



David Lynch painting "Small Boy in His Room with Pete Goes to His Girlfriend's House," 2009. (Photo: COURTESY OF DAVID LYNCH)

## David Lynch: 'Philadelphia is percolating in me'

By Fred. B. Adelson

PHILADELPHIA – "I never had what I consider an original idea until I was in Philadelphia."

That's what David Lynch, 68, told Robert Cozzolino, senior curator and curator of modern art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Yes, the David Lynch of "Eraserhead" (1977), "Elephant Man" (1980), "Blue Velvet" (1986), "Wild at Heart" (1990), "Mulholland Drive" (2001) and "Twin Peaks" (1990-91), the popular television murder mystery series that after 25 years will return in 2016 for nine new episodes on Showtime.

Though Lynch only enrolled for three semesters, the Academy has reconnected with its celebrated student.

"David Lynch: The Unified Field" is an exhibition of 90 paintings, drawings, prints, mixed-media constructions, and three short experimental films. On view at the Academy's landmark building until Jan. 11, it is the artist's "first major museum show in the United States."

Last month at a press conference at the Academy, Lynch admits: "I get something from painting that I don't get from any other medium. I only wanted to be a painter."

On the other hand, Lynch acknowledges: "I got into film by accident in this very building."

"Great students were here, and everybody was a worker. We inspired one another. Maybe the age I was when I was here and things I experienced, no place has influenced me as much as Philadelphia. Something clicked in Philly."

With the show's accompanying catalog and its scholarly essay by Cozzolino, Lynch is now receiving serious attention as a studio artist, something that has been overshadowed by his film career.

"Painting is the activity in his creative life from which everything else flows," Cozzolino writes.

Kenneth Kaleta, professor of film history at Rowan University and author of a monograph on David Lynch published in 1993, says, "It is impossible to deny his debt to painting. ... (He is) a painterly filmmaker."

For the 20-something art student in the late '60s, Philadelphia and its "vivid images" established an enduring foundation for his multi-faceted talent. Lynch lived across the street from the city morgue, which he even visited one evening at midnight.

"It wasn't a normal city when I was here," Lynch recalls. "The fear, insanity, corruption, filth, despair, violence in the air was so beautiful to me. Philadelphia is percolating in me."

So it's not surprising to encounter pictures that are nightmarish fantasies where evil always seems to lurk. Even a subject as seemingly innocuous as "Hello," a drawing of an old-style black telephone with its receiver off the hook, has a sinister presence, suggesting imminent danger.

"Maybe some drawings or some paintings have given an idea for a film, but mostly, they're just two separate worlds," Lynch says.

Surrounded by Lynch's impressively framed mixed-media constructions, Cozzolino asserts that Lynch "is not a celebrity who paints."

Other than a couple of very early short films from his Philadelphia days, the exhibit doesn't deal with his Academy Award-nominated feature films or television work.

The show covers more than 40 years dating from his student days of the late 1960s to several recent drawings on loan from Frank Gehry, the celebrated architect who is currently working on a transformational project for the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The exhibit cannot be considered a truly comprehensive retrospective, since there are few examples of his art dating from the mid-1970s into the 1990s, the period when he was heavily involved with filmmaking and television.

Even so, it is fascinating to see Lynch's non-cinematic work, especially the earliest canvases, in the historic spaces at the same building where as a student he had taken classes from January 1966 through the spring of 1967.

"He started as a visual artist and never put it down," Cozzolino declares. "He never stops thinking as a painter even if he is making films."

In 1967 in his studio at the Academy, Lynch had an epiphany as he saw one of his nearly all black paintings; several of these early canvases are on view.

"I am looking at the painting (he no longer remembers exactly what one) and from the painting came wind. ... And I'm looking at this and hearing this and I say, 'Oh, a moving painting. And that was it.' "

For anyone who might be skeptical that this ultimately led him into filmmaking, Cozzolino points out, "Lynch has consistently told that story the same way for decades."

Unquestionably, the show's highlight is "Six Men Getting Sick," a seminal work that was his ambitious attempt to create a moving picture. On view in its own gallery around the corner from where it was first presented, this installation is an extraordinary piece of theater that hasn't been displayed since 1967 when it tied for first place, winning the Dr. William S. Biddle Cadwalader Memorial Prize.

Against a screen with three relief heads (self-portraits) on the upper left, a one-minute scratchy film is projected; it is accompanied by a tape recording of a siren. Using X-rays and anatomical drawings of internal organs, the figures regurgitate in a syncopated rhythm. Drips of "action" painting as vomit are used to full visual advantage. The word "SICK" is also seen flashing on the surface. There is sincere honesty in its makeshift character, emphasizing how Lynch was "trying to figure it out as he was doing it."

All the key components of Lynch's art are fully manifested in the weird imagery of this "multi-sensory experience" that combines painting, sculpture, film and installation. Using a newly purchased 16mm wind-up camera like any other art tool, Lynch credits faculty at the Academy for encouraging him to experiment. The school wasn't then teaching filmmaking, animation or performance art.

In late 1970, after four years, Lynch left Philadelphia with his then wife and 2-year-old daughter to relocate to Los Angeles, accepting a fellowship at the American Film Institute Center for Advanced Film Studies.

"And I just kept getting green lights in cinema," Lynch says. He is based in Los Angeles, where he also maintains his painting studio.

The artist thinks of himself as a storyteller, using language prominently.

He effectively uses scratchy penmanship for his "little stories" (he submitted the same kind of writing for the exhibition title), which is visually different from the more fluid script of his signature. Some of his inscriptions might seem crude and lack refinement, just as his drawn imagery is deliberately bad, suggesting an untrained street artist.

The artist isn't forthcoming about listing what materials he has used for these mixed-media constructions, but they include things like Band-Aids, insects, cigarette butts, cigarette filters, real teeth, a large pine cone and horsehair.

It is impossible to appreciate his works without seeing them in person. The tactile surfaces and use of crude materials, which draw the viewer closer to each surface, enhance the mood of post-industrial urban decay.

The canvases done by a 20-something in Philadelphia still represent a refreshing genuineness and authenticity.

Some of his more recent paintings are handsomely presented in large frames like picture windows but seem a bit more mannered. With a childlike persona, Lynch is still dealing with themes of violence, sexuality and deviance. He says his work isn't autobiographical, but he believes: "No matter what type of childhood you have, there's a feeling that you're sensing more than what you're seeing in front of you. ... A lot of information comes to us, not in the form of words or pictures; it's a feeling in the air."

This exhibit offers a glimpse at Lynch's creative range, albeit intimately private yet omnipresent.

"When you're known for one thing and you do something else, it's not taken so seriously. But now, the world is different. ... People do many different things now and it's fine," Lynch says.

"And somewhere ... it comes together, because, strangely, everything is unified on one level. ... The unified field."

Fred B. Adelson is a professor of art history at Rowan University.