"I’m Happier and Happier": A Tortuous Q&A With David Lynch on the Inspiration For His New Paintings

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David Lynch
(Photo Courtesy Père Ubu via Flickr)

Lynchs "Boy Lights Fire," 2011 /
Courtesy Tilton Gallery, New York

Who would have thought that an interview with **David Lynch** would be so unsettling?

Lynch, who already has about as much cachet as any living American filmmaker could, seems lately to have expanded his preoccupations decisively beyond film, having branched out into pop music with his recent album "Crazy Clown Time," and even nightclub design with the opening of his **Club Silencio** in Paris last year. His efforts as a visual artist, however, stretch back decades, running in tandem with his more famous career as an auteur. It was as an art student at the **Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts** that he first

discovered the moving image, making the short animated film "Six Men Getting Sick" (1966) to give life to one of his paintings. Not so long ago, he had a full-blown career retrospective of his painting and sculpture at the **Fondation Cartier** in Paris. His solo exhibition at the Upper East Side's **Jack Tilton** gallery, however, is his first gallery outing in New York in decades.

The modestly sized show encompasses a series of newish paintings, some on cardboard panels and with bulky gold frames, some with Christmas tree lights poking through the background. The protagonists of these paintings are generally boys, often with bulbous or misshapen body parts, often frozen in the middle of some absurd moment of self-mutilation or savagery. One blows off his own face with a missile. One is just a hideous, screaming head, floating below the scrawled words, "I see my love," a tube poking out of his eye gushing blood. In the large "Boy Lights Fire" (which Lynch discusses below), a screaming boy is at right, his ludicrously elongated arms stretched across the picture and brandishing a huge book of matches. A naked doughy white woman seems to emerge from a small farmhouse in the distance at the bottom of the painting, arms spread wide (the look of glazed horror on her cartooned face recalling the apparition of the nude, beaten **Isabella Rossellini** that provokes the final crisis in "Blue Velvet").

On the second floor of Tilton, a suite of black-and-white photos also capture female nudes, the images having a gauzy vintage feel — except that the bodies have been twisted and manipulated to double limbs or orifices, or lop off heads, turning the women into lumpen monsters and nightmare odalisques. The exhibition also includes a single spindly sculpture that looks like some kind of alien antenna, as well as a 42-second film that repeats on a loop, offering, over and over, the pungently irrational image of a gloved hand floating onto a theater stage and giving birth to a numinous, egg-like form through its palm. This last is probably the strongest and strangest work in the show, though relatively clean of the psychosexual obsessions of the rest.

If my interview with Lynch left me slightly unsettled, it was not because of all this unnerving imagery so much as by his unnerving indifference to the typical interviewer's gambits. My game attempts to get Lynch to unpack the meaning of his clearly meaningful work were deflected with what amounted to a clear-cut if cheerful hostility to interpretation. Perhaps this is just the cageyness of someone who has had a thousand film students comb the nuances of his work for meaning. On the other

hand, the more I thought about the encounter, the more I was reminded that most Lynch movies center around men (or occasionally women) on a quest to interpret some alluring mystery, only to find fragmentary narratives that resist rational assembly (I'm thinking of Agent Cooper in "Twin Peaks" and Betty in "Mulholland Drive," my two favorite Lynch protagonists).

Lynch has told the tale many times of how his first film was inspired by a vision that came to him unbidden (he told me this tale again). Similarly, he describes his paintings as the products of aesthetic ideas that simply take hold of his brain. While this may sound like invoking the hoary legend of the creative visionary, I think we can take the artist at his word here. The way I see it, the artworks of David Lynch are about trying to capture the sense of being seized by an image so potent that it demands and commands your attention, but also so strong and otherwordly that it can't be tamed or properly explained. Whether he actually captures that particular energetic balance of fascination and repulsion varies from work to work. But, it seems to me, it is this underlying theme that explains the basic vocabulary of his work, which circles between the desiderata of desirable female figures, on the one hand, and monstrous tortured bodies, on the other. The former stands for pre-intellectual attraction; the latter, the turmoil of expulsion and rejection. As Lynch says below of his work, it's very simple: "action and reaction."

That's my two-cent interpretation, in any case. Here's our conversation:

Tell me about the work. You have perhaps four different types of work here, covering a pretty broad time period.

I have no idea.

I think the works upstairs are from 1999 and these here are the newest ones.

Yes, those are new. Most of these are pretty new. This is “Boy Lights Fire.”

What’s the process of making something like that?

It’s all ideas. Action and reaction. And then there it is.

Does this painting have a particular narrative?

Yes, there's a little story. Most of them have a story.

Is there an overarching narrative?

No, it's one at a time. In other words, this one has nothing to do with that one.

But there is a general theme overall.

There might be a world that they all live in. And then that world can change if you get new ideas. So, for a period of time, perhaps you could say that there is a certain world that they depict.

