

Body Surface

David Lynch's artwork is powerfully figurative

NATHAN LEE

DAVID LYNCH—DARK SPLENDOR EDITED BY WERNER SPIES OSTFILDERN, GERMANY: HATJE CANTZ (DISTRIBUTED IN THE US BY DAP). 352 PAGES. \$85.

DAVID LYNCH—LITHOS 2007–2009 EDITED BY PATRICE FOREST OSTFILDERN, GERMANY: HATJE CANTZ (DISTRIBUTED IN THE US BY DAP). 192 PAGES. \$60.

The publication of two monographs devoted to the art of David Lynch—paintings, photographs, works on paper, installations, canvases smeared with animal corpses—suggests a new way to think about an artist too often taken for an architect of dreamscapes, a fabulist of the psychosexual bizarre. The opposite is just as true: Lynch as a supremely earthly, material artist, whose great subject is the human body in all its banality—and strangeness. The most “Lynchian” of Lynch’s films are intensely corporeal: *Eraserhead* (1977), with its reproductive phantasmagoria; the exposed and dismantled bodies of *Blue Velvet* (1986); *Twin Peaks* (1990–91), a melodramatic labyrinth with a plastic-wrapped corpse at its heart; the doppelgängers and displacements of *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Inland Empire* (2006). So, too, with his studio art, a largely figurative body of work that, with few exceptions, loses focus the more detached it gets from the body.

Lynch was a painter before he made movies, and it’s tempting to read his turn to cinema as a means of pursuing a figurative practice against the ascendant Conceptualism and dematerialization of the late-’60s avant-garde. *Dark Splendor*, a handsome monograph with a silly title produced on the occasion of a 2009 retrospective at Germany’s Max Ernst Museum Brühl, spends a lot of time trying to situate Lynch in relation to official art history. In his introductory essay, curator Werner Spies makes the case for Lynch as a quizzical midwestern heir to Surrealism and Dada and further tracks down any and all potential correspondences with the work of celebrated artists, some less convincing than others. (There’s a white horse in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* [1992]; Joseph Beuys once used a white horse!) Playing Lynch off Duchamp, Rauschenberg, and Giacometti does little to establish a master of contemporary cinema as more than a minor figure in contemporary art, but it’s not without value in fleshing out a larger field of meaning in which to place his total achievement.

Lynch cites Francis Bacon as his favorite painter, and the influence is clear. Lynch’s figures are typically shown in some form of arrested agony, dissolution, or metamorphosis and often situated in a variation on the Bacon arena. The viscous, shit-colored nude splayed over a mustard couch in the mixed-media *Well . . . I Can Dream, Can’t I?*, 2004, oozes out from an indeterminate proscenium space, the archetypal Bacon contour. The houses, factories, and stages everywhere in Lynch connect to the interplay of figure and field in Bacon. Gilles Deleuze theorized this dynamic in a study of Bacon far more interesting than any of Bacon’s actual paintings, and he gives us a valuable concept for thinking about Lynchian figuration: “The entire series of spasms in Bacon is of this type: scenes of love, of vomiting and excreting, in which the body attempts to escape from itself through one of its organs in order to rejoin the field or material structure.” Just such a “spasm” occurs in Lynch’s first film, *Six Men Getting Sick*. Made in 1966 while Lynch was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the 16-mm loop animates a collective barf against flat, zoned-off planes of space. Where Spies sees a statement of “disgust at gestural painting,” a curious claim given the unabashed love of gestural effects in Lynch’s artwork, we

might think of this convulsion as an early attempt to think through the problem of bodies in relation to their field.

Processing Lynch through a Deleuzian machine runs the risk of stuffing unruly art into a neat theoretical box and does little to account for those tremendous enigmas and unnameable atmospheres that constitute the quintessentially Lynchian. (Though it pays to remember, as the critic J. Hoberman noted of *Dune* [1984], how “Lynch is weirdest precisely when attempting to be most normal.”) But it does help generate an alternative to the routine emphasis on the oneiric, surrealist, or psychoanalytic dimensions of

done to them, the effect is never savage. These are speculative bodies, hypothetical beings. They inhabit a parallel cosmos, participate in unknowable systems; we observe them going about their business on their own inexplicable terms. What gives them such uncanny presence and contemporary juice is, paradoxically, the historical tether, a trace of decor, pose, or posture that links them to another time (1839–1939). Evidence of their digital construction is obvious, but they give off a feeling not of historical materials altered but *fusions*, things fully formed, vibrating in the present.

