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The Mastermind (12a)

Dir: Kelly Reichardt

with: Josh O'Connor, Alana Haim, Hope Davis

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Synopsis: America, 1970s. Unemployed carpenter J B Mooney takes his family to a local art museum where he secretly checks the security before a robbery he's planning. With three friends he carries out the theft but when one of them is arrested, his plans begin to fall apart. Leaving his family he goes on the run, but cannot settle anywhere for any length of time. Another friend betrays him to professional criminals. He attempts to flee to Canada after stealing a woman's purse but ends up being arrested after being caught up inadvertently in an anti-Vietnam War protest.

Heist movies run on the mechanics of escape and the thrill of getting away with it, but Kelly Reichardt's latest detoured story brilliantly turns the genre on its head. In her 1970s-set film *The Mastermind*, the fallout from the mediocre robbery of a minor-league museum leads to a steadily deepening character study that ruminates on what's really at stake, and who exactly we're rooting for.

JB (Josh O'Connor) is not your usual stylish antihero with clockwork timing: he's a father of two, the son of a judge, and an under-employed carpenter by trade. The project of robbing a local museum (a favourite of his own family) occupies him like a new hobby, and his banal background initially fosters an oddball mystique as he cases the joint and pockets a miniature statuette on a trial run. Does he lead a double life as a criminal genius? Is he sticking it to the system in a disillusioned era? As an actor, the scruffily sly O'Connor looks primed to let us in on some secret as Rob Mazurek's jazzy score sizzles along.

But the steps in JB's grand plan keep wobbling, with an underplayed humour that keeps the film from tilting into easy-to-digest bumbling. His two accomplices shortly demonstrate that they're barely up to the job, and the aftermath becomes the story, from hiding the subtly wrought Arthur Dove paintings to going underground. Reichardt's typically lovely casting rounds out the comfortable middle-class family observing his predicament: Alana Haim as his wife Terri, Bill Camp as his undermining father, and Hope Davis as his indulgent mother, plus two kids he basically sets aside when the heist calls. (Hilariously, JB's father criticises the heist even when he doesn't know his son's involved: such a theft is "not worth the trouble," he declares.)

The key word is "comfortable," almost blandly so, since the robbery clearly seems to be JB's bid for attaining any distinction at all and



maybe rebelling (though he's not above dropping his father's name in a jam). Our initial presumption of an antihero who has merely misstepped leads naturally into a safe-house stay with an old friend, Fred (certified Reichardt company player John Magaro), whose withdrawal to the countryside might, in another film, signal some principled disengagement from establishment society. But crucially Fred's wife (Gaby Hoffmann) isn't buying JB's whole deal, sniffing out something shabby in his self-inflicted plight.

News keeps percolating in from the world at large in the form of dispatches from the ongoing Vietnam War and protests in the streets. Reichardt trickles these images and sounds in (no ham-handed Post-1960s Montage here) as part of life in America at the time – in a way, another aspect of the film's organic sense of period detail, from the pale blues and institutional yellows to the crankable car windows and push-knob cigarette vending machines. But significantly, these protests feel absent from JB's mind, which is perhaps not wholly unusual but grows a little glaring considering the self-indulgent nature of his endeavour. At the risk of sounding like one of JB's parents: what exactly is he doing with his life?

Not that Reichardt's tone ever gets close to moralising or judgmental (even as the film's title sounds increasingly ironic). She retains her genius for slowly but surely shifting a film's course until it's become something else again, subtly leaving us space to reevaluate what we might have thought of JB and his maverick path. It's not unlike her eco-terrorism drama *Night Moves* (2013) in this movement, but definitely more successful. At one point she crystallises the limits of JB's world and worldview with a 360-degree pan of his hotel room as he forges a passport: it begins and ends with him alone.

Reichardt has said she was inspired by a 1972 heist of the Worcester Art Museum (in another town in Massachusetts), and when the film begins, my impulse was, perhaps glibly, to see a parallel between art-heisting and filmmaking: get in, get your pictures, get out. But the concerns of *The Mastermind* run to other depths, very much conditioned by our current era, when moral dilemmas and the imperative to do anything more than stand by have reached an unignorable pitch. JB's character comes out with a sinking clarity when push comes to shove, and before you know it –

maybe like a heist in reverse – Reichardt has come and gone, leaving you with something invaluable to gaze upon and reflect.

