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Hilarious Highlights from Dennis Quaid's Auction House Drama 'The Art of More'

Ben Davis, Wednesday, December 9, 2015

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The cast of *The Art of More*.
Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook page.

I admit, I was skeptical when I heard that Crackle.com was making a show about the New York auction world. Even the show's title, *The Art of More*, sounded like a misfire. It took me a second to decipher that it was a play on Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, the bible of 1980s-era Wall Street executives.

Well, everyone is entitled to being wrong once. Having just binge-watched an entire season of *The Art of More*, I can tell you that it's great! (For those who don't know it, Crackle is a Hulu competitor best known for Jerry Seinfeld's *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* and the inscrutable-to-me *Sports Jeopardy!*)

Let me qualify this praise. *The Art of More* is not good enough to satisfy fans of "good TV." It's also not quite knowingly over-the-top enough to achieve *Empire*-level sublimity. Instead, it pioneers a new kind of genre, not a "hate watch" but the "huh?-watch." Its main pleasure is the wackiness of its *Drunk History*-style depiction of the New York art scene.

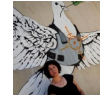
The show focuses on the cutthroat rivalry between account executives at

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two powerful New York auction houses, Parke-Mason (standing in for Sotheby's, which auction lovers will remember acquired US auction house Parke-Bernet) and DeGraaf's (that would be Christie's).

On one side is Graham Connor, a Bensonhurst boy turned Marine turned antiquities smuggler turned Parke-Mason account executive, played with bland but credible New-Yawk charm by Christian Cook.

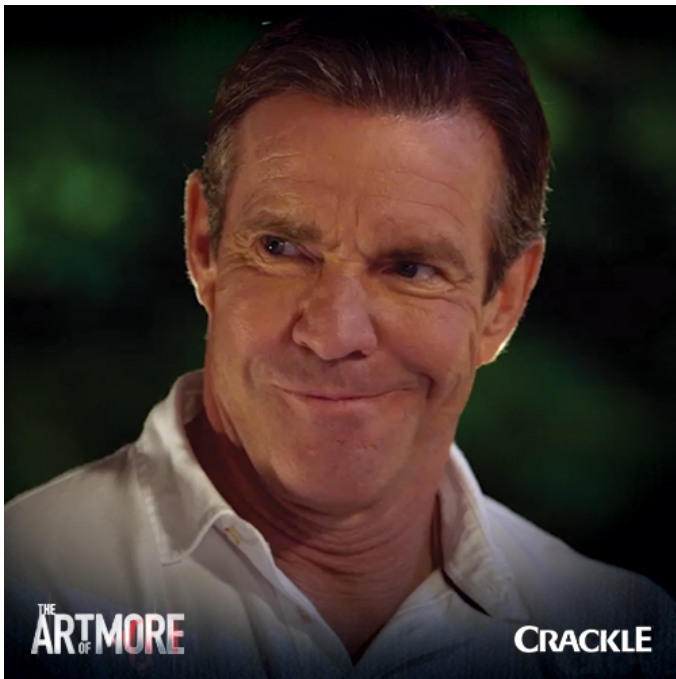


Christian Cook as Graham Connor.
Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook.

Opposite him is robotic recovered alcoholic Roxanna Whitman, daughter of DeGraaf's CEO, out to impress her icy father. This character is played by Kate Bosworth, who has gone from playing a surfer in *Blue Crush* to playing a non-humorous version of Emily Mortimer's character in *30 Rock* —the one who worked for Christie's and had "avian-bone syndrome."

As these two spar and flirt with each other, dueling for lucrative accounts, they orbit around two others. One is Arthur Davenport, played by elegantly weathered, one-time *The Princess Bride* heartthrob Cary Elwes, who is a wealthy antiquities collector and mentor to young Graham.

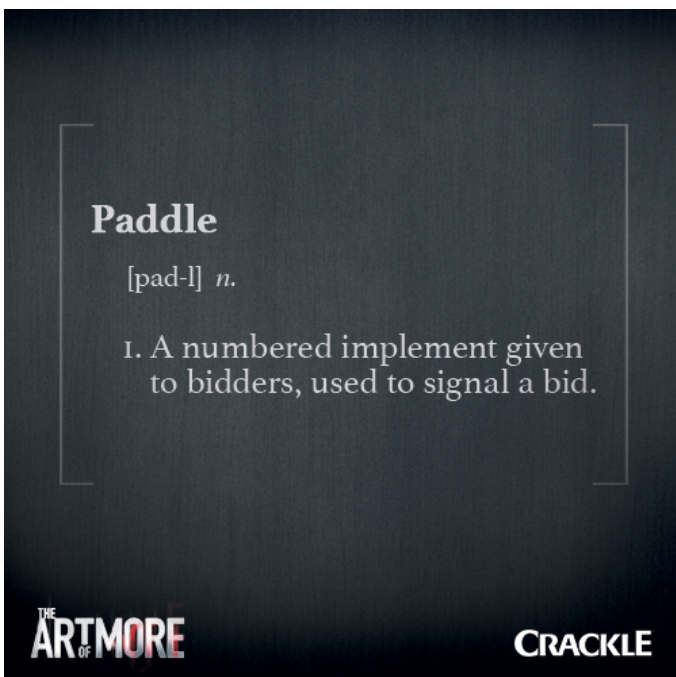
More importantly, there's Sam Bruckner, a brash, hard-partying real estate titan trying to stage a charity auction to launch his political career. The character is written as a hybrid of Peter Brant and Donald Trump. Dennis Quaid (who also produces the show) is having such a good time as Bruckner that you forgive the show for all its flaws when he's onscreen.



