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Raul Ruiz' new film, *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, examines the desire to create form out of chaos in the art world.

'The Hypothesis' as ambiguous as its subject matter

By JOE LEYDON
Post Film Critic

All people who write at length about the arts — drama professors, film critics, art historians, you name it — are motivated on some level by the reflexive desire to discover, or impose, a rational design in what appear to be disordered, purely random creative impulses. But

Film review

what if there is no rational design to be found? Does the determined expert give up? Or does he invent a design out of whole cloth?

Raul Ruiz, a Chilean political exile currently making films in France, examines and gently mocks this obsession with "explaining" art in *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, a moody, inefably spooky black-and-white film originally produced in 1978 for French television.

It begins as a fanciful pseudo-documentary about Tonnere, an imaginary 19th-century French painter whose works, though apparently innocuous, once were considered scandalous. An elderly, pedantic "collector" (Jean Rougeul) makes elaborate claims of deeper significance for the seemingly mediocre canvases, theorizing they symbolically depict an obscure pagan ritual. "Ignore the narrative elements," he tells us, and concentrate instead on the "striking details."

To bolster his theories, the collector re-creates six Tonnere paintings in three dimensions, as elaborate *tableaux vivants*. Unfortunately, the chain perceived by the collector as uniting the diverse works is broken. That proves, he insists, there is a seventh, now

'THE HYPOTHESIS OF THE STOLEN PAINTING' ★ ★ ★ (ou. of 4 stars)

British Film Institute release directed by Raul Ruiz. Screenplay: Raul Ruiz and Pierre Klossowski. Cast features: Jean Rougeul and Gabriel Gascon. French with English subtitles. Houston premiere: 8 p.m. Friday, 7 p.m. Sunday at Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Running time: 67 minutes. No MPAA rating.

missing painting. Or maybe, Ruiz implies, the collector is absolutely, positively mistaken.

Maybe there is no seventh painting. And maybe, even if there were, the collector would still be wrong. The old fellow admits as much when he concedes any explanation ultimately would be a disappointment. Even so, however, he'll keep plugging away, creating order from chaos through sheer force of will.

Hypothesis is a teasingly ambiguous puzzle, constructing intricate theories, then demolishing them with harsh scrutiny. In a way, the film works as a commentary on cinema itself, showing how the filmmaker, much like the collector, tries to unite individual, disparate images in a coherent narrative that reflects life. But life itself is beset by imponderables: impulsive gestures, what-the-hell outbursts, rogue flashes of inspiration. No one is in control. So why should creative impulses be any different? Why should six paintings — or seven paintings — by the same artist have any connection other than the artist himself?

The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting suggests we view all attempts at artistic interpretation with deep suspicion. I suggest you treat this review with the same wariness, and go see the film yourself.