

Lynch in Traffic

life slips away
it always slips away
sometimes death comes quickly
sometimes you don't see it coming
but life still slips away
always slips away
—disco song

It was probably not the worming rush hour of Mulholland Drive's switchbacks that David Lynch had in mind. In his film, the cars move. The plot of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) skims the ridge north of Hollywood then descends into the city of dreams. The opening title takes the form of a road sign in headlights; the first event is a car wreck that robs the main character of her memory. The road is the cusp from which height Lynch's characters are seduced, then overcome, by the irreality below. The film is famously inconclusive, and endlessly interpreted—a narrative strung up to loop—just as Lynch's feverish, recursive montage “of the subconscious” suggests a psychoanalysis that will never result in cure. Meanwhile, a weekday evening finds the dirt-and-scrub-covered Hollywood Hills constipated by flesh and blood—the occasional Bentley or Aston Martin idling among the gardening and pool trucks, the delivery vans having disgorged their antiques and paintings, all packed in by a mob of BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes. The whole social strata of Tinseltown braves these narrow, winding slopes in a traffic jam that, like death, claims both the weary and the rich.

When film grinds to a halt, you have photography—but painting comes just as close to the prosody

of all those stalled sports cars, hermetic and inert—the way David Lynch might paint them as black cartoons. “Sally’s in the Kitchen,” reads one of Lynch’s 2013 drawings. Sally isn’t pictured. Instead, a plane strafes the ground (emitting bullets, or punctuation, or turds), a man throws up his hands, and the hood of a vintage car erupts in smoke. In *Sally Has 2 Heads* (2013), it’s true: a ragdoll rendering of a girl in a red dress has, capping her sloping left arm, a girl’s head, and, on her proper neck, the muddy face of a German shepherd, labeled “Dog head.” The only other marks on the paper, towards the bottom, describe a row of three cars—green coupe, yellow convertible, black pickup truck—all styled with the languid lines of the 1950s. Their immobility denies the caption: “cars drive by.”

One anecdote cited in nearly every account of Lynch’s paintings serves to insist that Lynch is not merely a filmmaker who dabbles in painting (like too many actors, musicians, politicians, and other would-be polymaths); he is, and was, a painter first. From a 2011 issue of *Purple* magazine:

Alex Israel: I read somewhere that one day while you were painting you were suddenly captivated by wind.

David Lynch: Actually, I was sitting in a chair, in a space smaller than this room, looking at a painting. I don’t remember how big it was, maybe four feet square. All of the sudden the painting sort of started to expand and contract and a windlike sound came from it. I thought, “Moving painting!” Then I thought, “How could you make a moving painting?” Of course, that’s stop motion, that’s cinema.¹

This epiphany, a hallucination of the kind we now call Lynchian, happened while the filmmaker was in art school at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Soon Lynch



David Lynch, *Sally's in The Kitchen* (2013).
Mixed media on paper. 22 1/4 x 30 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Kayne Griffin Corcoran.

would drop out and head to film school in Los Angeles, eventually making *Eraserhead* (1977) and the rest. A precocious visual artist even as a child, Lynch trained as a painter, and it was painting that led him to film, and, as if anticipating a press release, he never really stopped painting. (Maybe, though, he has stopped making movies; as of this writing, *Inland Empire*, 2006, was his last feature film.) Moreover, just as the stars of *Mullholland Drive* flail and drown in the fumes of Southland cliché, Lynch is an obsessed painter, a compelled painter, a coffee and cigarettes and studio painter—the very 1950s coiffed and bohemian cliché of a Painter. Lynch even played a “Painter” in John Byrum’s *Heart Beat*, 1980—a period piece about Jack Kerouac’s inner circle—but was cut from the final print. “All I wanted to do,” says the artist, “was paint.”²

In this sense, too, Lynch’s late paintings are stylistically and thematically retrograde. They don’t move. His childlike factories and rotary phones idle in the same mid-century iconicity as his notion of what art is, or is for. Lynch’s advocates³ detect an echo of Edward Hopper’s diners, say—not to mention his gas stations—but so what if every fluffy stack of pancakes is drizzled with bile? Art “reveals”—but reveals what? *Airplane and Tower* (2013) depicts an elongated plane with a Korean War-era cockpit hurtling towards an obelisk of scaffolding—dare we say, a Washington Monument of the soul. If we perceive something sinister in the juxtaposition of these two simple, innocent shapes, the idea goes, it is because Lynch has channeled an anxiety we’ve been unable to name. But has he? The work is post-9/11, and anyway this kind of disaster-masochism isn’t such a subconscious so much as a conscious part of the American psyche. Whatever gothic pyromania and domestic abuse seeps through Lynch’s cracks has been preempted by (not just his own films, but) the Dada collage of early punk, of the internet, and of the news.

1. David Lynch, interviewed by Alex Israel, *Purple Magazine*, F/W 2011, issue 16, <http://purple.fr/magazine/fw-2011-issue-16/david-lynch/>.

It turns out every Lynch painting has the same twist: things that look nice can be mean. This constant intimation of threat is exhausting, revealing mostly the Hollywood banality of our cultural id—Llyn Foulkes with less range, Francis Bacon (an avowed influence of Lynch) but with less alcohol. A grey man holds out a grey potato in *Man with Potato* (2015), and a puss-pink rose labeled “flower” erupts from the dreary sky. In *Sally Floats Out* (2018) the little girl’s symbol-shaped house is rendered in a menacing, dark impasto. The singsong title *Billy (and His Friends) Did Find Sally in the Tree* (2018) in fact describes a lynching: Sally has been hanged.

