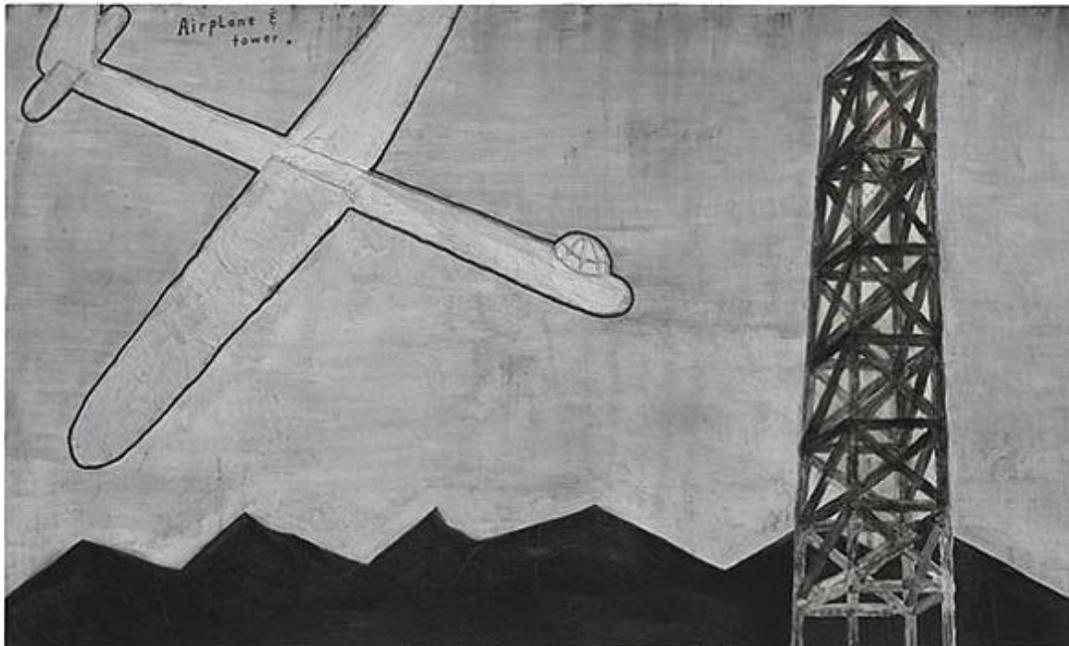


THE AUSTRALIAN

David Lynch, Twin Peaks creator, brings paintings to Brisbane's GOMA



Airplane Tower (2013) by David Lynch. Source: Supplied

By Michael Bodey

THE story seems familiar. An individual, a one-time phenomenon in one field, pulls back from the spotlight to concentrate on their true love: painting. Filmmaker David Lynch, however, is no peripatetic painter. He's an art school graduate, and as a child he dreamed of a life of painting but thought it an unachievable folly. That was until a mentor showed him it could be otherwise.

Lynch was a promising young artist before moving to the screen in such an indelible fashion, creating off-kilter films and the seminal television series *Twin Peaks*, which will return next year reimagined 25 years after the crime.

And while the world in 2015 will be waiting to see what exactly the auteur does with that famous series, Lynch will have his artistic focus set, at least briefly, on Australia.

In March, Lynch will make his first visit to these shores when Brisbane's Gallery of Modern Art presents one of the largest surveys of his work, a retrospective of the American's paintings, sculptures and films.

The exclusive show of some 200 works, entitled *David Lynch: Between Two Worlds* and curated by QAGOMA's Jose Da Silva, continues a late-career renaissance for a man better known for the breathtaking and singularly distinct cinema and television style that marked the 1980s and 90s, beginning with *Eraserhead* in 1977 through to *Mulholland Drive* 24 years later.

Lynch agrees it “sort of is” a renaissance for him, at least as an artist. He has been busy noodling away in his sprawling Los Angeles Hills compound for years; it’s just we haven’t seen many of the fruits of that labour.

