

Victoria Dalkey -- Bee Art Correspondent - (*Published January 15, 2006*)

If you enjoyed the Crocker Art Museum's Marsden Hartley exhibition, which closes Jan. 29, you may want to attend a screening of a new movie based on Hartley's epic poem "Cleophas and His Own." In a review of a screening at the Portland Art Museum in Portland, Maine, art critic Edgar Allen Beem aptly described the film as a story "about the goodness of a simple life as told by a man who lived a troubled life."

The 2 1/2-hour movie, directed by Michael Maglaras (who also plays the role of Hartley), will be shown at 7 p.m. Jan 28 at the Crest Theatre, 1013 K St. Maglaras, a successful insurance consultant in Stamford, Conn., who seems cut from the mold of eccentric New England artist-businessmen such as Wallace Stevens and Charles Ives, will give a gallery talk at 3 p.m. the same day at the Crocker.

The slow-paced, beautifully made film presents Hartley (Maglaras) seated in a makeshift studio in Maine in 1943, where, tired and ill, he tells a tragic story of the sad fate that befell the Masons, a fisher family he lived with on an island in Nova Scotia seven years before.

Hartley's poetic memoir dramatically brings to life the characters that transformed his life and art, including the Masons' son Alty, who was the love of Hartley's life. Recast as a French Canadian family headed by the noble and stoic Cleophas, the members of the Mason family memorialized in Hartley's poem become archaic, elemental forces that shaped the artist's tragic, romantic vision of art and life.

Using Hartley's text in its entirety and preserving the poem's 13-chapter structure, the film uses flashbacks and 24 of Hartley's paintings and drawings to tell of the events leading up to and following the Atlantic hurricane of Sept. 19, 1936. That was the day Alty (here called Adelard) and his brother Donny (Etienne in the film) lost their lives.

Hypnotic in its effect, the haunting film illuminates Hartley's life and work with a nearly Bergman-like gravitas. Shot entirely in Maine with a Maine cast and crew, the film has been shown only five times since its completion early last year. I recommend it highly.