



DAVID LYNCH is not just one of the most important filmmakers working today, he's a **complete artist**. He writes songs, paints, makes sculptures, and even designs lamps, in the consistently odd, weirdly dreamy, but resilient style for which the adjective *Lynchian* has become a catchword. We met at Griffin Contemporary Art Gallery in Santa Monica, where an exhibition of Lynch's recent paintings and sculptures filled the large, pristine white spaces, and asked him to talk about his enigmatic and ever-expanding personal universe.

interview by ALEX ISRAEL
portrait by ANNABEL MEHRAN

All artworks photographed by Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy of William Griffin Gallery, Los Angeles

ALEX ISRAEL — *Tell me about your clothes. Do you wear the same thing every day?*

DAVID LYNCH — What I'm wearing now? No, no, I'm dressed up today.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I ask this because I read somewhere that you wear the same thing every day.*

DAVID LYNCH — I'm in a suit as I'm speaking to you, but I don't wear one every day. Last Saturday I had to wear a suit because I was playing music with a friend. On Sunday I went to see my friend's film at the Sunset 5...

ALEX ISRAEL — *And you needed to look nice.*

DAVID LYNCH — I dressed up, yeah. I had to change from my work clothes to a suit — and I had to have my keys, wallet, money, and belt, and I had to change my shoes. It's a big deal to get all that stuff out and put it all away.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What film did you see?*

DAVID LYNCH — *Get Real! Wise Women Speak*, which was made by my friend Joni Steele Kimberlin. It's an important film, a good film. Women would love this film. It could be

very inspiring for them. I think men would like it too. She talks about how important grandmothers are. Everybody knows how important grandmothers are, if they're lucky enough to have one around.

ALEX ISRAEL — *If you do wear a suit, is it generally a black suit?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yeah.

ALEX ISRAEL — *If you're not wearing a suit, you usually wear a white shirt and khakis. How long have you been sticking to this regimen?*

DAVID LYNCH — A pretty long time. I don't know how many years. I guess I started to wear khakis from Sears with work shirts when I was in high school. I like Gant and Brooks Brothers shirts. In Virginia, where I started out, there was an Ivy League undercurrent. You wanted to look somewhat sharp.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Preppy?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yeah. I liked it. I like to feel comfortable in my work clothes.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Has David Lynch become a character?*

DAVID LYNCH — Everyone's a character, in a way.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Are you a character of your own making — one from a David Lynch film?*

DAVID LYNCH — In a way, yes. But I don't think I'm unique in that way. You're a character of your own making, too.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you go about your work thinking in terms of the character you've become?*

DAVID LYNCH — Not really. If I see myself in a photograph, sometimes it doesn't really go with the work. Which is surprising sometimes.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Who did influence your painting?*

DAVID LYNCH — Well, let's see, I guess Francis Bacon was my biggest hero.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I'm trying to imagine art school in the '60s. It was such a radical period. Bacon made his great breakthrough, and Pop Art and Minimalism were developing. Were you aware of these movements?*



Man Studies Picture, 2008-2009, watercolor on paper, 17 3/4 x 21 inches (framed), 9 x 12 inches (paper)

DAVID LYNCH — Sure. But I liked organic things of a type that, at the time, painting had drifted away from. Slick Pop Art didn't thrill me.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you still feel that way?*
DAVID LYNCH — Yeah.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What about film? Were you interested in surrealist or experimental cinema?*

DAVID LYNCH — In Philadelphia there was a theatre called The Bandbox that ran all the New Wave French films. But I didn't think about cinema. I liked theater.

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 wind-like 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. And that somehow led me to film.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Obviously, it was a moment of great impact.*

DAVID LYNCH — Looking back, it was incredible. At the time it was just an idea. But then I became really involved in the idea. I built a screen of about six by eight feet, which had three heads coming out of it. One of the heads was painted. I wanted to project film onto the screen, and I wanted the sculpted parts to distort the image. So that's what I did. But what happened wasn't exactly what I wanted.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Was your film, Six Men Getting Sick, projected on that sculpture?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yes. It was when I was at school. I had it on a loop. They had a projector which was on a stand that was quite tall. I built a kind of erector-set thing that took the film up almost to the ceiling and back down through the projector — and back up and down again — like a loop. I had speakers for the sounds

— of sirens — but the sounds weren't in sync with the film. They were separate elements. The screen hung from wires onto a stage. In the film, in the center of the frame, I had what I wanted to be projected onto the sculpted part of the screen. I had to move the projector back so that the part of the film I wanted fell on the sculpted part of the screen, which hung in the center of the stage. The other parts fell off into darkness.