The “Distorted Nudes” together with *Inland Empire*

bespeak the enormous energy released by Lynch’s encounter with digital imaging technologies. Shot using the Sony PD-150, a consumer-grade video camera obsolete for feature filmmaking, Lynch’s kaleidoscopic portrait of “a woman in trouble” was, by common consent, his most experimental feature since *Eraserhead*. Nearly as unanimous was the opinion that the film—or video, or epic YouTube nightmare, or whatever the hell it was—was hideously ugly. The dismay expressed by mainstream critics was inflected by an almost personal sense of betrayal, as if Lynch had provoked his own Dylan-goes-electric moment. “The usual Lynch trademarks—intense close-ups, monumental headshots, red curtains—are all

here,” wrote *Variety* with its customary pseudo-authority, “but noticeably missing are the deep, rich colors and sharp images. Instead, they’re replaced by murky, shadowy DV, which may give him more freedom but robs the pic of any visual pleasure.”

Visual pleasure thus defined is of a particular, narrow, and obsolete type—the sensual richness of 35-mm traditions. The tremendous beauty and intelligence of *Inland Empire* derive from its wild variation of surface, an encyclopedic compendium of digital weird: blotch, blur, distortion, fog, seepage, dissolution, mutability, grime. If *Mulholland Drive* was a movie about being in a movie, *Inland Empire* explodes this meta-narrative situation across the far less stable media environment of video imaging and the Internet. It makes a clean break with genre touchstones. Its ideal spectator is solitary; the movie is better suited to viewing at home on a laptop than in a cinema. It imagines a new kind of body, one we’re in the process of inventing; a body distributed over networks, caught up in feedback loops, delimited by bandwidth, escaping down a multiplicity of pathways. Even by the standards of the Lynch oeuvre, the movie is brazenly circuitous, perpetually slipping through its own cracks to coagulate anew then fissure once more.

If all of this seems the opposite of embodiment, that’s partly because our idea of craftsmanship remains tied to the analog. *Inland Empire* reaches back not just to the experimentalism of *Eraserhead* but to its highly wrought tactility. When it comes to moviemaking, Lynch is most avant-garde when most artisanal. Everything he makes, you might say, is a studio picture. Hand in hand with a reevaluation of the body in Lynch comes another shift. He is not a filmmaker who also makes art. He is an artist whose practice includes filmmaking. □

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Above, a still from David Lynch's film *Inland Empire*; right, an image from his series “Distorted Nudes.”



Lynch’s work, an approach long ossified into cliché that ignores the pronounced materialism of his vision. The lithographs collected in *Lithos*, a survey of work produced at the famed Item Éditions studio in Montparnasse, France, are voluptuously tactile, lovingly artisanal. These handcrafted images are, moreover, full of hands: handprints and handshakes, hands with objects (radios, knives, guns, abstraction), titles with hands—*Rock and Hand*, *Hand of Dreams*, both 2009.

This relation of body to texture is no less central to the films. *Blue Velvet*, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive* all trade in the forms and surfaces of classic Hollywood—melodrama, noir, western, *The Wizard of Oz*—and all of them trace the effort people make to negotiate the (unraveling) fabric of their universe. The tenor of these movies is highly self-conscious, as are their protagonists, who exude an anxious awareness. This frisson reaches a sublime peak in the famous rehearsal scene from *Mulholland Drive*, where the heroine dismantles her facade of innocence, exposing to the camera a magnificent, wholly unexpected agency. She has, for the moment, mastered the code of her context, and the shock of this sudden self-possession is as violent a collapse of the narrative as the structural shenanigans of the third act. *Mulholland Drive* is the definitive movie about people grappling with their existence in a movie—a sustained contemplation of bodies attempting to get out of themselves.

Nothing in Lynch’s studio art gets near this intensity, because the surface—scratched, smudgy, inky—is too consistent and conventional. His strongest work is precisely that which generates the strangest, most productive relationship between motif and milieu. These are the “Distorted Nudes,” a corpus of photographs from 2004 based on images from a volume of period German prints. Lynch manipulates the originals in Photoshop, inventing new anatomies and orifices, severing or reconstituting appendages, adding void or blur to the settings. For all the violence

Work in Progress

The National Portrait Gallery's queer endeavor

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HIDE/SEEK: DIFFERENCE AND DESIRE IN AMERICAN PORTRAITURE BY JONATHAN D. KATZ AND DAVID C. WARD WASHINGTON, DC: SMITHSONIAN BOOKS. 296 PAGES. \$45.

