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ARTFORUM



David Lynch, *Six Men Getting Sick* (detail), 1967, fiberglass, resin, acrylic, and graphite on Masonite panel, 16-mm projection (color, sound, 60 seconds).

Fields of Dreams

-Dennis Lim

PHILADELPHIA LOOMS LARGE in the personal mythology of David Lynch as a place that both terrorized him and changed the course of his life, his Gomorrah and his Rubicon in one. A product of small-town America, Lynch credits this onetime epicenter of urban blight with instilling in him a fear and disgust so extreme it opened a mental pathway to "another world." He transfigured the city's postindustrial dereliction into the infernal wasteland of his first feature film, *Eraserhead* (1977), and the dying gasps of its manufacturing age—clanking gears, droning machines, venting steam—indelibly shaped his aesthetic vocabulary. It was art school that brought Lynch to Philly in 1966, and it was in his studio at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts where he experienced an epiphany that, in the familiar telling, moved him away from painting. The story appears in his memoir-cum-self-help-guide, *Catching the Big Fish* (2006). He was at work on a painting of plants in a garden when he sensed a wind emanating from within the canvas, seeming to stir the leaves under his brush. What if paintings could move? he wondered. What if they had sound? The rest is cinema history.

Yet Lynch never stopped painting after this mythical shift from still to moving images. His first US museum retrospective, on view at his old student stomping grounds, consists of almost one hundred paintings, drawings, and lithographs, more than half of them produced since the completion of *Inland Empire* (2006), which initiated his longest hiatus yet from directing (set to end with the imminent return of *Twin Peaks* in 2016). As its title

suggests, “The Unified Field,” organized by Robert Cozzolino, the academy’s senior curator, seeks to resituate Lynch as an artist who happens to make films—as opposed to a filmmaker who dabbles in painting. The show’s implicit argument is for a congruence of vision and a shared set of themes and methods in Lynch’s work across multiple mediums, throughout his life. (“The unified field” is a significant phrase not just in particle physics but also in Transcendental Meditation [TM], which Lynch has ardently promoted in recent years, where it refers to an unbounded realm of consciousness that unites all living things.)

Lynch’s visual art is typically discussed in two ways: as a valuable skeleton key to his better-known work (hence the oft-repeated notion that he makes “painter’s films”) or as little more than a hobby, the latter in an attempt to assert that he chose the right vocation. “The Unified Field” does its part to counter the second tendency by complicating the first truism. The earliest works here—drawings and paintings of interspecies creatures and man-machine hybrids from the mid-1960s—contain the first glimpses of Lynch as a figurative artist for whom the body is both a site for transformation and a zone of alienation. Most depict biomorphic fantasies in which deformity and prosthesis are emphasized, with internal organs visible and biology rendered as machinery, a system of orifices and tubes.

Throughout the show, there are points of contact—both correlations and contradictions—with Lynch’s biography and filmography. The mutant genus spawned in *Eraserhead*’s traumatic birth appears several times; a whole clan of its members can be seen in *Family*, 1974, a pencil drawing of a living-room scene that foreshadows the rabbit sitcom in *Inland Empire*. Around the time Lynch discovered TM in the ’70s, spiritual motifs emerged, for example in *Crucifixion*, 1973, an ornate ballpoint rendering, and in symmetrical geometric compositions with Renaissance arches, rainbow spectrums, golden beams, and titles such as *Infusing the Being* and *Third Ray* (both watercolors from 1974).

But the Lynchian ideal of art as immersion in and pipeline to the unconscious produces notably different effects in his moving-image work and in his studio art; the latter even at its most haunting leaves less to the imagination. If Lynch’s richest narrative films, especially from *Blue Velvet* (1986) on, have confounded the categories of irony and sincerity, twisting them into strange new affective registers, his paintings of the last two decades aspire simply to the willful naïveté of art brut. Encrusted with rough, heavy impasto, many of these large canvases—which Lynch in some cases painted with his bare hands—depict a violent action (often pyromaniacal or sexual) against a field of primordial muck, from which stray objects (a chicken foot, an undulating curtain) occasionally protrude. Lynch’s mistrust of words means that his films often resist the expository function and realist tenor of dialogue, relying instead on intricate sound design to evoke what lies beyond language. In his paintings, and especially in the recent black-and-white lithographs, there is a perverse preponderance of text: a compulsion to name, label, and caption that, in heightening their absurdity, strips words of their power.

It’s only fitting that the highlight of “The Unified Field” is the restaging of a work that reflects Lynch’s dawning awareness of medium-specificity: the installation *Six Men Getting Sick*, 1967. Made in direct response to his moving-painting moment of truth, this piece was an attempt to bring the canvas to life by combining it with a film projection. In keeping with his undisguised reverence for Francis Bacon, the first action that Lynch depicted on celluloid is a spasm. Accompanied by a blaring siren and projected onto a screen with three sculpted heads in its top-left corner, this minute-long stop-motion animated loop depicts a row of figures in agony, their digestive tracts overflowing in a collective retch that floods the image with vomit in the form of streaked white paint. But their upheaval brings no relief; the cycle starts again immediately. Lynch would strive for precisely this no-exit effect in the passages of suspended trancelike intensity that periodically take over his movies. The punch line here, as in so many of his films, is that the ending is also a beginning.

Dennis Lim is director of programming at the Film Society of Lincoln Center in New York.

“The Unified Field” is on view at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, through Jan. 11.