ALEX ISRAEL — *At the time, were film and painting part of one experience for you?*

DAVID LYNCH — No, they weren't, really. But for some reason, painting conjured up the desire to use film. But when I finished that one work, I thought that was it. First of all, it took a long time and it cost a lot more than I thought it would. So I didn't think I would do another one. But then a man commissioned me to do a work like it for his house. It didn't work out — which was a big blessing. I made *The Alphabet* instead. And that film, along with the script for *The Grandmother*, helped me to get an independent filmmakers grant from the



Left: Yellow Grey Lamp, 2002-2003, cold-rolled steel, plaster, tint, resin, 75 x 14 x 12 inches
Right: Lime Green Lamp, 2002-2003, cold-rolled steel, plaster, tint, resin, 71 x 14 x 12 inches



American Film Institute, which was brand new then. Talk about a life-changing phone call. Getting that grant was euphoric.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Did you move to Los Angeles right away?*

DAVID LYNCH — No, I made *The Grandmother* in Philadelphia, which was really great. But I needed more money. A great man, Tony Vellani, came up on the train from D.C. to Philadelphia and saw the almost finished version of *The Grandmother*. When I drove him back to D.C., he said, "I'll get you the extra money." He also told me I should apply to the new Center for Advanced Film Studies in Los Angeles. That was another euphoric moment. Bliss. Phenomenal. I was floating on air when I was accepted. That's when I moved to LA.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What was film school like for you, coming, as you did, out of a fine arts background?*

DAVID LYNCH — Everything is the same, in that everything starts with an idea. If you've got ideas for film, you'll be okay. If you've got ideas for painting, you're okay, too. There was

a teacher there, Frank Daniel, who had been dean of the Czechoslovakian Film School. When the Russians went into Czechoslovakia he got out, thanks to George Stevens Jr., the head of the American Film Institute, who sent him a plane ticket and made him dean of the center in LA. Daniel was a great teacher and a really good person. I loved his class, Film Analysis. One of the students would focus on editing, another on sound, another on music, another on writing, and another on whatever. We'd watch a film together and talk about it from those different points of view. That makes you start thinking about the different elements.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Despite working in many different areas — film, painting, sculpture, and music — and using many different vocabularies, certain themes run through all of your work. You could call it the dark side of the American Dream, represented by eerie, suburban landscape settings. In your paintings maybe it's manifested as traditional, gabled houses. There's the theme of the longing that seems to preoccupy many of the characters in your films. Do the figures in*

your paintings that have very long arms also express longing, striving, and reaching?

DAVID LYNCH — Yeah. It's nice that you say that. There's a watercolor called *Man Reaching*, and some lithographs, *Reaching out for Nothing*, *Reaching Out*, and *Reaching*. I don't really think about things so precisely, but ideas come. Ideas are interesting to think about in terms of what makes them come along, and, in my case, in terms of what makes me fall in love with certain ideas and not others. **Also, there is something about wanting to make a dream place. In a good dream place there are forces at work that go against it, so it's tough. It's not a walk in the park.**

ALEX ISRAEL — *There's another recurring theme in your work: a fervent spirituality. In your films this seems to be achieved primarily through music and lighting. In the paintings I see it in terms of framing and presentation. The scale of a painting can do what the lighting and the music do in a film. I'm wondering*

if you think about that when you're working on the paintings — their size, their frames, and the way they oftentimes appear as altarpieces.

DAVID LYNCH — I call them jewel boxes. I saw a show of Francis Bacon's work at the Marlborough Gallery in New York...

ALEX ISRAEL — *And fell in love with the gold frames and the glazing?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yeah.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Damien Hirst was really influenced by Francis Bacon's framing. It's been said that Hirst's use of glass cases comes from Bacon.*

DAVID LYNCH — I did a bunch of glass cases for the Galeries Lafayette in Paris. They were four- or five-feet deep. At one point I started to build the paintings more dimensionally, so some went back and some came forward. But, you know, you need a place for them to live.

ALEX ISRAEL — *A jewel box is small and intimate, but you make relatively large-scale works.*

DAVID LYNCH — It's a jewel box that you look into through a glass front.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Like a diorama at a natural history museum.*

DAVID LYNCH — Yeah. There's something so magical about them — whole worlds are contained in them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *There's something stage-like about a diorama.*

DAVID LYNCH — I don't really work on stage things, but I've always loved them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Have you ever done stage work?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yes, with *Industrial Symphony No. 1*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. That was a long time ago, in 1989, after I made *Wild At Heart*. I did it with Angelo Badalamenti and Julee Cruise.

