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ART & DESIGN

David Lynch, Who Began as a Visual Artist, Gets a Museum Show

By HILARIE M. SHEETS AUG. 28, 2014

LOS ANGELES — David Lynch’s rooftop painting studio, perched high in the Hollywood Hills, is littered with the byproduct of work. Paintings with crude, childlike figures doing menacing things lean up against the walls, unfinished drawings are strewn over his huge desk, and the floor is carpeted with cigarette butts. While the dark visual sensibility of his film work — “Eraserhead” (1977), “The Elephant Man” (1980), “Blue Velvet” (1986), “Wild at Heart” (1990), “Mulholland Drive” (2001), and his TV series “Twin Peaks” (1990-91) — has permeated the public consciousness and widely influenced other filmmakers, writers and artists (including Cindy Sherman and Gregory Crewdson), Mr. Lynch’s own visual art is almost unknown. Yet painting is where he started, enrolled as an advanced student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1966 and ’67, and it is the medium he continues to work in most actively. His first United States museum retrospective, “David Lynch: The Unified Field,” opens at the Pennsylvania Academy on Sept. 13.

“I loved my time at the academy,” Mr. Lynch said, drinking coffee and smoking at his desk, his genial small-town manner a vivid counterpoint to the eerie tenor of his films. “The building was almost black. All of Philadelphia had a kind of coal-dust patina and a mood that was just spectacular. There was violence and fear and corruption, insanity, despair, sadness, just in the

atmosphere in that city. I loved the people there. All these things, whatever way it was, was my biggest influence.”

Despite the cultlike devotion to Mr. Lynch’s films, “nobody’s paid attention to him in terms of my colleagues at American museums,” observed Robert Cozzolino, the senior curator of the Pennsylvania Academy, who organized the show. It brings together paintings and drawings from five decades and includes a trove of barely exhibited early work from Mr. Lynch’s time in Philadelphia that set the tone for everything that followed.

“I think the art world has been suspicious of David, although he was trained as an artist,” said Brett Littman, executive director of the Drawing Center in New York, referring to the fashion of creative people prominent in one arena trying their hand in another. “He’s not James Franco.” Mr. Littman organized a smaller show of Mr. Lynch’s works on paper and photographs last year in Los Angeles at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, which represents the artist.

“David changed the way that we think about visual culture in the United States through his movies,” Mr. Littman said. “You may or may not like his visual artwork, but it’s definitely worth looking at.”

The 68-year-old Mr. Lynch, in his uniform white shirt and khakis, his shock of white hair piled high, said he has been wary of being misperceived as a “celebrity painter.” While he has never pursued showing his work publicly, he hasn’t rejected invitations either.

Isabella Rossellini, who starred in “Blue Velvet” and was romantically linked to Mr. Lynch in the late 1980s, brought his art to the attention of the art dealer Leo Castelli, who gave him a New York gallery exhibition in 1989. In 2007, the Fondation Cartier in Paris organized his first comprehensive exhibition, which traveled to Milan, Moscow and Copenhagen. When Mr. Cozzolino approached him about an exhibition for the academy, Mr. Lynch was thrilled.

It was a turning point for him. “Something clicked there,” Mr. Cozzolino said. “A lot of what he continued to work on that’s internationally known went back to that time.”

Born in Missoula, Mont., Mr. Lynch painted as a child, moving with his

father's jobs as a researcher in the Agriculture Department, to Spokane, Wash.; Durham, N.C.; and Boise, Idaho, before landing in Alexandria, Va., at the age of 14. There, he met Bushnell Keeler, a friend's father and a professional artist who became a mentor. "When I found out adults could do that," Mr. Lynch said, "that's all I wanted to do. I wanted to smoke cigarettes, drink coffee and paint." He took Saturday classes at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, and spent money from odd jobs to rent studio spaces with his friend Jack Fisk throughout high school.

In 1964, Mr. Lynch started at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but dropped out after the first year. "The students were just doing their assignments," he said. Mr. Fisk persuaded his friend to join him at Pennsylvania Academy in January 1966. "At the academy, everybody I met was a serious painter," Mr. Lynch said. "I was just starting to find something of my own. It was really inspiring."

He lived with Mr. Fisk north of the academy in a desolate, industrial area, where he would watch bodies being carried into the city morgue from a window. "I met the night watchman from the morgue at Pop's Diner, who invited me over," Mr. Lynch recalled. "He said, 'Ring the doorbell at midnight, and I'll let you in.'" Always interested in what he calls "organic phenomena"—stemming from his father's work with insects and tree diseases—Mr. Lynch was influenced visually by the decay in the urban landscape and objects being taken over by nature.

In 1967, late one night in his studio at the academy, he said, he saw plants start to stir in his painting and heard the sound of a wind from his canvas. "Oh, a moving painting," he remembers saying out loud. He and Bruce Samuelson, another student, exchanged ideas for animations, and Mr. Lynch bought himself the cheapest camera he could find. "David knew nothing about filmmaking or cameras or projectors," said Mr. Samuelson, a professor at the academy since 1973. "He's totally self-taught."

