

F I L M R E V I E W



... But is it art?

The world of modern art gets a roasting in Takeshi Kitano's morbidly funny 'Achilles and the Tortoise'

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Director Takeshi Kitano, who also works under the name Beat Kitano, has a very personal style as both a director and an actor, and has never been afraid of confounding expectations. He has a passion for portraying the violent lives of men living on the fringe, but with his latest feature, *Achilles and the Tortoise* (Akiresu to Kame), he turns his gaze to the world of modern art.

Kitano is a practicing artist himself, which might explain this blackly comic rendering of the art world that would be absurd if its consequences for the characters involved were not so terrible. For Kitano, the world of modern art is as full of viciousness and chicanery as the lowest yakuza dive, and while the violence is more psychological than physical, Kitano ensures that plenty of people still get dead.

The title *Achilles and the Tortoise* is taken from the famous paradox of the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea. An explanation of the paradox is given in an animated sequence that precludes the film. The film itself is a vastly expanded portrayal of the concept of the paradox. Achilles in the film is Machisu Kuramochi, a young boy from a wealthy family who loves nothing better than to draw. His tortoise is some kind of meaningful fulfillment, which the film suggests will be found in art. But however Kuramochi chases it, fulfillment remains out of reach.

This is a life story laid out as a mathematical problem, and it is the inevitability of the math that drives the story forward. Kuramochi makes one futile attempt after another to become an artist and win the appreciation of his peers. His work is constantly denigrated, but often finds its way onto the market in the hands of unscrupulous dealers, though Kuramochi gets no cash or credit, and he works increasingly frenetically to find a style that will sell.

The early section of the film shows Kuramochi as a youth, depicting a childhood of privilege stripped away by family



Motion becomes an illusionary principle in Takeshi Kitano's *Achilles and the Tortoise*.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF FILM

Film Notes

ACHILLES AND THE TORTOISE

DIRECTED BY: TAKESHI KITANO

STARRING:

TAKESHI KITANO (MACHISU KURAMOCHI), KANAKO HIGUCHI (SACHIKO), YUREI YANAGI (ADOLESCENT MACHISU), REIKO YOSHIOKA (YOUNG MACHISU), NAO OMORI (ART DEALER)

LANGUAGE: IN JAPANESE WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

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disintegration. His only pleasure is in making primitivist paintings with the village idiot, before his own insistence on working from life gets the man killed as he tries to sketch a moving bus. This is but one of many of Kitano's jibes at art theory in the course of the film.

In adolescence, similar disasters, also fatal, follow. At art school, abstract expressionist paint splashing exercises lead to the death of a student who rams a paint-laden truck into a huge canvas. When the waitress at the local canteen offers to pose for Kuramochi nude, the singularly ugly Fauvist inspired work he produces is the source

of hilarious confusion.

In middle age, Kitano himself takes over the role of Kuramochi, but continues these little satiric sketches of various modern art movements. Needless to say, Kuramochi is always one step behind the curve, creating endlessly derivative work in an accelerating frenzy of activity. He does find time to marry and have a daughter, but both become victims of his obsessive determination to come to grips with his art.

Kitano and the two actors who play Kuramochi as a child and an adolescent play the role straight, letting the humor of the situations develop around them. It is perfectly effective, Kitano is a fine performer, and some of the scorn poured on modern art and the people involved in it is hilarious. Unfortunately, Kitano lets the film run on too long, and the joke begins to wear thin. The fact that this monotony seems to be what Kitano is consciously aiming for does not make the spectacle more enjoyable. Toward the end of the second hour, even as the situations become increasingly absurd, it is harder and harder to keep rooting for Achilles.

You'll have to watch the movie to find out whether Achilles ever does catch the tortoise, but by that stage you might not really care.