“I’ve been painting all through the years and all I ever really wanted to do in the beginning was be a painter,” he says. “So I kept painting but I never showed too much.”

He describes his irregular gallery exhibitions through the years — in his hometown Los Angeles; another in New York in 1987 on the recommendation of his then girlfriend and Blue Velvet star Isabella Rossellini; and others in Japan — as “hit and miss”.

But in 2007, the Paris museum Fondation Cartier pour l’art Contemporain presented the first comprehensive exhibition of Lynch’s art. That exhibition travelled to Milan, Moscow and Copenhagen. “And that started the ball rolling again,” Lynch says.

Last month, his first American museum retrospective, *David Lynch: The Unified Field*, opened at the Pennsylvania Academy, his former art school. The new QAGOMA exhibition will be a distinct, and larger, offering.

Importantly, the exhibitions are “art shows” rather than cinematic retrospectives (although QAGOMA will screen a retrospective of his film, television and video works at its Cinematheque). To be sure, through his peak years of *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), Lynch influenced more than just cinema. His hallucinatory narratives and visuals informed a multitude of storytellers and took hold of the public to the point at which it seemed we were all pondering who killed Laura Palmer.

His artworks give a clear view of where that all came from while being their own distinct achievement in his career.

Da Silva says Lynch is not a token painter and sculptor.

“Even on a basic visual level, you understand how the same person is making these films and making this work,” he says. “Unlike some filmmakers who dabble in other media, his work across other media has been central to his ideas about his broader cinematic work.”

Indeed, arguably Lynch’s most striking film work, the 1967 experimental short *Six Men Getting Sick*, is the apotheosis of his painting morphing into film.

The work was a large-scale resin screen, featuring three protruding impressions of his own head, on to which he projected a one-minute, handpainted loop animating six heads in various stages of distress. The three faces distort, a siren wails and the men’s stomachs fill with fluid that rushes to their mouths.

The art school experimental work elevated his career out of the grime of Philadelphia, the city that so influenced his work. It saw Lynch step off the canvas and into another realm as he explored his notion of the “moving painting”.

Moving to film then was the logical artistic step. “Exactly,” he says of the work that was as much a film as a sculpture or painting. “You know the reason I made that first film, it was a thing that came out of wanting a painting that would move.

“That’s the way I sort of saw cinema, especially in the short films time (of my career). I didn’t know anything about cinema but I sort of saw it as painting with sound and a story, and it was very abstract to me. It was an extension of painting.”

The notion of a “moving painting” is intriguing. It is one way of approaching the ideal of pure cinema yet, counter intuitively, modern cinema often eschews the possibilities of the visual. Composition is ignored in favour of kinetic energy and stories are told via dialogue, not imagery.

Lynch notes dialogue can “be like music” and remains important. “But, for instance, *Eraserhead* hardly had any dialogue and you know, it is a combination of all those things: dialogue, pictures, sound effects, mood and lighting,” he says. “But it was born out of wanting a painting to move.”

Lynch painted as a child when his family moved between four towns for his father's jobs as an agriculture department researcher before they ended up in Alexandria, Virginia, where, at the age of 14, he came under the wing of a friend of his father. Artist Bushnell Keeler showed the teenaged Lynch it was perfectly reasonable for adults to paint as a profession.

"A bomb went off in my head," Lynch recalls. "It was in the back of my mind that (painting) was very nice to do but it wasn't something I could do when I grew up. Absolutely in that one moment (I was) transfixed and transformed and I thought: 'That's all I want to do.' I got permission from the dialogue from that encounter and that was it."

Painting, whether his broader cinematic audience knew it or not, has "stuck with me like tar" ever since. The ambitions of children can be far-fetched, yet Lynch's as a young teen ultimately defined him. "Oh yeah," he says. "I wanted to live what I called the art life. And it was totally thrilling to me, so that was it."