Mr. Lynch's drive to make a "moving painting" resulted in "Six Men Getting Sick," a multimedia installation for which he shared first prize in the school's experimental painting competition that spring. He cast a large-scale

screen from resin, with three impressions of his own head protruding. On this sculpted surface, he projected a one-minute, hand-painted loop animating six heads in various stages of distress. As a siren wails and their faces distort, their stomachs fill with fluid that rushes to their mouths and erupts.

“It was a painting, it was an animation, it was a kinetic sculpture,” said Mr. Samuelson, who saw it unveiled. “Everybody went nuts.” Mr. Cozzolino is restaging the installation in the exhibition for the first time since 1967.

“He was trying to work on what is the most intense feeling you can have, of his body repelling,” said Rodger LaPelle, a 1961 graduate of the academy who came to the competition. He hired Mr. Lynch — broke, just married to a fellow student, Peggy Lentz, and expecting a baby — to work for him and his wife, Christine McGinnis, another academy alum, in their printing business. The older couple became crucial benefactors over the next three years, employing Mr. Lynch as an engraver and giving him space on the weekends to make paintings, which they bought for \$25 apiece. The exhibition includes more than a half-dozen of these canvases, weird hybrids of humans, animals and plants that were informed by the primal emotion of Francis Bacon’s paintings, which Mr. Lynch saw in New York in 1968. In September, Rodger LaPelle Galleries in Philadelphia will exhibit several early paintings and more recent photogravures with nude figures by Mr. Lynch.

The Pennsylvania Academy show also displays his continuing experiments in film, combining animation and live action: “The Alphabet” (1968) and “The Grandmother” (1970), which starred Ms. McGinnis’s mother as a doting nana birthed from a pod planted by a love-starved boy. The film won Mr. Lynch a fellowship at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, where he moved with his family in 1970. For much of the next decade, he was consumed with realizing “Eraserhead,” his first feature-length film, which Mr. Lynch said “was born out of Philadelphia.” It is set in an industrial world where a young father slips between hallucinatory episodes as he is left to fend for a needy creature that looks like a cross of a human baby, a reptilian alien and a gourd.

Mr. Cozzolino sees “Eraserhead” as an artwork — “a filmed installation,” he said. As Mr. Lynch became successful after 1980 in the mainstream film

world — “The Elephant Man,” another story of deformity, received eight Academy Award nominations that year — he continued to chase the idea of a “moving painting.”

“I feel like his eye as a painter and his approach to thinking about how images can carry meaning rather than dialogue carrying a narrative has really affected the kind of filmmaker he is,” Mr. Cozzolino said.

Fred Elmes, the cinematographer for “Blue Velvet,” “Eraserhead” and “Wild at Heart,” noted Mr. Lynch’s extreme attention to the composition, palette and lighting of the tableaux they created before any action unfolded. “The mood of each frame was the most important thing,” Mr. Elmes said. “I think that’s directly related to creating a painting where the idea is to go into that frame. David’s always been concerned with creating a little mystery that’s going to draw viewers in.”

The Philadelphia Film Society will be screening every feature film by Mr. Lynch, including his most recent, “Inland Empire” (2006), in partnership with the museum exhibition.

“As a painter, you do everything yourself, and I thought cinema was that way,” Mr. Lynch said, “like a painting, but you have people helping you.” That was the case with “Eraserhead,” when he was able to immerse himself in that world over the five years it took to make it. “When there’s more and more money involved,” he continued, sounding a note of disillusionment, “you’d think you could spend more time, but that’s not true. The whole thing is based on staying on schedule.”

Whether or not that’s why he produced “Inland Empire” independently and hasn’t made another film in eight years, Mr. Lynch has been absorbed in recent years with work in the studio — both his art and recording original music in his sound studio right below his painting studio. The refinement of his early paintings has given way to a style more deliberately naïve and messy, suggesting a child’s vantage point.

“For me, there’s some possible great magic in that world,” he said. One gallery at the academy will be devoted to recent works based on the theme of home and domesticity, where couples are often locked in ambiguous embraces

that could be amorous or suffocating. His frequent juxtaposition of phrases such as “I hold you tight” or “Who is in my house?” offer multiple readings, humorous and ominous.

“I like to think very close to home,” said Mr. Lynch, who has a 2-year-old daughter with his wife, Emily Stofle, an actress in “Inland Empire.” (He has three other children from as many previous marriages.) “Everything that goes on out there in the whole world goes on in the small world, just in a little different way.”

As for showing any work in progress, he demurs. “Right now, I’m lost in a transition,” Mr. Lynch said. “The old is dead, and I don’t know what the new is. The only way to find the new is to start different things and see if there’s something that can come out of experimentation. It’s somewhat unsettling, but it’s a hopeful thing in a way. I’ve been here before, lots of times.”

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