Credits

James Blaine "J.B." Mooney	Josh O'Connor
Terri Mooney J.B.'s wife.	Alana Haim
Fred	John Magaro
Maude	Gaby Hoffmann
Sarah Mooney	Hope Davis
Judge William Mooney	Bill Camp
Louise	Amanda Plummer
Guy Hickey	Eli Gelb
Larry Duffy	Cole Doman
Ronnie Gibson	Javion Allen
Carl	Sterling Thompson
Tommy.	Jasper Thompson
Jerry	Matthew Maher
Gordon	Rhenzy Feliz
Director	Kelly Reichardt
Screenplay	Kelly Reichardt
Cinematography	Christopher Blauvelt
Editing	Kelly Reichardt
Music	Rob Mazurek

USA 2025 | 110 mins

Take 2

It's difficult to say what truly motivates James Blaine Mooney (Josh O'Connor) to blow up his own life. Frustration, perhaps, with an uninspired suburban existence with his wife Terri (Alana Haim) and their two rambunctious sons Tommy and Carl (Jasper and Sterling Thompson). A juvenile desire to embarrass his father, a county judge, in front of their community? Perhaps it's sheer, pig-headed hubris – he's an art school drop out relying on hand-outs from his parents which he claims are to fund his bespoke furniture-making business, while scheming to steal four Arthur Dove paintings from the small but well-appointed Framingham Art Museum he takes his family to visit on the regular. He recruits some acquaintances into the scheme (who will prove his eventual undoing) but the theft is entirely JB's brainchild. Besides the obvious benefit of financial gain, it's such a deeply unwise thing to do, Kelly Reichardt's Vietnam-era heist drama is immediately engaging in its opaqueness.

The crime itself is a comedy of ineptitude, but once it's over JB – with his staggering hubris – fancies himself home free. When the heat inevitably closes in, JB ditches his family, hitching rides across the Midwest in search of a way out of the hole of his own making, seeking out old friends he can bum accommodation or money off for a night or two. Mooney, an aged-out hippie with a withering stare and effortless talent for deception, seems to feel no remorse or regret, and in the phone calls he makes to his wife and kids, his platitudes are half-hearted at best. For O'Connor, it's a turn that resembles his sublime performance as tomb-raider Arthur in *La Chimera*, but there was always something half-hearted about the melancholy architecture expert's life of crime – JB is a different animal, unmoved by morality. With his Dylan-esque getup, he's a regular rolling stone, emblematic of the Nixon era of individualism ushered in by the turn of the decade.

As JB scrambles like a rat in a paper bag, the anti-war movement plays out in the background, with protestors clashing against law enforcement, while dispatches crackle through the radio static and appear in black and white newsreels. The brash isolationism of

Mooney stands apart from her usual ruggedly solitary characters; this is a man who had a comfortable middle class handed to him on a plate and decides to torpedo it for a curiously low-stakes art theft that seems to have more sentimental value than monetary. There are shades of Elliot Gould and Gene Hackman in O'Connor here, a chameleon as much as a chimera, while Alana Haim's small but crucial supporting performance as his had-enough-of-this-shit wife is further proof of her captivating on-screen presence.

Although the premise evokes the golden age of The Coen Brothers and their money-hungry n'er-do-wells, *The Mastermind* is a tragicomedy as only Reichardt can fashion, shot by Christopher Blauvelt (her regular DoP since *Certain Women*) drawing inspiration from the era-defining work of William Eggleston and Robby Müller to create images that feel lived-in – warm but distant snapshots of an America on the cusp of permanent fracture. This is Reichardt in *Night Moves* mode, but with a little more of the comedic energy (culminating in a lilting sadness) found in *First Cow*. It's a film that understands there's nothing to be gained from making oneself an island, but remains stoic and unsentimental in its vision of the past. By the time the film's crushing, riotous hammer-blow ending comes, we're left with more questions than answers about what JB's gambit was all for. Greed? Well, isn't that just another word for the American Dream?

Hannah Strong: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday March 20 2026

The Venue. 7.30pm

The President's Cake (Iraq 2025). 12a

Iraqi cinema has slowly begun to feature on the international scene and it's a pleasure to bring the latest example *The President's Cake* to the Society. Only recently released in the UK, it's the story of 9 year old Lamia who wins a competition to bake a cake for her peers at school to celebrate the birthday of Saddam Hussein - a dubious honour given that celebrating the birthday is a mandatory event and Iraq is still under international sanctions. But Lamia is determined to succeed.

Winner: Camera d'Or, Cannes 2025