By yanking David Wojnarowicz's film *A Fire in My Belly* (1986–87) from the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition "Hide/Seek," Smithsonian secretary G. Wayne Clough gifted to art history a splendid case study in cowardice, censorship, and institutional failure. Far from undermining the exhibition (which closed last February), moreover, Clough's capitulation to the grumblings of the Catholic League managed to validate beyond all expectations the relevance of the show's conceit. The Wojnarowicz Affair *performed* the very premise advanced by curators Jonathan Katz and David C. Ward: a story of queer portraiture told through a dialectical account of absence/presence, shame/pride, closeted/out, hidden/revealed.

"Hide/Seek" was marked by elisions from its inception. The title itself points to a work missing from the show, Pavel Tchelitchew's great 1940–42 canvas *Hide-and-Seek*. Anchored by the central figure of a gnarled tree that doubles as a hybrid hand-foot appendage and organized as an elaborate vortex of visual puns conflating anatomy, biology, botany, and the cycle of seasons, this peerlessly seductive painting was, as Katz notes in his introductory essay to the catalogue, once the most popular painting in the Museum of Modern Art. An openly gay representational painter, Tchelitchew fell out of favor during the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism, and it was just recently that his masterwork was returned to view at MOMA after decades in storage.

Katz understands the multivalent strategies of Tchelitchew's painting as "familiar to a subculture long used to employing protective camouflage, while at the same time searching for tiny signs, clues, or signals that might reveal the presence of other queer people." Indeed, queer people must read between the lines of the show's blandly abstract subtitle, "Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," to recognize a project about their own experience—albeit one that deploys portraiture to interrogate what it means to identify with the contemporary categories LGBT or Q.

Well, not so much T. From Marcel Duchamp to Catherine Opie, "Hide/Seek" offers a generous perspective on the aesthetic of drag but has little to say about explicitly transgendered history, experience, or representation. As might be expected of a show at the nation's official portrait gallery, "Hide/Seek" is very much a canonical project—a straight show about queer art. Katz and Ward are up-front about the exclusionary scope of difference they're going to address. "Our goal," writes Katz, "is not to challenge the register of great American artists, but rather to underscore how sexuality informed their practice in the ways we routinely accept for straight artists. . . . While we have tried to represent a diverse group of artists, our emphasis on canonical figures has worked against our desire for inclusivity." We should be thankful,

I suppose, for such frank laying of the curatorial cards on the table. Acknowledging that one will be predictable does not, however, make for a less predictable exhibition.

"Hide/Seek" does not so much recall—or bother to mention—"In a Different Light," the last major survey of queer art in America, curated by Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder at the Berkeley Art Museum in 1995, as it does another handsome, middlebrow production whose importance lay precisely in using a stable, canonical form as the vehicle for novel queer affect: *Brokeback Mountain*. "Hide/Seek" begins its story of difference and desire in a world of erotic indeterminacy that Jack and Ennis would have felt at home in. Thomas Eakins's *Salutat* (1898), a splendid (and to contemporary eyes blatantly homoerotic) portrait of a bootylicious young boxer, offers a richly ambiguous starting point for the curators' historicization. How, Katz asks, "can we discuss Eakins's sexuality in advance of the very words that convey it?"

Finding, naming, identifying, and describing positions within the matrix of (sexual) difference and (same-sex) desire: This is the project—and the problem—laid out by Katz and Ward. "Hide/Seek features straight artists representing gay figures, gay artists representing gay figures, and even straight artists representing straight figures (when of interest to gay people/culture)." The curious matter of what may be "of interest to gay people/culture" leads to some fuzzy justifications. Katz devotes several pages of his essay to parsing the "lesbian" vision of Georgia O'Keeffe, which amounts to reading her animal-skull paintings as representing "dry" vaginas rendered "illegible" to men. This is preferable, at least, to the boilerplate analysis of a Berenice Abbott photo as "tender[ing] an explicit resistance to colonization by the heterosexual male gaze." If one is dismayed by the masculine bias, both in the quantity of works on view and in the quality of discourse in the catalogue, it is perhaps to be expected of a "male gaze" that finds it "takes much dedicated looking" to parse the quite obvious act of cunnilingus in Tee Corinne's kaleidoscopic *Yantra of Womanlove #41* (1982).

On more familiar turf, Katz productively scrutinizes Robert Rauschenberg's pictures and Combines, decoding fragments of text persuasively read in light of his relationship with Jasper Johns. Though one may question Katz's claim that their relationship "was doubtless the crucible of their artistic development, of their signature styles," he poignantly draws attention to, for example, a scrap of comic-book dialogue in Rauschenberg's *Collection* (1954), made shortly after meeting Johns: "How depressing life would be, if our lucky stars hadn't introduced you to me."

