

## Season special

### Film meets art at the ICA

The post-war US art scene – in all its back-stabbing, paint-splashing and skag-shooting glory – takes centre stage this week at a short ICA film season named 'Shoot Yr Idols', reports **David Jenkins**

First off the pile at this week's ICA film season dedicated to documentaries about modern American artists is James Crump's excellent **'Black, White and Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe'** (★★★★★), a beautiful and tender glance at the life of blue-blood art collector Sam Wagstaff and his influence on photographer (and lover) Robert Mapplethorpe. Wagstaff was a champion of all kinds of esoteric art forms but here most attention is reserved for his immense collection of photography, which he later sold to the Getty Museum. Crump's film colourfully depicts Wagstaff's complex inner mindset and rarefied eye for imagery by allowing the stunning prints to linger on the screen.

Morgan Neville's **'The Cool School'** (★★★★★) is a slickly packaged

document of the burgeoning modern art scene in LA during the late '50s and early '60s which sadly submerges its fascinating subject matter in technical clutter and contrived set-ups. Abstract expressionist works by artists such as Billy Al Bengston, Ed Kienholz and Wallace Berman – all regular exhibitors at LA's pioneering Ferus Gallery run by Irving Blum and visionary curator Walter Hopps – are spoiled as idents and subtitles whiz across and around the screen, making the testimonies of Dennis Hopper, Frank Gehry and Dean Stockwell feel slightly redundant.

Next is **'Face Addict'** (★★★★★), a ruminative DV portrait of the beat/disco/punk cliques of New York in the late '70s and directed by Italian fashion photographer Edo Bertoglio (house snapper for *Interview* magazine in the early '80s). In the film, Bertoglio reconvenes with various sparring partners, drug buddies and scene stalwarts who reminisce about the 'the good old bad old days'. There are some interesting moments and insightful contributions by John Lurie and Debbie Harry. There's also a great anecdote by artist James Nares in which he recalls how Nan Goldin would drift around the New York clubs wanting to take pictures of people shooting drugs. One time, he



Mapplethorpe (left) and Wagstaff



1950s LA artists in 'The Cool School'

agreed to do it, so she handed him a package of MDA and he overdosed on the spot.

Regrettably, the film's intended air of melancholy is all but annulled by Bertoglio's wan, haughty and utterly pretentious narration about how wonderful New York was at that time. All this despite the fact that he and many of his associates were reduced to roaming the gutters of Alphabet City, scabbling for change to feed their junk habits. Also, too much screen time is given to rambling violinist/artist Walter Steding, who was mercilessly chewed



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up and spat out by the Warhol machine and left to linger through the '80s and '90s as a drug casualty who now lives out of a storage container.

Unlike Bertoglio, first-time director Esther Robinson proves that a dash of subjectivity isn't always a bad thing, showing a remarkable clarity of vision and thirst for knowledge in her superb **'A Walk Into the Sea: Danny Williams and the Warhol Factory'**

(★★★★★). It tells the story of her late uncle, artist, technician, filmmaker and Warholite Danny Williams, whose creative output was cut drastically short due to his strange disappearance in 1966 at the age of 27.

At once an affecting trawl through Robinson's family archive and a jaw-droppingly frank social fresco of the people, places and practices of Warhol's Factory, the director draws a series of lively interviews from her subjects (Ron Nameth, John Cale, Paul Morrissey *et al*) and, in the process, says as much about the erratic nature of oral history as she does the plight of her uncle. The film also features one of Williams's own angular (and highly accomplished) 16mm shorts.

*See listings for details of screenings.*

*All films screen this week apart from 'Face Addict', which opens on Aug 22.*