Now 68, the late recognition could be discombobulating. Yet Lynch appears broadly comfortable with his output and the process by which he came to make his art, even if he still hasn't found what he's looking for. And he doesn't believe film diverted him from the career he wanted. "People do many different things and I love the cinema but, like I said, I kept on painting and I got into still photography through cinema. So you know many different things can go on."

Da Silva says those many things — painting, photography, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, sound design, music and film — combine for an artistic blockbuster featuring more than 200 works that offers a point of difference from recent cinematic retrospectives.

"In my mind, for a living filmmaker, it's a rare exception having this level of extraordinary depth," Da Silva says.

The curator aims to pivot the exhibition on themes central to Lynch's work, including man and machine and the extraordinary, rather than offering a chronological retrospective.

"It's not about how one thing led to another but these are artistic concerns that have been concurrent throughout his career," Da Silva says.

Lynch hesitates when asked whether he agrees there is a cohesive line through his work.

"Well, yes and no," he says. He likes his early output from the 1960s, and sees some commonalities "but it's changed at the same time".

He cites Francis Bacon and installation artist Edward Kienholz as the artists he admires most, which itself suggests Lynch is influenced by a broad palette.

Presumably his art has advanced by his having becoming more adept technically?

"No, no, I've become less adept," he corrects quickly. "And I like bad painting. I like organic phenomenon and I like nature to help me with some painting."

He explains his penchant for throwing different things into his paintings, building up surfaces and cutting holes in what he dubs a kind of "bad, childish painting". "I haven't ever really been satisfied yet but I keep trying to go for something I don't know exactly what it is," Lynch adds.

"But it has to do with organic things and certain proportions. I like figures. I like absurdities. I like to burn things. I like glue. I like mistakes. I like destruction, wire. I like cardboard. I like ... different things going on in there but I haven't got the thing I'm looking for yet."

His work also has periods of monochromatic intensity. Lynch concedes he went through a stage where he "hated colour" and painted just black or white or earth colours. But at one point even brighter earth colours "started making me sick". "I'm not really against colour if it works," he says. "But for a long time it just didn't work."

His time in Philadelphia contributed to that darker period. He dropped out of Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1964 and moved to the Pennsylvania academy in 1966.

Lynch says the latter city has been the greatest influence on his work. *Eraserhead*, the surrealist horror film starring Jack Nance, emerged from that time, when his "kind of love of factories and fire and smoke and soot and mood and certain type of feeling was ingrained in me".

"I had a love-hate relationship with the city but looking back I'm so thankful I was there."

The new-found appreciation of Lynch's art — and confirmation of his return with Mark Frost to television with *Twin Peaks* for the US broadcaster Showtime — follow a fallow period during the 2000s. Publicly, he was off the radar. Privately, he was as industrious as ever. Lynch predated many with his ambitious digital distribution channel davidlynch.com in the early 2000s, with its online short films and a sitcom about humanoid rabbits.

Yet he appeared to have burrowed down his own rabbit warren with the release of 2002's *Inland Empire*, the unstructured film shot during the course of two years. Then there was his bizarre promotion of the three-hour film, which included promoting Laura Dern's Oscar prospects by sitting on Sunset Boulevard with a cow and a banner reading "WITHOUT CHEESE THERE WOULDN'T BE AN INLAND EMPIRE."

An understanding reading of that event would be that Lynch has the confidence to express any idea he develops. Clearly his ego overcame fear long ago. And what once might have been considered his unconventional artistic choices have been adopted as mainstream. For instance, could the recent US series *True Detective* have existed without *Twin Peaks*?

Lynch reveals his one true love is "catching ideas". "A lot of times I just sit and daydream and look at a painting in progress and think about it and run different scenarios in my mind until something catches," he says.

Then he experiments "and more often than not it's making something that's so bad that you get to destroy it and many times out of this destruction comes something that is a surprise and leads to the next thing."

Lynch has been a vocal exponent of transcendental meditation for 41 years and believes it has been "the biggest facilitator for happiness and more and more the ability to catch ideas that are thrilling". "I use that as the No 1 tool for creativity," he says.

