Cont.*

LA WEEKLY: ARTS+BOOKS

Search: Prodigy Schmodigy by Doug Harvey

Date: July 19, 2006

Link: <http://www.laweekly.com/art+books/art/prodigy-schmodigy/14030/>

Excerpt: *"She started painting at 1," recounts Stuart Simpson, whose Ventura Boulevard gallery in Encino is hosting recent kindergarten grad Marla Olmstead's West Coast solo debut. "She was motioning to her dad that she wanted to try and paint something — her dad's a painter, but he doesn't paint much — so he gave her a canvas and brush and said, 'Go and play,' and she started painting. Well, she kept doing it and they wound up with more paintings than they knew what to do with, so they gave some to their friend who owns a coffee shop in downtown Binghamton, New York, and he hung them on the wall. Then this couple comes in and asks if they're for sale, and the owner says, 'I don't know — let me call the mother.' And Laura said, 'Sure — 250 bucks,' thinking the guy would just laugh it off and go away. Then they called back and said, 'Okay, the check is here.' From \$250 to Mosquito Bite, which is \$25,000, she's come a long way."*

BBC NEWS

Search: "Child art prodigy wows New York"

Date: September 29, 2004

Link: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3701484.stm>

Excerpt: *A four-year-old girl is wowing the New York art world with paintings that are drawing comparisons with Jackson Pollock and Wassily Kandinsky. Marla Olmstead, from Binghamton, in New York state, has been painting since just before she was two years old. Using brushes, spatulas, her fingers and even ketchup bottles, she is creating canvases of six by six foot. The prodigy has already sold about 25 paintings, raising \$40,000 (£22,000).*

THE REELER.COM

Search: Interview with Amir Bar-Lev, *My Kid Could Paint That*

Date: January 20, 2007

Link: http://www.thereeler.com/sundance_features/amir_bar-lev_my_kid_could_paint_that.php

Excerpt: *Q: Tell me about My Kid Could Paint That.*

A: "It's the story of a 4-year-old girl who's sold a couple hundred-thousand dollars' worth of abstract paintings in the space of about six months, and after six months her dad was accused of secretly authoring the paintings."

Q: And controversy ensues.

A: "Controversy ensues, and the filmmaker -- me -- gets dragged into the story because he's mid-way through a film that suggests Marla is doing the paintings. It's kind of a meta-narrative."

T IMEL I N E

- February, 2000** Marla Olmstead is born in Binghampton, NY
- Early, 2002** Marla Olmstead begins to paint
- October, 2003** *Coffee Talk* exhibition, Binghampton, NY
- May, 2004** Gallery owner Anthony Brunelli approaches the Olmsteads about putting on an exhibition.
- August 4, 2004** First article by Elizabeth Cohen in *Press* and *Sun Bulletin*
- 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, Binghampton, 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 - Aug. 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

CREDITS

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