

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

RIOT MATERIAL

David Lynch: I Was A Teenage Insect



Woman with Small Dead Bird, 2018

(All photos: "David Lynch: I was a Teenage Insect" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles. September 8 – November 3, 2018. Photo credit: Flying Studio, Los Angeles)

Disturbing yet mesmerizing depictions of death, decay, and deformity bestrew beloved neo-noir director David Lynch's latest collection of multimedia paintings, watercolors, and drawings currently on display at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. This series of dark, violent, and surreal meditations on childhood and adolescence offers a rare and tantalizing peek into the celebrated film legend's perplexing psyche.

First gaining acclaim with his avant-garde, Kafkaesque debut, *Eraserhead* (1977), Lynch meticulously crafted the world of protagonist Henry (John Nance). This mind-bending horror film centers upon the upbringing of Henry's disfigured, reptilian baby in a depressing, industrial city greatly inspired by Lynch's adopted hometown of Philadelphia.

Three years later, the wildly eccentric and experimental director again dove headlong into themes of deformity and industry in *The Elephant Man*, a film based on the true story of Joseph Merrick, a man with severe congenital disabilities in 19th century London. On top of all of these other achievements, Lynch also reinvented the mystery genre with his adored television series *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and his non-linear Hollywood thriller *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

Nimptsch, Emily. "David Lynch: I was a Teenage Insect." Riot Material. 28 September 2018. Web.



I was a Teenage Insect, 2018

Lynch currently has his fourth solo exhibition at Kayne Griffin Corcoran, *David Lynch: I Was A Teenage Insect*, and it offers a fascinatingly grotesque glimpse into the artist's juvenescence. Here commonplace childhood events veer off into realms of the morbid and the unexpected.

In *Woman with Small Dead Bird* (2018), a female figure with short chestnut-colored hair dons a cerulean dress and cradles a dead bird in her hands. Lynch seems to have molded her face and body out of Play-Doh, creating the effect of relief sculpture. Adding to the grade-school tone of the image, the off-white background resembles papier-mâché and even features a scrawled, handwritten label revealing the painting's name. This image instantly reminds the viewer of elementary school art projects and classmates handling wildlife against the wishes of parents and teachers. *Woman with Small Dead Bird* expertly juxtaposes notions of youth and death.

Progressing out of childhood and into puberty, the exhibition's titular mixed-media painting offers a scathingly self-critical outlook on this particularly awkward stage of life. In *I Was a Teenage Insect* (2018), the viewer notices a dingy, decrepit-looking picket fence and a dark, rudimentary depiction of a house in backdrop as a lone figure stands in the foreground wearing tight dark pants and a striped shirt. Materials resembling excrement and grime billow out of his side and neck. Where the figure's head should be, we discover a wire halo held together by either rocks or used gum. Droplets of a mustard yellow, or some bile-like substance, stain the upper portion of the image, as does a series of erasure marks accompanying the image's label. Considering the painting's title as well as the fact that the male subject bears a strong resemblance to a cockroach, one is reminded of German author Franz Kafka's gruesome 1915 novella, *The Metamorphosis*. In Kafka's haunting tale, traveling salesman Gregor Samsa wakes one morning to find that he has magically transformed into a giant, repulsive insect, a representation that no less spoke to the absurdity of modern life — a theme both Kafka and Lynch find not only fascinating but rich for mining. It is possible here that Lynch is referencing Kafka's unsettling narrative to express his utter discontent with his own transitions during adolescence.



Ricky Finds out He Has Shit for Brains, 2017

Along similar thematic lines, the painting *Ricky Finds Out He Has Shit for Brains* (2017) offers a grisly portrait of a bald, dead-eyed young man. While the visitor does find a glittering, burnt orange lump of brains exploding out of the figure's head, a bent and charred silver wire connects the boy's face with an umber-hued mass mimicking excrement. Directly beneath the subject's buck-toothed smile is a white, viscous goo resembling semen topped with a ball of dirty bandages. Bridging notions of plentiful physical injuries and sexual exploration, together these two visceral symbols paint a stereotypical depiction of life as a pubescent boy.

Ideas of immaturity continue in *Philadelphia* (2017). Walking this dynamic image is a male figure with skin slathered in bronze-colored gunk. He possesses Trumpian blond hair and an exaggerated, furious facial expression as he blurts explosively the name "Philadelphia" into a cartoon speech bubble. The eye is immediately drawn to the subject's microscopic member as well as the heart in his hand accompanied by the misspelled word, "sorry." Complete with a backward and capitalized "R," the once sincere, apologetic phrase becomes "soЯe." The original meaning is now completely lost as one discovers even more random assorted letters spread across the picture plane. This word vomit mixes and mingles with the burnt black bile emanating from the figure's torso. Of course, one could read this work as political satire, but the City of Brotherly Love also holds much personal resonance for Lynch. As a graduate of the prestigious Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, the artist first gained his own sense of independence here by dabbling in film and the visual arts. He lived in a particularly run-down area called Fairmount with his young family. The neighborhood's crime and poverty terrified Lynch. Later describing his time there, the artist recalled, "We lived cheap, but the city was full of fear. A kid was shot to death down the street ... We were robbed twice, had windows shot out and a car stolen. The house was first broken into only three days after we moved in ... The feeling was so close to extreme danger, and the fear was so intense. There was violence and hate and filth."

Nimptsch, Emily. "David Lynch: I was a Teenage Insect." Riot Material. 28 September 2018. Web.

Like the rough seas carving rugged cliffs across millennia, the past shapes who we become. Through these acerbic, semi-autobiographical paintings, Lynch invites the viewer inside his subconscious mind and adolescent experience, therefore granting them a fully-developed understanding of this multi-dimensional multi-media artist.

—Emily Nimptsch