



Image © David Lynch | Telephone (detail), undated | Courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles | Photography: Brian Forrest

The twin careers of David Lynch: We visit the director’s art exhibition in Middlesbrough

As his admirers eagerly await new episodes of his cult 1990 TV series *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch – the director best known for films such as *Blue Velvet*, *Eraserhead*, *the Elephant Man* and *Mulholland Drive* - opens the first major exhibition of his work in the UK.

Lynch, who was a painter before he was a filmmaker, entitles his Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art show *Naming* to highlight the ambiguous nature of naming his paintings, drawings, watercolours, photographs and films. DR STEPHEN MOONIE, Lecturer in Art History at Newcastle University, enters Lynch's universe.

This exhibition, which includes watercolours, prints and photographs spanning David Lynch's career from 1968 to the present, provides the first opportunity to view his artwork in the UK. Lynch does not want to be seen as a 'celebrity painter'. Unlike the ageing rock stars who turn their hand to the occasional daubing, Lynch has always been a visual artist in his own right.

He made art before his first films in the late 1960s. However, despite the long-standing connection between Lynch's art and his film, his art is stylistically different, and merits being seen on its own terms. It might come as a surprise to some viewers – especially devotees of his film and TV work – to find that much of Lynch's work has a deliberately naïve style, although this is not without the odd touch of whimsy or the macabre for which he is renowned.

This stylistic difference is especially apparent in the prints and watercolours, which allow him to explore the different visual possibilities offered by mark-making. The work on display is small-scale, requiring the close scrutiny of the viewer.

His watercolours, such as *Far Close* (undated), initially seem accidental. Dark washes of pigment float the surface and bleed at the edges, while the scrawled lettering wanders awkwardly across the surface. Closer inspection, however, reveals that this seemingly accidental treatment is in fact quite scrupulous. *Far Close* contains a carefully arranged circular perforation. Although the surface initially seems opaque, the tiny hole invites the viewer to peer into the beyond as if through a telescope. The work plays with the idea that a painting is both a flat surface, and a window onto the world.



Image © David Lynch, Far Close, undated | Courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles | Photography: Brian Forrest

The words scrawled into the surfaces are the central theme of the exhibition: 'naming'. It attempts to explore the relationship between words and things: a relationship which is never as simple as it seems.

The first exhibit is a disturbing film entitled *The Alphabet* (1968), which was based upon an account by Lynch's wife of her niece having a nightmare. The animation seems more closely related to the exploration of repressed fears, desires and anxieties which Lynch would explore in film and TV.

However, it stands out from the rest of the exhibition, where the works fall largely into two categories: the quirky, playful watercolours and prints, and a series of immaculate, deadpan photographs of the urban landscape.

Lynch's prints emphasise the fact that they are handmade. Drawn with a thick, heavy line which is elegantly smudged, the images play not only with words but with visual imagery.

Dog (2012) shows a Surrealist influence: it is a single shape which is made up of a composite of different forms: these could be crossed limbs, an animal head, and what looks like a hockey stick with the legend 'dog did bite' running up its side.

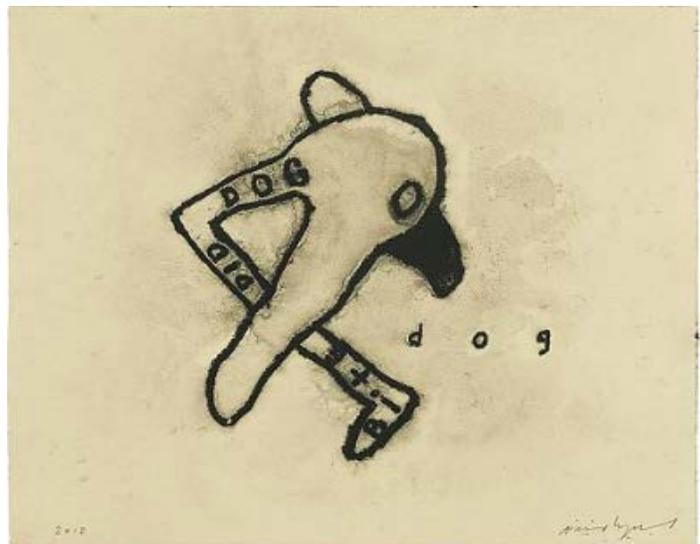


Image © David Lynch, Dog, 2012 | Courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles. Photography: Brian Forrest

