

New Releases



Quasi
"Field Studies"
Up Records
Grade: B+

Quasi's Sam Coomes has made a career out of hating everything. Life, himself, relationships, the music industry, work. Coomes isn't too fond of any of it. But he seems to take a perverse pleasure in being chronically unhappy.

"Life is dull, life is gray/At it's best it's just OK/But I'm happy to report, life is also short," Coomes sang on Quasi's last album, "Featuring 'Birds.'"

It's the word "happy" in that lyric that makes it work. Quasi songs take great delight in their depression.

As on Quasi's other albums, the music on "Field Studies" is so buoyant and bright, it makes the listener forget how grim the subject matter is. Coomes pens nursery rhyme lines with easy rhymes that bounce up and down on his classic pop melodies.

Imagine an alternate universe in which a depressed Dr. Seuss hits rock bottom and decides to end it all, his jar of sleeping pills next to his bed. Before he takes the pills, he decides to write a children's book about his suicide, full of the usual Seuss wit and humor. Quasi albums sound like that imaginary book set to song.

Appropriately for Coomes, a man who manages to turn failure and misery into happy little pop songs, the other member of the band is his ex-wife, Janet Weiss, who has a higher-profile job drumming for critical darling Sleater-Kinney, is the counterpoint to Coomes' bleak world view. She provides an energetic, upbeat tempo to Coomes' slightly lethargic voice, and her sunny harmonies contrast with, and even mock,

Coomes' undying pessimism. Their romantic relationship may have failed, but their musical partnership works because of the contradictions.

This contradiction shows up in the sound of the music, too. In Quasi's universe, rock music can be traced in a straight line from 1960s rock to indie rock, as if neither punk rock nor stadium rock ever happened.

Quasi follows Rock tradition with a capital R in songwriting. The words rhyme; the harmonies and melodies are catchy. Paul McCartney bass lines and George Harrison guitar flourishes are all over "Field Studies," especially on the four songs in which Elliot Smith, a Beatle fanatic, plays bass. Even "It Don't Mean Nothing," which sounds like punk on the surface, owes more to the Kinks and other '60s garage rock on repeated listening.

However, Quasi's music also lives in a 1990s indie-rock world where there are no stars. The songs are simple and deeply personal. This is what mainstream rock would have sounded like if it hadn't been preoccupied with platform shoes, smoke machines and \$60 ticket prices. But the music is too fragile, too skeletal to resonate with MTV audiences or rush-hour radio listeners.

And there's that pessimism issue, too. Quasi's songs are too negative for mainstream radio fans and too smart and witty for doom-and-gloom obsessives.

To be fair, Coomes is aware of his shtick. "Don't believe a word I sing/Because it's only a song, and it don't mean a thing," he sings on "The Golden Egg," a beautiful piece of melancholic pop. He also jokes, "I feel much better when I'm under a cloud," on "Under a Cloud."

Coomes knows it's silly to be depressed all the time, and his songs work best when he pokes fun at his own sad-clown persona. He even moves beyond it on "Smile." The song chastises a never-quite-made-it semi-loser for always looking on the side of the fence where the grass has died. He punctuates these verses with the chorus, "Smile, it's not so bad."

And he almost sounds as if he means it.

— Josh Krauter

'Bone Collector' breaks no innovative ground

BY SAMUEL MCKEON
Senior staff writer

"The Bone Collector" contains nothing most moviegoers haven't seen before, including Denzel Washington as a cop, because he's a cop in almost every other movie he makes.

But this time, Washington defies convention and goes into the final frontier of pigland: paralysis. Of course, his character, Lincoln Rhyme, is brilliant, has written 12 books and generally has an answer for every question asked of him.

But a serial killer threatens his genius by butchering New York citizens and leaving them in grimy warehouses and below underpasses. Lincoln needs some help. He gets it in pillow-lipped Amelia (Angelina Jolie), a NYPD beat cop who's about to take reassignment with juvenile offenders.

This is the movie. It breaks no ground in terms of excitement, though director Philip Noyce raises the gross factor in his depiction of the murders — none of which are particularly suspenseful after the first kidnapping, where a rich industrialist and his wife get trapped in a taxi driving nowhere.

There's a supporting cast, essentially drawn to help Lincoln and Amelia in their search for a killer and then die periodically. Even Lincoln's nurse (Queen Latifah, who plays a nurse a lot) gets in on the action.

Washington has to act with only his face, and he does well with it, but it

really time for him to move on. His character alternates between seriousness and gallows humor at his condition — this tactic gets old in 20 minutes.

Jolie, beautiful wonder that she is, is good as the cop forced to be Lincoln's eyes and ears in gruesome situations. She, too, will move on quite soon with her acclaimed turn as a mental patient in "Girl, Interrupted."

The villain, a person who does not seem physically capable of committing the murders, is completely arbitrary to the point of ridicule. For those who like trying to guess whodunit — fuggedaboutit.

I don't know. "The Bone Collector" isn't bad, just there. No risks. No great performances. Just typical movie fare.

One thing: Do not view this movie in hindsight. Trying to give this movie the viewing grade it deserves is pretty hard, considering the holes that permeate the whole story. Just see it and forget it.

Film Review The Facts

Title: "The Bone Collector"
Director: Philip Noyce
Rating: R (bloody murder, language, Angelina Jolie's big lips)
Stars: Denzel Washington, Angelina Jolie
Grade: C
Two Words (that's all it's worth): Nothing special.

Sheldon shuffles its art

BY DANELL MCCOY
Staff writer

Most of the collection is usually tucked away, but this month, about 80 works have been dusted off and displayed in six gallery areas at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.