In one of his six essays scattered throughout the catalogue, Ward insightfully contextualizes this aesthetic of evasion and coding in light of cold-war paranoia and ideological witch hunts. The hide/seek interpretive

framework peaks around the discussion of midcentury aesthetics—Rauschenberg, Johns, and the advent of a Zen-inflected avant-garde by artists like John Cage and Agnes Martin. Zen, Katz argues in relation to Martin's grid paintings, enables a mode of strategic silence: "Paradoxically then, the evasion of sexual difference, inevitably sorrowful in the Western tradition, under Zen became its own palliative."



Keith Haring, *Unfinished Painting*, 1989.

And what to do when Silence = Death? Katz and Ward demonstrate how gay portraiture took on new subjects, strategies, and urgency during the AIDS crisis. Approaching his death from AIDS, Wojnarowicz shot a photographic memento mori of his face merging with the dust of the earth (*Untitled, Face in Dirt*, 1990). AA Bronson immortalized the skeletal corpse of his fallen partner, the artist Felix Partz, in an image of shattering force and compassion. Felix Gonzalez-Torres remembered his own fallen lover with "Untitled" (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*) (1991), a pile of multicolored candies equivalent to Ross Laycock's 175-pound body weight. Invited to help themselves to the plastic-wrapped sweets, audiences participate in the slow removal of the surrogate flesh, which is then replenished by the institution.

Gonzalez-Torres, notes Katz, can be seen as extending a genealogy of conceptual queer portraiture born with Duchamp and passing through Rauschenberg and Johns. Despite the power of these works, the curators start to fumble their narrative when attempting to contextualize the AIDS era within postmodernism. Proceeding from the preposterous notion that premodern painters merely "represented the world as it appeared to them" and reprising the outdated theory of modernism as a sustained, medium-centric critique devoted to the flattening of the pictorial surface (a story that Tchelitchew, for one, renders obsolete), Ward summarizes:

Hide/Seek has two conclusions, or more precisely, it has a coda that can only hazard a guess at the future. The problem is the appearance of the monstrous HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1980's. Its metastasizing and ravaging of the gay population and other communities destroys the progressive narrative that would have transpired had the epidemic never occurred. With

out AIDS, the arc of Hide/Seek would have been straightforward: the insistence of a binary definition of sexuality with the codification (indeed criminalization) of homosexuality led to decades in which gay and lesbian artists developed strategies (hiding and seeking, as it were) to work creatively and even to survive.

Notwithstanding its apparent contradiction of a previous statement by Katz ("one of the most conspicuous aspects of this book is its refusal to frame queer history as moving in one direction only, toward ever-growing tolerance and social acceptance"), this conclusion is curiously muddled. What, in Ward's account, did AIDS bring an end to? Clearly not those strategies of creativity and survival marshaled in the work of Bronson, Gonzalez-Torres, and Wojnarowicz, to say nothing of other "Hide/Seek" artists like Robert Gober, Keith Haring, and Robert Mapplethorpe. It is true that these artists belonged to an era in which concepts like "progress" and "narrative" came in for critique, but to imply that AIDS somehow brought the project of queer agency and recognition to a screeching halt is to mistake suffering for regression, oppression for invisibility. AIDS produced as much as it destroyed; the tyranny of the disease went hand in hand with insurgencies in the fields of politics, discourse, and representation. Postmodernism, the art-historical period associated with the AIDS crisis, may well be an "exasperating term," as Ward says, but you don't have to be Fredric Jameson to grasp how it cultivates strategies of hiding and seeking with the utmost sophistication.

Ward's belief that we are "still hamstrung by the age of AIDS, one in which the liberation promised by 1969 has only been imperfectly realized or actually retrogressed," delineates not a claim but an imaginative and scholarly limit that fails to account for how the kind of art surveyed in "Hide/Seek" (urban, privileged, canonical) is now produced in a decidedly *post-AIDS* culture with an entirely different set of problems and practices. Catalogue entries on works by Anthony Goicolea, Cass Bird, and Glenn Ligon confirm aesthetics previously glossed rather than chart the currents of emerging queer art. There's no reflection on performance or new-media work, no collectives or publications, no exploration of how anonymity and connectivity play out in the queer space of the Internet. Jack Pierson has far less to tell us about the evolution of queer portraiture than does any profile on manhunt.net.

Katz concludes with a utopian speculation on a polymorphous future unstructured by binaries of gay/straight, queer/trade, male/female, and, indeed, hide/seek. In time, he writes, "perhaps this book itself might be viewed as something akin to a survey expedition, a means of chronicling a species just prior to its disappearance." An obsolescent project that dreams of obsolescence? Queer indeed. □

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