And the photos upstairs, the "Distorted Nudes" — what's going on there?

I like nudes. And I like not necessarily seeing the whole body at once. I like to find things going on in them, and then to isolate those things.

And how do you make those?

It's all done in Photoshop. The original images are scanned from a book called "1,000 Nudes," a book a German man put together. Mostly anonymous photos of nudes. I asked him if I could have permission to scan and manipulate them, and he gave me permission over the phone. And then he died. But his son gave me permission, which I thought was really great. So I was able to experiment with their book on the nudes.

And what drew you to those particular images?

They were just beautiful to me. They were old photographs. They have an old quality to them, and I love manipulating them. It was a brand new world, I just loved it.

A lot of this show has an old feeling, kind of Gothic…

No, not Gothic at all — what does Gothic mean? What does it mean?

It depends. A period of art history or a dark sensibility…

No, this [indicates "Boy Lights Fire"] is modern. It's our world, and all it is is a boy lighting a fire. And here is his neighbor, the neighbor girl whom he likes a lot. It's a neighborhood picture.

I guess what this would share with the photos on the next floor, which is a very different work, is that there is the same kind of distortion of bodies, a kind of warping.

A little bit of distortion, yes.

You said that they were each in their own world. Is there any kind of message you are trying to communicate, or is it really just inside your own head?

Every viewer is going to get a different thing. That's the thing about painting, photography, cinema. There's an expression: "The world is as you are." And the thing about a painting is, each person stands in front and looks, and comes back, and there's a circle. Each person is going to have a different experience even though the work stays exactly the same. It's kind of magical. It happens. And sometimes people say that is not for me, and they go away. Others, they love it. It's up to the person.

Have you ever had someone really violently reject one of your paintings?

I don't really go watch. Same way with cinema — I'm not really in the room.

I know that Francis Bacon is a big influence, and the press for this mentions Magritte, and in photography Diane Arbus. How do you process these sorts of influences?

People get inspiration from other people, and that's a really good thing. There's work out there that really speaks to you, and inspires you — but it's finding your own voice that's really important. That just takes the doing. Getting ideas and working. And then sometimes things come out that are reminiscent of other works. You can't do everything. Every film, now that there is over 100 years of cinema — or 110, really — every film is compared to something that's gone before, and painting is the same way. That's just the way it is.

They talk about how your frames are supposed to look like Bacon's frames…

Yes, because I saw a show of Bacon's work at the Marlborough Gallery in 1966 — I think it was '66. I was living in Philadelphia, and a bunch of us came up. They were framed like this. And I said, "This is the way to frame a painting!" And it thrilled my

soul. But it was way out of my price range to frame anything like that — and it still is. Now, the price of these things is unreal.

But why is it important? Because it sets the painting back? Because it makes it like a stage?

Yes, it's like a theater stage. Yes, like a jewel box or a theater. The way a thing is presented to me is critical. The frame isolates it beautifully and makes it correct in my mind.

These particular paintings have lights poking through them — what does that represent?

It doesn't represent anything — they're lights. I love Christmas tree bulbs and I started putting them in my paintings. You've got to plug this painting in, and it's got a rig in the back, so that each one can be replaced if it burns out.

I was glad you mentioned the history of cinema. I find the short film clip upstairs really mysterious. What's going on there?

What do you think is going on there?

A hand flies in and gives birth to an orb.

You are interpreting it very well yourself. It strikes you a certain way, gives you a certain feeling. And that's it. If there was meant to be more, there would be a whole text for it. It is what it is.

I know you started making movies to make your paintings move...

No, it didn't happen exactly that way. I was working that way, and I was looking at it, and from the painting came a wind, and the painting started moving. And I thought, "how would I do a moving painting?" And the next thought was, "maybe with film." And that's what started it.

My question was, you've continued making art alongside films for a really long time. You have a really extensive body of work. Is there something you do in this realm that is different?

Yes, it's totally different! It’s its own medium. That’s what’s so beautiful. You get a painting idea, and you go do that. You get a cinema idea, and you go in to do that. The difference is, even though the paintings might take some time to make, with cinema you are booked for a year and a half, minimum. And so, lately, I’ve been working on music and painting primarily.

Why?

That’s where the ideas are.

It’s not a time question?

No.

The final question: Do you think your body of work has evolved over the time you have been making art?

It’s evolved for me. I don’t know what other people would say. But for me, I’m happier and happier with what’s coming out now. So it's thrilling to me personally.

Why?

I love to work in painting, and I like what’s coming out.

Is it different? Has it become a different kind of painting?

Things evolve. They change, let's put it that way. Things change based on the ideas, and so because they change, you could say looking back, even though I really like a lot of stuff from the past, I like the new stuff better.

What are you working on next?

I’m working on some paintings. I’m working on some music. Paintings and music, that's where the ideas are.