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Forever Wild at Heart

Exploring David Lynch's Paintings and Drawings

By **KEN JOHNSON** SEPT. 17, 2014

PHILADELPHIA — It was in 1967 that David Lynch had his Road-to-Damascus moment. Then a promising student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts here, he was working one night on a dark painting of a garden when it seemed to him that wind was rushing out of the painting and the plants were moving. “I’m looking at this and hearing this,” he recalled years later, “and I say, ‘Oh, a moving painting.’ And that was it.”

This almost biblical epiphany sounds like a scene from one of Mr. Lynch’s movies in which inanimate objects like curtains and radiators seem imbued with supernatural consciousness. It eventually set him off on a career that would alter the landscape of late-20th-century cinema with films like “Eraserhead” (1977), “Blue Velvet” (1986) and “Wild at Heart” (1990) as well as “Twin Peaks” (1990-91), a show that upended the conventions of serial television.

While he put painting on a back burner not long after that early revelation and dropped out of the academy after three semesters, Mr. Lynch did not abandon nonmoving art. He continued to produce paintings, drawings and prints, and he has been particularly busy doing so since directing his most recent full-length feature, “Inland Empire,” in 2006. “David Lynch: The Unified Field,” an exhibition that just opened at the Academy of the Fine Arts, surveys this fine-art oeuvre. Organized by Robert Cozzolino, the academy’s

senior curator, it presents about 90 paintings and drawings dating from 1965 to the present.

Is Mr. Lynch as compelling a fine artist as he has been a filmmaker? The short answer is no. Images of sex, violence, trauma and black comedy abound, but many of the qualities that make his movies so singular — so “Lynchian” — are missing. The convoluted narratives, shifts from noirish realism to hallucinatory surrealism, erotic sensuality and creepy voyeurism, atmospheres of suspense and dread, mood swings from wonder to hysteria to bottomless grief, battles between innocence and evil: these dimensions aren't fully realized in Mr. Lynch's paintings.

Nevertheless, for Lynch completists, it's a fascinating, must-see show. Works from the '60s and '70s, which make up a third of the exhibition, are especially noteworthy for what they reveal about his early development. Most conspicuous is the influence of Francis Bacon. Some large canvases from 1968 feature smeary fragments of human figures on broad areas of flat black. Mr. Lynch took from Bacon an idea of how to picture a person undergoing a shattering emotional experience.

Images of people under duress — blurred, vibrating and crying out like the figures in Bacon's “screaming pope” paintings — recur in many of his films. An early example, “The Grandmother,” a half-hour film from 1970 that is shown on a flat screen in the show, presents the fairy-tale-like story of a bed-wetting boy who is violently abused by his scarily shouting, animalistic parents. In a secret room, the boy cultivates from a seed a big, hideous pod that gives birth to a benevolent grandmother, a comforting figure who may or may not be real.

Though they are remarkably sophisticated for an artist in his early 20s, the Bacon-like paintings are too obviously derivative. Drawings on paper are more interestingly varied and peculiar. In those from the mid-'60s, you see Mr. Lynch working through Surrealist influences in finely drawn and shaded compositions of body parts. Exacting drawings from the early '70s of stagelike spaces and arrangements of architectural elements resembling plans for Renaissance altarpieces anticipate the lush musical-theater interludes in “Blue Velvet” and “Mulholland Drive” (2001).

It's with the pencil drawings made as studies for "Eraserhead" in the early '70s that you see him coming into his own as an image maker. Several envision the grotesque, unbearably anxiety-inducing baby that the film revolves around.

The most pivotal work from the early years, however, is "Six Men Getting Sick" (1967), which he made soon after the revelation of the wind-generating garden painting. It consists of a large flat fiberglass slab with the heads of three men sculpted realistically in high relief in the upper left corner. Onto this surface, he projects a one-minute animated film that adds three cartoonish men who, like the sculpted heads, spew paint like vomit from their open mouths while a siren sounds. It's an amazingly precocious piece for a 21-year-old student.

"Six Men" is also prophetic in that it involves a collaboration between sculpture and film. In a sense, Mr. Lynch never stopped thinking like a visual artist: In his movies he's as much an image maker as a storyteller. Think of the startling vision of the man in the yellow jacket, dead but still standing, in "Blue Velvet." (In his excellent catalog essay, Mr. Cozzolino fruitfully explores the relationship between art and film in Mr. Lynch's career.)

Evidently, making movies cut into Mr. Lynch's painting time from 1980 to 2006, as there are only about 10 works from those years in the show. There's a significant shift from the relatively refined ways of the '60s and '70s to a broader, brushier deliberately clumsy style in the '80s and '90s. Generic narrative images of houses, trees and human figures recall the Bad Painting and New Image Painting trends of the late 70s. This is not a salubrious development; an untold number of indifferent artists produced works indistinguishable from these. "Rock with Seven Eyes" (1996) is a funny-spooky exception, a thick blob of black paint with embedded glass eyes that seem to be looking at you.

The years after 2006 bring a surge of painting and drawing, with more than 50 pieces on view. Here, the trend is toward a kind of faux outsider art. There are simple cartoon drawings of houses, airplanes, factories and people doing bad things. Most impressive are large works from 2009 and 2010

featuring violently deranged puppetlike characters on sheets of brown cardboard to which the artist adds three-dimensional elements and glowing light bulbs.

In “Boy Lights Fire,” the lumpy figure of a demented child wearing a real toddler-size striped shirt and underpants holds up a giant book of matches with gloved hands attached to long arms made of sticks. In the distance a doll-size female figure with a gun guards her house. “I Burn Pinecone and Throw In Your House” and “Pete Goes to His Girlfriend’s House” are works in a similar vein, seemingly made by a psychiatric patient nursing festering grudges.

These late works find him tapping into primal fantasies of the psychotic annihilation of self and the other. They’re too obviously made with professional cunning to be really alarming, but it’s exciting to imagine the new movie that might be brewing in Mr. Lynch’s uncommonly fertile unconscious. In a recent interview in *The New York Times*, he admitted to no such plans. “I’m lost in a transition,” he said. His fans can only hope and pray that he finds his way back to doing what he does best.

“David Lynch: The Unified Field,” runs through Jan. 11 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 128 Broad Street, Philadelphia; 215-972-7600, pafa.org.

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