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***Big Dreamers* and *This American Gothic* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

Linda Falkenstein on Saturday 04/05/2008 9:30 am , (4) Recommendations

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You could call *Big Dreamers* and *This American Gothic* a double feature of documentaries that ponder the relationship of art and tourism. But the audience at Monona Terrace on Friday evening seemed to view them both as comedies of the Christopher Guest/mockumentary sort, wherein somewhat foolish townfolk/enthusiasts are made to look ridiculous, just by being themselves.

Big Dreamers tells the story of an Australian town in need of an economic boost -- so town leaders plan to erect a giant "gumboot" (that's just a rubber boot) in order to attract tourists, in the way of certain Interstate exits in Wisconsin featuring giant cows and mice with hunks of cheese.

It did bear some resemblance, I suppose, to *Waiting for Guffman*, but I was reminded of the documentary shown at Mount Rushmore, which makes clear both the titanic struggles of sculptor Gutzon Borglum and the fact that the idea for the monument was born out of a desire to attract tourists to South Dakota. What makes art high-minded? At what point does a memorial become a tourist attraction? How is Mount Rushmore different from a big boot?

This American Gothic, to me the more interesting film, examines the Iowa site of the white Gothic cottage in the background of Grant Wood's iconic "American Gothic." Townsfolk attempt to raise enough money to build a visitor center for the site, in part out of respect for a piece of Americana but also to rev up their dying town. The filmmakers also interview art historians on the impact of Wood's famous painting, so the film becomes more about art's relationship to commerce in a much wider context. One of the highlights is the clip of a vintage 1960s cornflake commercial that uses the farmer couple to hawk the cereal.

Though I guess I run the risk of sounding like the rather pompous art history professor type in *This American Gothic* by saying so, I preferred these as food-for-thought rather than as comedies, and as food-for-thought they gained power through their juxtaposition -- but either way, an interesting pairing of films.

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