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"I Wanted to Be a Painter": David Lynch on His Film Career's Art School Origins



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David Lynch
by Benjamin Genocchio
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Born in 1946, David Lynch went to art school before moving to Los Angeles in 1970, where he launched his film career with the experimental cult classic *Eraserhead*. But he never stopped painting and drawing. Now, Lynch is having an art career revival: After a 2007 exhibition at Fondation Cartier, in Paris, he's had shows at New York's Tilton Gallery, Kayne Griffin Corcoran's new space in L.A. (where he also has an upcoming show scheduled in September), and venues in Germany and Denmark, with two publications by Steidl. Benjamin Genocchio talked to the versatile director at his home in the Hollywood Hills.

How did your art school experience shape you?

I went to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, in Boston, after high school, but I didn't like it there. Later I went to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia. The teachers were real painters and I wanted to be a painter as well. I didn't learn much at the Academy, but I think the most important thing about

school is if you are with a good bunch, you push yourself along. You work harder. Also, Philadelphia had a huge impact on me. Back then it was corrupt, filthy, violent, filled with a sickness.

I was drawn to the mood of it, the aesthetic, and that city really shaped my outlook as an artist. I often say *Eraserhead* is my Philadelphia story.

What is the underlying inspiration for your artwork?

My mother was from Brooklyn, my father from Montana. From my father I got a love of organic phenomena, and from my mother I got a love of smoke, fire, industry, machines, the city. These things are always alive in some way in my work.

How did you make the transition to film?

I came to film through painting. The thing that got me into making my first film was an interest in the idea of making a moving painting. I knew nothing about film, Hollywood, or the studio system. Painting was what I wanted to do, so at art school I began to put together short films like a painting. It just happened to be with moving images, involving characters, mood, and sound.

What happened to your artmaking while you worked in film?

I continued to paint, but I didn't show so much—for a long time I didn't show at all, apart from a few times at Corcoran Gallery, in L.A., and once at Leo Castelli, in New York. But I was always working on things. If I didn't have money, I was drawing. If I had money, I was doing paintings.

You make highly imaginative, usually illustrative, stream-of-consciousness collages and drawings— or that is how they appear to me. Tell me about your process and the use of words in your work.

I go by ideas. If I get an idea for a drawing, usually the drawing comes out fairly fast and if there are words in the drawings they come in last, as something to explain a story or because I like the shape of particular letters. Ideas for paintings come and sometimes I work on paintings for a long time but it's the same process: Ideas drive the boat. The paintings take longer; they need more time to figure out, depending on whether or not I am working on anything else.

What artists do you like or admire?

Francis Bacon's paintings are things I truly love. Then there is Edward Kienholz, who I discovered in the 1970s when I came out to L.A. and is one of my all-time favorite artists. I went to Barney's Beanery because of Kienholz's sculpture. I also like Georg Baselitz and Lucian Freud.

What has brought you back to the art world after so long in film?

This is a really interesting time. In the past if someone was successful in one profession, they'd be dismissed as a hobbyist or a Sunday painter if they wanted to show art. Make you puke. But now there is this flow of ideas across everything, and it is absurd to think of a person as doing only one thing. There is this freedom to go where the ideas take you. That's what I love.

What do you hope to achieve by showing your artwork?

I would make art whether I sold the work or not. But I do like the idea of selling my art—not for the money, but because it's just nice to have someone want the work. It can give people great pleasure to own a painting, and if it is one of my works, then that makes me happy.