Meditation has benefited his "bigger picture of life, feeling good in the body, looking forward to the day and more and more energy".

He believes it starts "expanding his consciousness". "We don't know an idea until it enters the conscious mind," he says. "So if you can make the conscious mind bigger ... you can catch the ideas on a deeper level; they've got more information, more thrill, they come with so much more and then you're rolling.

"It's still a mystery how they come along. I get lots and lots of ideas but those ones that I really need I say are like gifts and they're a blessing and you can't really tell when they're going to come in." Not that he wants viewers of his artwork to muse on any particular idea. Anyone who paints or makes films does it "basically for yourself" and when they're shown, you quickly realise what you see is completely different to what anyone else sees, Lynch says.

"Every viewer is different and each viewer sees a different thing," he says. "It's just a strange phenomenon."

The phenomenon of modern visual artists moving into filmmaking with aplomb, including Sam Taylor-Johnson (*Nowhere Boy* and the coming *Fifty Shades of Grey*), Julian Schnabel (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*), and reigning Academy Award best director Steve McQueen (*12 Years a Slave*) is entrenched. The trend of filmmakers heading the other way still has a way to go. But Lynch has avoided the stigma of the celebrity artist.

"It's a problem for some people maybe but I started out as a painter," he says.

"And in today's world more and more people do different things. More and more people have permission to get into different mediums.

“For a while, if you were a famous whatever and started painting, they’d say it was a stupid hobby and a pastime, and not take it seriously. But those days are changing and it doesn’t really matter to me — but it gets me out of the celebrity painter thing.”

Lynch is well beyond celebrity. There was a time the term Lynchian was used to describe his many imitators. That might re-emerge as his art is appraised and he returns to *Twin Peaks*.

A week after our conversation, Showtime announces the series’ return. Cryptically, Lynch notes once he is “in love with an idea, you can’t help yourself”, but he doesn’t have a cinema idea “driving me crazy right now”.

No, television it is. He’s caught another idea.

David Lynch: *Between Two Worlds* opens at QAGOMA in Brisbane in March next year.

TWIN PEAKS: THE VIEWING REVOLUTION WAS TELEVISED

By Graeme Blundell

WE live in a time when television shows can engage our attention in such a way that we become obsessed with them. We even start to stalk them, impatient with anticipation until we can see them again. David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* was the first such program.

It was the story of the search by the eccentrically intuitive detective Special Agent Dale Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) for the murderer of the beautiful Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee, pictured), “day-ud, wrapped in plastic”, in the small Washington state town of the title.

Lynch’s offering changed TV with its disquieting, dreamlike style; its campy fusion of soap opera with 1950s murder mystery melodrama; its violence and sexuality; its focus on setting as character; and the way everything seemed connected to some deeper, murky, pattern of implication.

Co-created by *Hill Street Blues* writer Mark Frost, it debuted in 1990 — nine years before *The Sopranos* marked the beginning of the so-called golden age of TV storytelling. It was the first series about which fans become evangelical, desperate for others to share the experience in a way we expect of television today. It dared viewers to take it seriously and made us believe we would be loyal to it for seasons to come, in contrast to the flashy, interchangeable courtroom, hospital and police procedurals with which commercial TV was infatuated at the time.

It presaged an era in which we would establish new relationships with our favourite shows, such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Lost*, *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad* and *Broadchurch*, watching them in different ways. They would no longer be simply diverting pastimes but part of our lives, deserving of our passion in a way TV shows had never been.

We obsessed about who killed Laura Palmer; the dancing dwarf who spoke backwards; the one-armed man; the traffic lights that kept turning red; the Log Lady; why the fish was in the percolator; and the meaning of that damned ceiling fan.

A huge critical and commercial hit in its first season, the show was too quickly a victim of its own success, not enduring beyond its second outing. “It was like we had a little goose that kept laying golden eggs and then we were asked to take that little goose and snip its head off,” Lynch said. Lynch’s reimagining next year of *Twin Peaks* will be watched closely, by old and new generations alike.