

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Practitioner of the Dark Arts

October 7th, 2014

In Addition to Being a Filmmaker, David Lynch Creates Haunting Visual Art



ENLARGE

In addition to being a filmmaker, David Lynch also creates haunting visual art, such as 'Gardenback' (1968-70). *PRIVATE COLLECTION*

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Some people are born to be artists, as if the impulse to draw, paint, sculpt, write, compose, make films or photographs were not a choice but hard-wired—a destiny.

David Lynch seems to be such a fated individual. Since at least 1966, when he enrolled as an advanced painting student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he has been

making icky, funny, violent, sexy, naive images and, as documented in this scrupulous retrospective in the museum next door to his old school, he has never stopped.

The show's title, "The Unified Field," suggests both the cross-transferences within Mr. Lynch's multimedia career and the areas of dark matter that have fed his creativity. The mind that wrote and directed "Eraserhead," "Blue Velvet," "Mulholland Drive" and "Inland Empire" is recognizably the same one seen in the galleries here.

Around the walls of the three rooms on the second floor are drawings and paintings of screaming men and crucified monsters, all tendons and bones; of naked women standing at open windows and children setting fires and babies wrapped like mummies; of trucks, airplanes, a dial telephone, factories, and a brown rock with seven red eyes.

Nostalgic themes of romantic longing and home as a precarious sanctuary permeate the imagery here. Mr. Lynch's dreamlike take on the pleasures and terrors of American life, popularized in "Twin Peaks," his ground-breaking network-TV series from the early 1990s, qualifies him to be called our foremost homegrown Surrealist.

This scholarly tour of his uncensored subconscious starts on the ground floor, where a small room presents—for the first time in public since 1967—the installation "Six Men Getting Sick." Three men's heads protrude in relief (another one is drawn) from a plaster background. An animated film begins to play on the surface, detailing six men's heads along with their agitated hands. Their insides below the neck are outlined, intestines and stomach filling up with fluid, until at the climax they vomit. A pink and purple stain spills down their fronts while a siren wails on the soundtrack.

Mr. Lynch was only 21 when he devised this one-minute piece. Knowing they had an unusual and accomplished student in their midst, his PAFA professors awarded him a prize for the work. By then he had stopped going to class, however, telling the school he was "seriously making films instead."

Fans of the director may want to linger in the first room upstairs, where senior curator Robert Cozzolino has grouped material from the Philadelphia years (1965-70). Mr. Lynch has said he had his first "original thought" in the city. Living in a crime-ridden neighborhood across from the morgue, he continued to draw, paint and sculpt while working on his singular films.

The walls from this period are full of discomfiting images, usually half-abstract, half-human, that began on canvas or paper and later ended up on celluloid. "The Alphabet" (1968), a 4-minute short that mixes live action and animation, is like a bizarre primer for Satan's children. "The Grandmother" (1970), playing on a monitor here, is about a boy who seeks comfort from his abusive mother and father in the arms of his "grandmother," who may or may not be real. (She is born out of a human orifice in a treelike potato that he grows by watering a mound of dirt on his bed. Yes, you read that sentence correctly.)

A vitrine contains Mr. Lynch's pen drawings of the mutant baby that cries inconsolably and horrifies its parents in "Eraserhead" (1977). Mr. Cozzolino's catalog essay and chronology notes that, although this script was written and filmed in Los Angeles, it has its origins in "Gardenback" (1968-70), a creepy painting of a hunched faceless figure done in Philadelphia.

Mr. Lynch's stylistic influences have evolved over the decades as he has moved around the country. In his paintings and drawings from the 1960s and '70s, Francis Bacon's grotesque biomorphism and Jean Dubuffet's art brut left a discernible imprint. In the other two rooms, containing work done mainly in Southern California, the images are noticeably simpler. Edward Ruscha, whose text paintings inserted catchphrases on top of stereotypical images, may be the mentor here.

In a number of more recent works, such as "My Head Is Disconnected" (1994-96) or "Factory at Night With Nude" (2007) or "All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth" (2012), the handwritten words of the title are incorporated as a formal element. As often happens in his films, primitive violence wars with primitive innocence.

In 1989, when Mr. Lynch showed a selection of his paintings at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, he was roughed up by critics who believed him to be capitalizing on the acclaim that trailed "Blue Velvet." His celebrity seemed to allow him to skip the intermediate rungs most artists had to climb and to begin at the top.

If nothing else, Mr. Cozzolino's diligence—building upon the even larger 2007 retrospective at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris—should prove that Mr. Lynch wasn't then, and isn't now, an *arriviste*.

Would his paintings and drawings merit such scholarly devotion were he not a visionary filmmaker? Probably not. But MoMA's retrospective of Tim Burton in 2009, which broke box-office records, was erected on even slimmer grounds.

It remains astounding that the American entertainment industry ever found a place in its mercenary heart for a filmmaker as openly committed to experimentation as Mr. Lynch. Much of the credit for this is due to Mel Brooks, in his role as producer. He was floored after a screening of "Eraserhead" and for some reason thought that the young director was the right choice for "The Elephant Man" (1980)—a critical and commercial hit.

In the past decade, Mr. Lynch has made fewer movies and branched into music and photography, examples of which are sadly missing from the exhibition. But his improbable success and grandmaster status have inspired filmmakers, such as Wes Anderson and Spike Jonz, to stay true to their instincts as visual artists. Mr. Lynch has shown that it's possible to be allied with Hollywood and at the same time alienated from its baser values. His ardent fans, here and around the world, should improve Philadelphia tourism over the next four months.

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