ALEX ISRAEL — *There are a lot of light bulbs in the exhibition of your artwork that's on now. In the center of the show is a stage full of lamps. Are these paintings and sculptures similar to films, in the way they use images and light?*

DAVID LYNCH — In a weird way, they're like very, very short stories. I like a story in a painting.

ALEX ISRAEL — *The theme of decay is another constant that runs through your work. In your films it often takes on a very literal representation, such as the ear in Blue Velvet. In your paintings I think this theme is implied in the way the paint looks like food, or flesh, or other things that rot.*

DAVID LYNCH — **That's the organic phenomenon.**

Everything new gets old and starts changing, and oftentimes it's more beautiful and interesting once nature starts working on it.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Does a rotting corpse disgust you?*

DAVID LYNCH — No.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Did you grow up around dead animals?*

DAVID LYNCH — [Laughs] **I grew up in the woods, where there are dead things and living things.**

Life goes on, which is so fantastic.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What about fear?*

DAVID LYNCH — There's a lot of fear in the woods at night, when the sun goes down, especially when you're in a dark part of the woods.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Another theme is madness, isn't it?*

DAVID LYNCH — Madness is really a variation on a theme. There's so-called normal behavior and then there's behavior that veers off from it — that's what really interests me.

ALEX ISRAEL — *In your work madness sometimes takes the form of adults exhibiting childlike behavior.*

For example, Diane Ladd in Wild at Heart, putting on her lipstick. She starts with her lips and then covers her entire face with it. That's something a kid would do. In your paintings the exploration of madness seems most prevalent in the way you use text, which looks like it was written by an adult but in a childlike way.

DAVID LYNCH — The childlike thing in the painting has to do with a kind of bad drawing, which to me is more beautiful than precise drawing. There's something that happens when a text starts breaking apart or becoming childlike. The world expands and starts to feel like a dream. Simple childlike things can become absurdities, and can even conjure up bigger things, which are more precise than well-formed paragraphs. Something organic occurs in childlike things. There's so much freedom.

ALEX ISRAEL — *And madness?*

DAVID LYNCH — No, it's not really madness. It depends which way you go with it. It's like the Vedic line, "The world is as you are." Each viewer takes a different trip. If you are inclined to go one way, you'll go that way.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Your art, films, and music evoke darkness and fearfulness, but humor frequently runs alongside this darkness and fearfulness. I'm curious*

to know where you stand in terms of this relationship — that of the real emotional, expressive, fear-inducing impulse with the sense of humor, irony, and camp.

DAVID LYNCH — It's a fine line. It comes with the ideas. I don't try to affect anyone. I get ideas and I fall in love with them. I understand that there's humor, fearful elements, beautiful things, and magical moments. Ideas come, but things have to be done in a certain way. The translating of the ideas is my job.

ALEX ISRAEL — *When you say that you don't try to affect anyone, do you mean that you translate ideas into experiences for yourself first, and that maybe others will be able to share these experiences with you?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yes. If I'm true to an idea, if I do the best I can to make it clear, and if it's thrilling to me, chances are it will be thrilling to at least a few other people. But ideas are strange. There are ideas that thrill a lot of people, and there are ideas that thrill only a few.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You recently performed live with Duran Duran.*

DAVID LYNCH — Yeah, but that was Duran Duran on a stage. American Express does these things called Unstaged — you know, So-and-So Unstaged. They did Arcade Fire Unstaged. They ask a director to film it. Terry Gilliam did Arcade Fire. When they asked me to do Duran Duran, I started thinking that everybody knows these concerts look similar, that they're all kind of the same. I thought, "What can I do?" Listening to the music I'd get ideas for images. Then I'd build, find, and shoot those images, which were then double-exposed over the concert to varying degrees — sometimes it was 100% of the image with no concert, and sometimes it was very little image and more concert. We always had the two swimming together. I thought it was very beautiful and hopeful.

ALEX ISRAEL — *I love your song, "Good Day Today." It's very eerie and desperate in tone — especially in the way that the lyric is repeated over and over again. It's an unexpected coming together of moods, it's a complicated idea, and, at the same time, it's a really fun dance track.*

DAVID LYNCH — It's a bunch of things. I just started hearing the tune, and the lyrics "I want to have a good day today" just came. Then I started thinking, well, everybody wants a good day, but not everybody is going to get a good day. So it's a yearning for something. Then other lyrics started coming and the thing got formed. My most recent ideas have come from the world of music.