Dennis Quaid as Sam Bruckner.
Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook.

The plot is preposterous and convoluted, even by soap opera standards. In addition to the art auction action, the main story revolves around Connor's entanglement with a trio of nefarious Iraqi antiquities dealers. These characters have just enough nuance to avoid completely turning your stomach as stereotypical "evil Iraqis"—though not by much.

Each episode revolves around one potential auction lot that will motivate the action, opening with a historical prologue taking us back in time to tell its origin story. The writers do not have a lot of faith in an audience's interest in art to carry the show. Thus, we are treated to episodes about Napoleon's hat, Steve McQueen's car, Sally Ride's spacesuit... the list goes on.



The Art of More Facebook explains the term "Paddle."
Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook.

But it is the moments where *The Art of More* tries to engage with art that make it genuinely worth the ride. And so, here are some of the Great Moments in Fake Auction History you have to look forward to when viewing the show.

Be warned, there are spoilers.

Episode 2: "We Need to Find the Current-Day Picassos"

In episode 1, Graham goes on a first date with Elizabeth Mason (Savannah Basley), a naïve Parke-Mason authentication expert (also the CEO's daughter) at an underground art hotspot that I swear is actually set in a Mexican restaurant. He abandons her abruptly when he gets a booty call from Bruckner's assistant (Cristina Rosato).



Savannah Basley as Elizabeth Mason.
Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook.

That's the set-up for the following great bit of banter as Graham tries to win her back and she schools him on the emerging art scene (at the 7:50 mark):

ELIZABETH: I actually had a great time after you left. I met a cute guy from the New Museum in the Bowery. Have you been?

GRAHAM: I haven't.

ELIZABETH: You should go. Everyone at Parke-Mason should.

GRAHAM: Sounds like a great little field trip....

ELIZABETH: I'm just saying, there's more to art appreciation than a heavy price tag. We need to find the current-day

Picassos if we want to remain relevant.

So true. Although it also sounds like she might be more at home at a smaller auction house like Millips de Murray and Co.

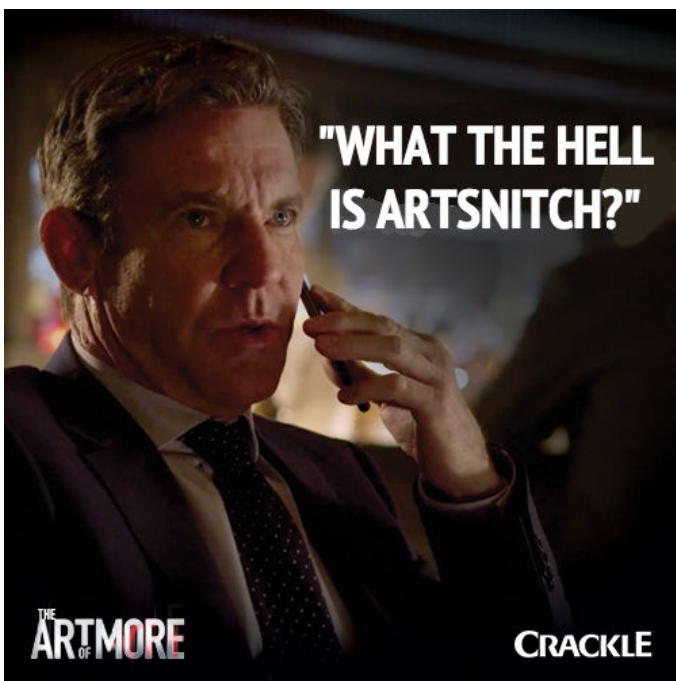
Episode 4: I Need a Priceless Van Gogh, Stat!

Through some nefarious shenanigans Roxanna lands the coveted Swift Collection, only to discover that it does not contain the priceless "never-before-seen Van Gogh" that she was after. And so, she travels to Dusseldorf to hire an unscrupulous Wolfgang Beltracchi-type master art forger to create one (3:05).