Equally whimsical is the watercolour TV BBQ (2009) which depicts an old TV set and a barbeque side by side. Lynch smudges each object, bringing out the similarity between the two: propped up by spindly legs, these appliances resemble a pair of hovering insects, or even a pair of B-movie spaceships touching down.

His prints and watercolours demonstrate the influence of Surrealism in their suggestive, naïve style. However, Lynch's photographs of Los Angeles and New Jersey exhibit a deadpan 'coolness' characteristic of Pop and Conceptual Art in the 1960s.

In the series Untitled (Industrial, New Jersey c.1986), one particular photograph captures a wall-mounted telephone beneath a copper plaque. Viewed from our era of smartphones, it appears to be a strange-looking object. Other photographs depict side-streets, warehouses, bars and pool halls.

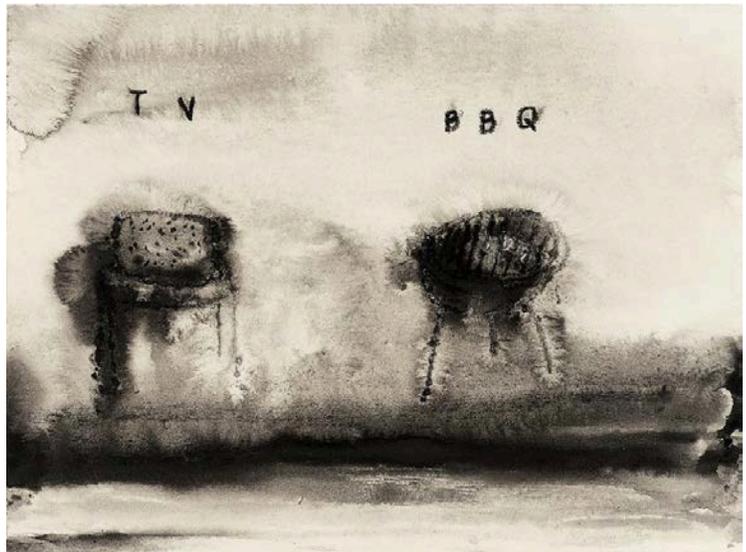


Image © David Lynch, TV BBQ, 2009 | Courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles | Photography: Brian Forrest

Human beings are absent from all of these photographs, but each one contains words or letters, which are often slyly humorous. Another photograph from the New Jersey series shows a nondescript bar in an industrial suburb.

A puddle of rainwater gathers at the entrance, while in the background, the front end of a car bonnet juts out awkwardly. A hastily written sign in the window invites us to try 'Ted's Meatball Hero - \$1.75.'

Another photograph shows a different bar with a drab façade. The lettering in the window, 'Monroe Buddies', conjures up glamour and beauty, or perhaps just sociable company, but this contrasts starkly with the deserted façade.

Other photographs capture a more cinematic grandeur: the fence guarding a New Jersey power plant creates a dramatic diagonal of crisscrossing barbed wire and power lines. Likewise, Untitled (Los Angeles) (1979) looks up at the shop sign 'Thrifty'.

The pharmacy logo is set dramatically against the sky as if it were a heroic icon. The image is reminiscent of other photographs of LA by Ed Ruscha and Dennis Hopper. Like those artists, Lynch's deadpan style leaves the viewer guessing as to his feelings about the subject matter.

Although the exhibition will undoubtedly attract fans of Lynch, the works stand on their own two feet. They show that Lynch is an artist engaged with many aspects of art in the post-war United States: the urban environment, the strangeness of language, and the legacy of Surrealism.



David Lynch Naming is at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art until 26 March 2015.

An edited version of the above interview with BBC Entertainment correspondent Colin Paterson was originally broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Today programme on 12 December 2014