

Style

Oscar-nominated ‘Waste Land’ gives grace (and art) to garbage

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Correction: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly said that artist Vik Muniz expected to be greeted with hospitality by the garbage pickers of Rio de Janeiro. In fact, he expected to be greeted with hostility. This version has been corrected.*

By Jason Edward Kaufman

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The contemporary art world may be an orgy of the rich, but occasionally it shows a glimmer of compassion for the poor. That’s the takeaway from “[Waste Land](#),” a film about the Brooklyn-based, Brazilian-born artist Vik Muniz, which recounts a celebrated artist using his work as an instrument to promote social justice.

The documentary accompanies Muniz to Brazil, where he plans to harvest garbage from one the world’s largest landfills and use it to assemble portraits of people who scavenge the dump for their livelihoods. Expecting to be met with hostility, he and an assistant visit the site and discover instead a community of amiable and well-mannered workers. Rather than proceed on his own, he decides to collaborate with the workers on their “garbage” portraits and to return proceeds from sale of the artworks to improve their lives.

An Oscar nominee for Best Documentary this year and winner of the

Audience Awards at Sundance and the Berlin Film Festival, the 93-minute film — directed by Lucy Walker (“[Devil’s Playground](#),” “[Countdown to Zero](#),” “[Blindsight](#)”) and with a soundtrack by Moby — will be released on digital and DVD on March 15 and have its television premiere April 19 on PBS’s “Independent Lens.”

Muniz, 49, whose work is in the National Gallery of Art, the Corcoran Gallery and other Washington collections, is the most successful contemporary artist from Brazil. An international star, his photographs — mainly portraits and Old Master compositions that he “paints” using unlikely materials, such as chocolate syrup and dirt — have sold at public auction for more than \$250,000 and been exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and hundreds of other museums around the world. In other words, he has no need to dumpster-dive to make a living.

But Muniz grew up in a working-class family in a rough neighborhood of Sao Paulo. He was shot in the leg trying to break up a fight and, with the compensation he received, moved to New York in the 1980s to make his fortune. Having grown up poor, he says, he wants to give back, and he has made several bodies of work with a social edge and become involved in nonprofit groups that serve street children in Rio de Janeiro.

Jardim Gramacho, established in 1970 on the northern edge of Rio, is a 320-acre dump that takes in 7,000 tons of the city’s waste a day. Within sight of Rio’s iconic statue of Christ the Redeemer, a workforce of thousands of garbage pickers — *catadores* in Portuguese — awaits an endless convoy of trucks to sift and pick recyclables from the mountains of trash. They remove 200 tons a day, selling the metal, plastic, PVC, paper, rags and other materials to wholesalers, who re-sell to recycling companies.

We learn from interviews with the workers that most of them grew up lower middle-class and, after losing a husband, parent or job, wound up earning a miserable income wading through the city's garbage, some living in rat-infested shanties for \$8 rent a week. These *catadores* are articulate, honorable and competent in their work, but even though licensed by the city since the 1990s, they are shunned by society, the stigmatized victims of poisonous classism.

Muniz, who says with less luck he might have wound up in similar straits, befriends seven men and women among the *catadores*, takes their photographs and returns to his studio, where he projects the images onto the floor. From a balcony above, using a laser pointer, he directs the workers (who are paid for their time) to arrange bits of recycled garbage to "draw" the graphic portraits. His photographs of these assemblages become a series of large-scale artworks that he later sells to wealthy collectors.

Of the six portrait sitters featured in the film, the star is Sebastiao Santos, co-founder and president of the labor association that represents 2,500 garbage pickers. Muniz poses him in a bathtub a la Jacques-Louis David's 1793 painting "The Death of Marat." Santos accompanies Muniz to London, where the portrait sells at auction for \$50,000. Santos breaks down in awe and gratitude, and Muniz tells him, "It's only the beginning." He's right.

The film reports the sale of the seven "Pictures of Garbage" raised \$250,000, which went to the *catadores* association, which used the funds to buy a truck and open a learning center. (It is not clear whether they will receive additional funds from future sales of prints.) Muniz gives the sitters a framed print of their portrait and helps install them in their homes. He reportedly also gave the group some cash.

But the greatest impact seems to have been to help legitimize *catadores* as respectable human beings and a recognized sector of the labor force. A scene has the workers admiring their portraits in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, where they tell their stories to the media.

And in bonus material on the DVD, we learn what became of the participants. One started her own cooking business; another realized his dream to open a library for the *catadores*; one went to live with her father; and another got a job in a drugstore. A woman who attended secretarial school said the film experience had given her “the will to change.”

We learn also that Jardim Gramacho is scheduled to close in 2012 (pursuant to a law abolishing open-air dumps) and that the *catadores* association is training the pickers for new jobs. The film’s notoriety has enabled the organization to establish medical, day-care and educational centers for the group and to secure contracts with recycling plants being set up in Rio and also with the World Cup, which will be in Brazil in 2014.

Santos — who the film’s producer, Angus Aynsley, predicts will take on a larger political role in Brazil — is gaining professional recognition for the *catadores* and advocating recycling as ecologically and economically sound public policy. The association helped establish recycling cooperatives in neighboring municipalities and convened the first international conference of *catadores* in Sao Paulo in November 2009.

Santos said his encounter with Muniz renewed his hope for society. This documentary of that experience renews our hope for the art world. With the gap between the wealthiest and the rest of society widening every day, “Waste Land” is a timely reminder that sometimes the powerful — in this case a famous artist — act with a social conscience.

“Waste Land”

(DVD single and Digital)

93 minutes plus extras

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