"It would be an original piece, unknown, just discovered," Roxanna explains. "We would come up with a likely subject matter, technique, and of course you will have to use the exact supplies he would have used." After seducing him with a promise of big money, he asks how much time he would have.

The answer: "Forty-eight hours." Dun-dun!

Forging priceless paintings is so easy, in fact, that the unscrupulous Swift heirs will go on to demand that Roxanna forge a fake Vermeer to further augment their big auction.



Dennis Quaid as Sam Bruckner.

Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook/modified by artnet News.

Episode 4: "Have You Seen ArtSnitch?"

This one's near and dear to my heart. All is going swimmingly for Bruckner's plan to launch his political career with a massive charity art auction—until pesky art website ArtSnitch gets in the way (8:14).

"What the hell's ArtSnitch?" Quaid bellows. "It's a blog about the art world," his assistant tells him grimly, forwarding him an article which he reads on the heads-up display of his car.

"Sam Bruckner hasn't decided whether to go with DeGraaf's or Parke-Mason," the incriminating article reads. "Or is it the other way around?"

Insiders tell ArtSnitch that both houses are looking into whether more than a few pieces in the collection are stolen."

What a scoop!

At Bruckner's behest, Graham later tracks down weasel-like ArtSnitch writer "Henry Davis" at his apartment and threatens to beat him with an ashtray if he doesn't retract the article. This confrontation yields one of this zany show's few true moments of realism, as the hoodie-wearing art scribe shrieks, "I don't have any money! Take the computer!"

Episode 6: Metzinger?

At the preview of the Bruckner Collection (25:30), Graham meets Gabrielle Mukete (Kim Nelson), director of one of the "top 20 hedge funds." Sidling up to her, he makes an overture:

GRAHAM: You looking for anything in particular?

GABRIELLE: I've always had a thing for the Cubists.

GRAHAM: We have an amazing Klee over in the other room.

GABRIELLE: I prefer Picasso, Braque, or Metzinger.

I truly have difficulty imagining the writing process that produced this back-and-forth. Surely whatever Wikipedia search turned up second-tier Salon Cubist [Jean Metzinger](#) (1883-1956) would *also* have turned up the fact that [Paul Klee](#) is not the first name you'd pull out if someone asked about Cubism.

It's doubly weird because they are standing in front of a wall of Cubist paintings.

Having just met this powerful potential client, Graham then immediately looks around suspiciously and suggests he has access to some secret antiquities that she can buy, if she doesn't mind the fact that no one can ever know about it.

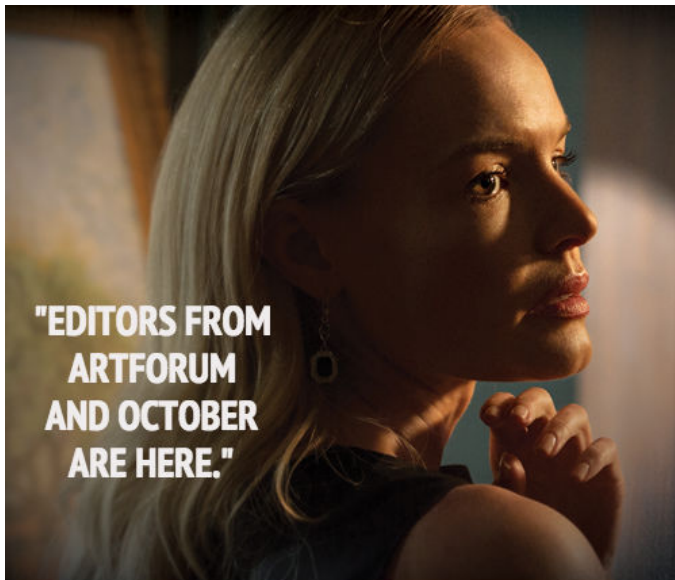
Episode 7: The Case of A Singular Case of Suicide

If you watch only one episode of *The Art of More*, make it Episode 7, "The Quatrefoil," which marks it's main attempt to depict contemporary art.

Instead of some kind of historical vignette, this time out the opening sequence (0:38) depicts hot young artist Gonzalo Silas hard at work in his studio. He appears to be a composite of [Damien Hirst](#) and [Oscar Murillo](#), and here we watch as his sculptural masterpiece, *A Singular Case of Suicide*, is born.

While opera music plays to indicate the sublimity of the creative process, Silas (Marco Grazzini) is shown personally taking apart a deer carcass, stuffing it, and then penning a suicide note from the deer. The final work features the animal posed in a bathtub with the suicide note held mournfully in its hoof, posed to resemble David's *The Death of Marat*.

"The guy who did this, you can tell he's not faking it," Graham says later (14:43), seduced by the work. "He knows what it's like to really be in pain."



Kate Bosworth as Roxanna Whitman.
Image: via The Art of More Facebook/modified by artnet News.

