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David Lynch away from the camera

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C. K. WILLIAMS

“David Lynch With Film Reels,” by C. K. Williams.

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PHILADELPHIA — Before being anything else, motion pictures are just that: pictures. Some filmmakers are more visual than others. You can literally *see* it. It’s there in how they use the camera, in how they compose within the frame, in the palette of colors they choose. Most of all, it’s evident in how they think first in terms of images, rather than dialogue or narrative or even motion.

Stanley Kubrick, for example, began as a still photographer. That shows not just in his phenomenal eye, but also his mannequin-manipulating inhumanity. Actors are cattle, Alfred Hitchcock supposedly said. Actors are props, Kubrick might have countered. People mattered less to him than lenses did.

David Lynch began as a painter — he still is a painter — and the uncanniness of so many of his film images would seem to belong as much to canvas as screen. People matter less to him than tableaux do. Actually, that's not quite right. People matter less to him than their fears and urges and dreams do — fears and urges and dreams as *seen* in tableaux.

The filmmaker's painting career is the subject of "David Lynch: The Unified Field," which runs at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts through Jan. 11. From 1966-67 Lynch was a student at PAFA (after studying at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts — where he briefly roomed with Peter Wolf, of future J. Geils fame). "I had never had an original idea until I was in Philadelphia," Lynch has said. The very Lynchian location of his first apartment, across the street from the city morgue, surely played a part in that.

A small companion show, " 'Something Clicked in Philly': David Lynch and His Contemporaries," looks at that era at PAFA. The title comes from a remark of Lynch's. One of his fellow students was Jack Fisk, who would go on to become Terrence Malick's favorite production designer and also design Lynch's "The Straight Story" and "Mulholland Drive." Fisk's talents are justly celebrated, but even he couldn't have come up with a better setting for the two shows: the giddy splendor, part Beaux Arts, part "Arabian Nights," of the PAFA interior.

Another member of Lynch's circle was C. K. Williams, who'd later win a Pulitzer Prize for his poetry. There's a marvelous photograph Williams took of a young Lynch, eyes shut, a set of film reels on the wall behind him. Are they actually there, or is Lynch dreaming them? Either way, something clearly did click in Philadelphia back then. The show runs through Dec. 28.

Lynch's films are like no one else's. The same can't be said of his artwork. Francis Bacon hangs heavy over his early student work, as does Surrealism. The latter is a

constant. Dreamscapes come as naturally to Lynch as landscapes did to Constable.

Lynch's later work often feels very '80s neo-expressionist. That style (not that it can claim Lynch) suits him, with his limitations as a draftsman, cheerful primitivism, and general lack of gestural reticence. One doesn't exactly get the sense of Lynch hesitating much in front of a canvas. That first-thought-best-thought quality contributes to a recurring cartoonishness. Just how cartoonish — and how eclectic Lynch's influences — can be seen in a mixed media on paper from 2012, "Hello," and a grease pencil sketch, "Airplane," from 2013. They're as close to Roz Chast (no, seriously) as the 1966 painting "Woman With Screaming Head" is to Bacon.



Lynch's "Woman with Screaming Head," 1968.

“Woman” is big: 5 feet by 5½ feet. The young Lynch wasn’t afraid of scale. It’s not just hindsight that sees how easily he would ascend to the much-expanded frame of a movie screen. His magnum opus at PAFA, the mixed-media “Six Men Getting Sick,” from 1966, involves stop-motion and projection. It’s wall-sized, at just under 6 feet by 7 feet, and a highlight of the show. “Six Men” isn’t as graphic as the rest of the title leads one to fear. Then, as now, Lynch’s work has this weird innocence — maybe guilelessness would more accurately — that can make the transgressive seem not so much offensive as peculiar (all right, very peculiar).

“Getting Sick” does speak to a number of Lynch’s recurring artistic concerns: flesh in extremis, bodily processes, the encrustation of the expressive upon the organic — or is that the other way around? He was, and remains, fond of biomorphic shapes, the incorporation of texts, working with textures, playing with dimensionality. Celluloid and digital being limited to two dimensions is a significant disadvantage for Lynch, one that a viewer can all but feel him pushing against in so many of his films.

Fire is a favored motif over the decades, as is a sense of distress — physical, emotional, you name it — something fire conveys with such potency. Lynchians will, of course, immediately think of the subtitle of the “Twin Peaks” movie, “Fire Walk With Me.” Better yet, the title “Woman With Tree Branch,” an acrylic from 1968, sounds like that television series’ Log Lady character waiting to happen. For that matter, the setting of “Blue Velvet” is a town called Lumberton. “David Lynch: The Unified Field” is also “David Lynch: The Unified Forest.”