There’s a narrow ease particular to Lynch’s painterly work. It seems approachable, even apprehensible. The paintings appeal to what one reviewer calls the “completist” drive of the Lynch fan.⁴ Here on the wall is a painting; but it might also be, if you believe in art the way the ’50s did, a window into the auteur’s thoughts.⁵ Either way, Lynch’s paintings and drawings rely on the enduring myth of art as psychoanalytic fodder. Like Lynch’s dream-obsessed characters, the collector will spend their life trying to decipher someone else’s nightmare—living someone else’s life, or acting in it, or just watching. But Lynch has already solved the riddle; there is nothing else.

In Lynch’s films, however, the next symbol never resolves the last. Even as their narratives contort the path from dreams to meaning—in *Mullholland Drive*, for instance, each of the two lead actors plays two characters in a way that mystifies the limits of the film’s illusion—his art gives up that irresolute, Jungian thrill. Pop surrealism leads to pop psychoanalysis. “My head is disconnected,” reads the text above a cartoon man in a grisaille painting of the same name (c.1994); sure enough, a box hovers above a figure’s clipped neck. In a large triptych on panel, *Boy Lights Fire* (2010), a mush-faced kid reaches dream-long arms across a tiny black house to strike

2. Rick Barnes, Olivia Neergaard-Holm, and Jon Nguyen, dirs., *David Lynch: The Art Life* (2016; Denmark), film.

3. Robert Cozzolino, *David Lynch: The Unified Field* (Berkeley: U of C Press, 2014).



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David Lynch, *I Was A Teenage Insect* (2018)
(installation view). Image courtesy
of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran.
Photo: Flying Studio, Los Angeles.



David Lynch, *Sally Has 2 Heads* (2013).
Mixed media on paper mounted
to wood panel, 31 × 27 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles.

a match. Lynch sees childishness—not only the depiction of children, and toy-like rendering, but a faux-naïf approach to his subjects—as opening up possibility, returning to the prelapsarian freedom of imagination before we settle into routinized, adult thought. Lynch paints the inescapable tortures of dreams—not the bugs under the perfect green lawn so much as an ineradicable unease with bugs, a hardwired disgust underlying a universal-ish sort of symbolism. BOY. FIRE. HOUSE. Bad. But while his films move on from there, the paintings stay put.

Thus, Lynch trades the virtuosity of his films for a technically accomplished but rhetorically stunted vision of the plastic arts. He offers an aesthetic fiction: a dedicated insider, with art school chops and a respectable dealer, wielding the aesthetic of Art Brut or Outsider—that is to say, a put-on authenticity. Yet any student of Lynch knows that authenticity is just another sham. Lynch seems to know this too. The paintings and drawings exhibit a transparent attempt to be weird, and to (maybe) symbolize something more than weirdness itself: a *de facto* perversion of authentic expression, as if only fucked-up thought can be true. Naturally. The experience of these spooky inklings comes not as a shock, but as consummation.

Day in and day out, minor screenwriters workshop their scripts in the coffee shops of Los Feliz (not quite East Hollywood, let alone Mulholland), trying to arrive at the right tessellation of Krav Maga guru, gas station, and loaded gun. Lynch's paintings likewise shuffle clichés. This is not what Lynch does in his films, where he banishes cliché to a life behind a dumpster or has clichés' body go undiscovered. We dream in films, not drawings. And, while we're dreaming, those rolling scenes feel vital and threatening in a way that never survives their recollection as waking, static surrealism. The moving image, in contrast, might leverage its

4. Ken Johnson, "Forever Wild at Heart," *The New York Times*, September 17, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/18/arts/design/exploring-david-lynchs-paintings-and-drawings.html>.

action against the clichés it propels, even as set, character, and plot follow familiar paths (the conventions that Gilles Deleuze calls "the crisis of both the action-image and the American Dream"⁶). On a Mulholland Drive of dusty high beams and midnight runs, Lynch the filmmaker makes cliché into a vehicle.

Lynch's first moving-image work was a hybrid: *Six men getting sick* (1967) consists of a film of six men puking in unison, projected onto a white relief of three more men. Their stomachs well up with red fluid, and they vomit; the film loops. What remains at stake in this artwork isn't so much its bald parable of immobility and disgust, its depiction of men trapped in a Sisyphean barf fest—granted, an appropriate response to the modern condition—but its diagnosable conflict between *moving* and *not*. This dynamic, absent in Lynch's drawings and paintings, is amply illustrated by the city itself: One warm Hollywood evening, a white late-model sedan pulls to the curb in front of a theater. A man rolls down the back passenger window, and vomits, orange, all down the car's white side. People in line outside are revolted, or amused; some don't notice. The car sulks back into traffic.

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5. For instance, Thomas Micchelli describes Lynch's paintings as "chunks of crystalized consciousness that have cracked off his monumental id and fallen to the studio floor, where he picked them up and glued them to ratty sheets of cardboard." Thomas Micchelli, "Shrapnel from the Skies," *Hyperallergic*, October 11, 2014, <http://hyperallergic.com/154145/shrapnel-from-the-skies-the-paintings-of-david-lynch/>.

6. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 210.