ALEX ISRAEL — *There's another theme in your work, which is that whatever medium you're working*



Film still from *Eraserhead*, 1977, copyright David Lynch



Left: *Love Light*, 2009-2010, cold-rolled steel, wood, 71 x 13 x 17 inches



Right: *Yellow Green Violet Lamp*, 2011, cold-rolled steel, plaster, tint, resin, 60 x 12 x 24 inches



Fire on a Man, 2008-2009, watercolor on paper, 10 1/4 x 14 inches

in, the work you create tends to refer back to that medium. Your films are, in many ways, about filmmaking. “Good Day Today” is pretty much about using the structure of a pop song for a dance track. Your paintings are about painting, in the way they exaggerate painting by building up surfaces, foregrounds, and the paint-on-canvas relationship, which lies at the root of that form. It’s hard for me to imagine an artist like yourself — a master of his craft — rejecting the impulse to use this facility in order to manipulate an audience.

DAVID LYNCH — No. Never. I’m the viewer, but I’m also trying to get the ideas right. I’m manipulating the action until it feels correct. There’s something nice about sharing things. An idea has a particular sense, whether it’s a fearful idea, a happy idea, or a sad idea. It has many different qualities, which are specific for specific things. There’s a man and a woman in a room and they look a certain way, they talk a certain way. That comes with the idea. That’s the idea. Otherwise, how would you know what to do? These ideas put themselves together. I say the same thing over and over again just to get it to feel correct! But if no one

else saw it... Take the idea for my painting, *Boy Lights Fire*: I need to build a matchbook. And I like red rubber gloves. I like the long arms. I like certain proportions. I like cardboard. *Boy Lights Fire* brings all of this stuff together in an instant. So, basically, it’s done. But, actually, it’s far from done, because when you get into the specifics of building each element you say to yourself, “That’s too big.” Or, “That’s too small.” Or, “I gotta do that again.” Or, “I gotta fix this.” That’s what happens with these materials. It’s a fantastic process. Driven by the idea. Intuitively unfolding the idea.

ALEX ISRAEL — *When you’re working on a film, do you take part in all the different aspects, like the props and surfaces, the sound, and the scoring?*

DAVID LYNCH — Just like in the paintings.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is painting a solitary process?*

DAVID LYNCH — Pretty much.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Do you think of your films as being handmade artworks?*

DAVID LYNCH — Yes, but I have many helpers.

ALEX ISRAEL — *You have a history of using the same actors in different projects. These recurring faces take on the characteristics of a recurring material, which adds a kind of handmade, very personal quality to the films.*

DAVID LYNCH — You want the right person for every part. If you’ve worked with someone before, and they’re right for the part, it’s a good double-whammy, because you’ve developed a friendship, and a shorthand kind of communication, so it’s going to be easier. Going down the road with this person is not an unknown. Of course, if an unknown person is right for the part, you go with them.

ALEX ISRAEL — *Is there a connection between the way you cast a film and the way you choose materials for one of your jewel boxes?*

DAVID LYNCH — In a way. What I normally do is I look at faces. The casting director Johanna Ray shows me a lot of them. Maybe I’ll take the top ten. I used to talk to all ten, but sometimes that takes too long, so now they’re

put on videotape and I watch them. When I see someone talking I can tell. Sometimes someone will just squeak through; sometimes someone will slam it. A lot of times someone won’t be right for the part they came in for but I’ll see them for another part. Something like that always happens.

ALEX ISRAEL — *What does the transition from film to digital mean to you in terms of the material?*

DAVID LYNCH — Normally, I’d be the person least likely to switch because I want the organic thing, but I started experimenting with the Sony PD150 and I was amazed at the immediacy of it. It’s just incredible!

ALEX ISRAEL — *Did switching to video enhance your ability to make things organically?*

DAVID LYNCH — **Yes. You can hold the camera, you can move it, you can make it go over here, you can make it go slow, and it doesn’t matter if the quality is bad.** The medium pulls forth ideas that marry to it. If it’s watercolor,

ideas will come that fit with what you like about watercolor. If it’s music, ideas will come through that you can marry to a particular drum or guitar sound. It just happens. Good video imagery has a life of its own.

END