Episode 7: Roxanna Takes on October

By far the single greatest line of the show comes from Roxanna, who's trying to make sure she stays on top of the press at MoMA's "Modern Art Summer Fundraiser," held at the Davenport estate (10:30).

"Editors from *Artforum* and *October* are here," she informs her assistant. "That's all the interviews we'll do today. If a blogger tries to speak with you, just refer them to me." Bloggers!

In my head, I hear her follow up: "Benjamin Buchloh is writing an essay about contemporary painting as the avatar of reactionary anti-modernism —we have got to get ahead of this."



Cristina Rosato as Sam Bruckner's assistant Belinda Romero.
Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook/modified by artnet News.

Episode 7: "Today Is All About the Kids"

Almost immediately after this immortal line, Bruckner arrives at the party via school bus, unloading a passel of kids for a photo op connected to his upcoming charity auction, which will support a children's hospital (10:45). Why he is staging this stunt at a rival collector's MoMA charity event is unclear.

"Fifteen minute photo op then get them on the bus and get them out of here," Bruckner snaps at his assistant, who somehow is unaware of this plan until they get out of the bus.

Fun fact: This is based on a real incident, where collector Peter Brant bussed homeless teens up to his Greenwich estate to learn about art from Dan Colen.

You know what they say about truth being stranger than fiction? Sometimes it is also stupider.



Christian Cook as Graham Connor.

Image: via *The Art of More* Facebook/modified by artnet News.

Episode 7: *The Art of More* Does Post-Internet

Graham seems to be an expert in all types of lots—antiquities, Impressionism, cars, spacesuits—*except* contemporary. So it is left to his girlfriend Elizabeth, a contemporary art fan (she's a regular visitor to the "New Museum in the Bowery," remember?), to explain the work on view at the MoMA fundraiser to him.

Sauntering past some abstract canvasses, she dismisses the work of painter Justin Carney ("only 25, and people are raving about his stuff") but is drawn to Olivia Riddle ("she has an energy that pulls you right into it.")

The two pause, however (13:35), in front of what appears to be a T-shirt stuffed with old-timey inkjet computer paper, an opus which is too cutting-edge even for Elizabeth's tastes.

ELIZABETH: Is that computer code?

GRAHAM: We're doing a whole auction on "Algorithm Art" in the fall. For the right buyer this is a piece of history.

This, I believe, is what the show means by keeping up with "current-day Picassos."

Episode 9: The Auction Tracking Boards Are Going Crazy!

This episode opens with the return of everyone's favorite character: intrepid ArtSnitch writer Henry Davis!

Davis puts up a video on YouTube exposing Bruckner's past anti-immigrant rantings, then dredges up shady real estate deals. Everyone on Team Bruckner freaks out about the effect it will have on his upcoming political campaign... not to mention the all-important auction of the Bruckner Collection (about 10:30).

"Brant says that I am down five points in the polls in the last hour, and I'm looking at the auction tracking boards—they're down 10 percent!" Quaid barks into a speaker phone to Graham.

Indeed, in *The Art of More*, people are constantly talking about how the "estimates are holding up," apparently existing in a world where the public follows the fluctuations of pre-sale auction estimates like you follow the stock market.

Episode 10: And Finally, Some Touching Advice From Dad

You may be wondering how a working-class guy like Graham came to his extensive knowledge of art? In the season finale's episode-opening flashback, we see his dad taking the young Graham to the Metropolitan Museum. Pausing in front of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (definitely not in the Met), we witness an exchange that is meant, I think, to explain the lasting and permanent attraction to art for Graham (1:40). It's weird.

DAD: You like her?

GRAHAM: Yeah she's pretty. I like her boobs. But why is she naked?

DAD: Well, the human body is a beautiful thing. Artists have been painting it for thousands of years.

GRAHAM: My friend John has a lot of magazines like this.

DAD: Yeah. I bet he does. I find this more inspiring...

GRAHAM: What do you mean?

DAD: Well, a photograph, it tells you everything, right? But a painting, a good one, doesn't do all the work for you. Your mind has to fill in the rest.

Now that is some fine advice on art appreciation!

Cutting back to the present, this climactic episode sees the long-anticipated Bruckner Auction go forward. I won't spoil it, though I will just say that the centerpiece is Cezanne's *The Card Players*, which in real life went for something like \$250 million to the state of Qatar, which gives you a hint as to its parallel-universe fate.



The Card Players as depicted in The Art of More
 Image: via The Art of More Facebook

There is one detail, though, that I'd like to clear up for readers who aren't all that familiar with the foibles of the art world. You know that crazy part where all the rich people in the auction room give a standing ovation when a star lot sells, as if spending millions upon millions of dollars on a painting is some kind of heroic achievement?

That's totally real.

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Ben Davis

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