The Sheldon, 12th and R streets, is presenting a complete reinstallation of its permanent collection, emphasizing the diversity in the development of American art.

Although many of the most important works are on permanent display in the gallery throughout the year, Dan Siedell, curator of the Sheldon, said some of them were being sent to Massachusetts for an exhibit. This meant reorganization of the collection.

"We haven't had much of a radical reorganization until now," he said. "These spaces are spaces that don't get moved around much."

"I remember that when I went here for my undergraduate work, the pieces were always in the same place," he said. "I always wanted a more radical change."

For the reorganization, the Sheldon decided to bring in works that haven't been on display and intermingle them with the regular pieces on display.

The reinstallation consists of

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curator of the Sheldon

six galleries. The paintings are no longer arranged in chronological order. Instead, they are organized thematically. Each gallery presents a different theme.

The first provides an introduction to the basic themes within the five other areas. It will contain only 18th and 19th century American art.

The other five will exhibit 20th century art featuring the human figure, still lifes, urban landscapes, pastoral landscapes and animal and plant life.

"By organizing the works this way, they are more user-friendly," Siedell said. "It provides a continuity. These themes are broad enough to allow for artistic interpretation, yet narrow enough to show how artists in the 20th century respond to each theme."

Siedell said the reorganization also will allow viewers to see how American art has developed over the past few decades from different stylistic perspectives. It also shows the unity, as well as the diversity, of American art throughout history.

Photography is included in the exhibition and will be displayed in correspondence with the themes of the paintings and sculptures.

Siedell said although the reorganization of the gallery's permanent collection was a necessity, it also allowed for them to work with pieces many people may not have seen before.

"Some of the works we have brought up from storage have not been seen before," he said. "Some of them have not even been on display."

Artist's pieces foster a family thread

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ings.

The subjects of many of her early paintings focus on images of her family's restaurant when she was a child.

She described the family-run restaurant, which was a block from where she lived, as the family's psychological home.

It was such a major part of her family members' lives that the workers in the restaurant were considered a part of the family, she said.

Her strong connection with this place gave her vivid memories to draw on.

"I had something to say but didn't know what I wanted to say. Art is what I wanted to say," Wong said.

This need to express herself also brought her to mixed media installation work using common materials surrounding her.

"Mixed media means I use everything from my children's old rocking horse and vintage suitcases to the more traditional pencil and paints to create my works," she said. "I use a lot of nontraditional materials."

The materials she integrates in her work include rice, rice sacks and suitcases.

She is an installation artist because she often makes the space her work is in part of her work.

She said when she is asked to show her work, she will go look at the place it is being shown and see how it fits into the site. Then, she uses everything from the floor to the ceiling.

Her unique way of using common materials and integrating them into their surroundings has earned Wong much recognition.

She received the 1997-98 Installation/New Genre Award from the arts council in Silicon Valley.

She also received the 1995 President's Award on behalf of the national Women's Caucus for Art and has numerous other awards and grants.

One recent honor was her acceptance as a resident at the Bemis Center in Omaha, which brought her to Nebraska for the first time.

It was here Wong fell in love with Nebraska and its people.

She was thrilled the Bemis was located in the Old Market of Omaha, but what impressed her most was the

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FLO OY WONG
artist

geographical differences between Nebraska and California.

"The geographical changes were just stunning," she said. "The sky in Nebraska is just awesome."

Not only did she fall in love with the geography, she also developed a bond with many of the people she met.

"I didn't realize I would run into such interesting people," she said. "I was accepted with open arms."

She said coming in as an artist allowed her to blend into the community immediately and make many deep attachments with families in the community.

She said she has become good friends with Asian faculty and staff members in Lincoln and has become acquainted with many of the city's Chinese restaurant owners.

She described Nebraska as having lots of culture and says the people and students she works with are very receptive to her.

"Nebraska now has very much of a presence in my work," she said.

In Nebraska, she has entered a visual art world and what she described as two of her comfort zones, teaching and art.

In Lincoln, she has done workshops with students at all levels.

Lea Worcester, an assistant for the artist-in-residence program, has had an opportunity to see Wong teach her classes.

"It was remarkable to see her working with the students," Worcester said. "She gets 200 percent out of the students."

Worcester talked about the arts and humanities project Wong is doing with sophomores and juniors in high school.

Worcester said Wong starts with a slide show, which gives the kids a focus on what she will be talking about.

The photos in the slide show are of her parents' Chinese village.

"They get a feel of why her parents wanted to leave their humble village," Worcester said. "They had no electricity or plumbing, and one photo shows a tree with a spot of missing bark. The village people had to eat bark because they were so hungry."

The next phase of her workshop involves students writing in journals about profound family experiences they have had. They are then asked to collect photos from their home.

After the journal writing and photo collection, they are asked to fashion their art into a collage in a case.

"It was very interesting to see how these kids took off once she got started with them," Worcester said. "She really knows how to tap into the students and get them to look inside themselves."

Wong also has students working on a rice sack flag for a project she has been developing for two years.

The flag will be put on display on Angel Island, off the coast of California. Angel Island was an interrogation center for incoming Chinese people in the first part of the century.

Wong is teaching children to tell a story through their work because she describes herself as a visual storyteller.

"I like to tell stories but don't like to have a final product in the form of a book," she said. "It comes out in forms of art projects."

Wong's stories are 40 years of built-up feelings and thoughts coming across in paintings and mixed media work.

"My whole purpose is to make art and talk about issues that are important to me. I talk about family, community and culture," she said.

"There is a strong universal thread that weaves through what I do that allows me to touch other cultures and make them understand."