

'The Smell of Us': Venice Review

VENICE – **Larry Clark** does Paris in the oddly named if otherwise largely familiar *The Smell of Us* (one hopes the title isn't a comment on French hygiene). This is basically a Francophone *Kids*, with only slightly more body hair and with teen prostitution replacing HIV. Oodles of very explicit sexual content, hard drinking and drug use will keep U.S. teenagers from seeing *Smell* in cinemas, should a stateside distributor pick this up, though a well-publicized VOD premiere seems more likely. That way, old voyeurs and randy youngsters alike can enjoy this impressionistic and downright depressing tale of adolescent sexuality from the comfort of their own homes, should they so desire.

Clark's previous film, 2012's *Marfa Girl*, which was distributed exclusively online, was set in the sleepy, sun-drenched Texas town of the title. With the teeming metropolis of grey-skied Paris as its backdrop, instead of the Lone Star State, the frames of *The Smell of Us* are naturally more densely packed with people. On top of that, cinematographer **Helene Louvart**'s frequent close-ups suggest both intimacy and a sense that there's no personal space or privacy in either the big city or the 21st century, where everything's constantly captured on video phones and small cameras (footage of both is threaded into what passes for the narrative throughout).

The screenplay is credited — "was written" might be overstating the case — to **Scribe**, the pen-name of 24-year-old Frenchman **Mathieu Landais**, as well as Clark. However, there's a sense that much of the scenes were improvised on the go, and the current edit isn't held together by a storyline as much as the fact that several people happen to appear in one more than one scene. About half the film is over before audiences even get to know the names of some of the kids they see, constantly engaged in nothing much of substance — though there's plenty of substance abuse.

The most arresting presence of the group of skaters and rent boys Clark follows turns out to be called Math (**Lukas Ionesco**), short for Mathias. He's got the features of a well-mannered Roman aristocrat, topped by a head of angelic, blondish curls. He's also very aware of his allure, milking his looks for cash by sleeping with rich older men. They're clearly turned on by his ephemic physique, with its light dusting of body hair that suggests he'll soon turn into a man, so this might be the last stop before his

loss of innocence. Of course, in reality, that innocence has been gone for ages, though it's never quite clear what has replaced it or why Math does what he does (he doesn't exactly live on the street).

Dark-haired beanpole J.P. (**Hugo Behar-Thinieres**) frequently hangs out with Math and also turns tricks. But the reasons behind his behavior, which emerge piecemeal from only vaguely connected scenes, are very different, since he's desperately in love with his buddy. That's strictly one-sided, however, as Math, who's described by his semi-incestuous mother (**Dominique Frot**) as "too selfish to have any friends," is only "gay pour le cash," as he himself so heartlessly puts it.

That's about it in terms of story, though the film also follows other members of their posse, who all come to skateboard and hang out in front of the Palais de Tokyo and its twin building, the Museum of Modern Art. None of the people here seem to have a lot of self-worth or a developed sense of moral judgment, let alone any interest in art, so they pay zero attention to both the countless art-loving visitors that pass them by or the area's frequently drunk homeless man that the youngsters have nicknamed Rockstar — there's even a supposedly provocative shot of the clochard's crotch as the wets himself — who looks suspiciously like Clark on an especially bad day. Clark's *Bully* star **Michael Pitt** also appears, uncredited, as a scruffy busker.

What the sequences of all these youngsters, clearly adrift in an amoral void, all add up to is open to debate. A quick shot of Math crying on the shoulder of a colleague after servicing a client suggests he might have a flicker of an inner life after all and a disturbing sequence with his grotesquely screechy mother hints at severe unresolved issues at home (they are especially resonant when one realizes Lukas is the son of **Eva Ionesco**, whose troubles with her famous photographer mother were the subject of her biographical feature *My Little Princess*, with **Isabelle Huppert** as the mother).

There's also an extremely odd sequence in which an older bearded man feels up half-naked, dripping-with-sweat youngsters at a rave and none of the dancing boys seem to really mind. When the pumping diegetic music is replaced by soothing indie rock and the images slow down, there's almost a sense that the director, who's 71, has introduced this figure as a kind of perverse comment on the fact he hasn't stopped eyeing up naked youths since the beginning of his career as a photographer back in Tulsa.

As is often the case with Clark, there's no attempt to explain anything, only the desire to film what's there, right now and on the surface. Indeed, much like the characters in the film, a part of the audience might feel simply numbed after being exposed to so much sex, violence, drugs and general apathy.

Absent a narrative throughline, many of the shots are stitched together by the almost constant stream of loud and punchy songs on the soundtrack, much of it from the hand of **Jonathan Velasquez**, one of the leads from Clark's *Wassup Rockers*.

Production companies: Morgane Production, Polaris Film Production & Finance, Polyester, Wild Bunch

Cast: Lukas Ionesco, Diane Rouxel, Theo Cholbi, Hugo Behar-Thinieres, Rayan Ben Yaiche, Adrien Binh Doan, Dominique Frot, Philippe Rigot, Michael Pitt

Director: Larry Clark

Screenplay: Scribe, Larry Clark

Producer: Gerard Lacroix, Christophe Mazodier, Pierre-Paul Puljiz

Director of photography: Helene Louwart

Production designer: Natalia Brilli

Editor: Marion Monnier

Music: Howard Paar

Sales: Wild Bunch

No rating, 87 minutes