

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

## From Lynch to the Lynchian and the Dreams in Between

by Thomas Micchelli on May 11, 2013

*Hypnotherapy*, a group show at Kent Fine Art, gives David Lynch fans a chance to revisit the iconic filmmaker's alarming artwork a year after his solo turn at Jack Tilton. But that's only one, conspicuous though it is, of its strengths. What really matters is the opportunity to experience a museum-quality exhibition that approaches the pitfalls of latter-day surrealism with as much intelligence and refinement as this one does.

As you've already gleaned from title, the theme is hypnosis, though you can walk through the show without thinking much about it. There are no clever curatorial conceits standing in the way of the art. The concept is simply a stand-in for the fluidity of the borderline between the conscious and subconscious mind. Lynch is a supreme surrealist, one of the few filmmakers, mainstream or otherwise, capable of infusing his works with the associative imagery of a dream state (as opposed to conventional dream sequences, which are hardly ever like dreams at all).



David Lynch, "Two-Tongue Johnnie" (2012),  
mixed media, 27 x 31 inches  
(All images courtesy Kent Fine Art)

For this reason his movies worm their way into your cerebral cortex and lodge there for days, if not for good. His ability to evoke primal terror from the mundane, while using film techniques no fancier than what was available to Georges Melies more than 100 years ago, is unparalleled.

Lynch's visual art drinks from the same hallucinatory well. Often incorporating words and phrases, it is direct and visceral, populated by a menagerie of grotesques rendered in monochromatic watercolor or painted bas-relief.

One of the latter, "Two-Tongue Johnnie" (2012), is especially disturbing: Johnnie's two tongues, one orange and one pink, emerge like a pair of slugs from the side of his otherwise faceless, floppy-eared turd of a head, atop a torso clothed in an actual, baby-size shirt.

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This may sound like a not-so-distant echo of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's comic-horror dioramas, but there's a crucial difference between their mid-century absurdism and Lynch's often violently ludicrous humanity.

Lynch's work is marked by a sense of fatalism that is shared by the other artists in the show — John Brill, Llyn Foulkes, Pablo Helguera, Jill Spector and, in what is billed as a “special appearance,” the English occultist, mountaineer and libertine Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). Rather than rage against the dying of the light, these artists watch night approach with dispassionate fascination.



*John Brill, “Every Boy’s Dream” (2013), detail of installation, with photographs and video by the artist*

The anticipation of our inevitable absence comes across most seductively in John Brill's “Every Boy's Dream” (2013), an installation (which Kent is billing as a separate show “in conjunction with” *Hypnotherapy*) taking up an entire room off the gallery entrance.

Brill's pristinely arranged elements — framed photos on the wall, heavy wooden furniture, dimly glowing sconces and table lamps, picture albums, discarded clothes in the corners and miniature live fish in tiny aquariums — fuse into a vision of crisp, melancholy perfection.

But what's even more intriguing, and irresistible, is that even after you've looked more closely at Brill's photographs — bleached and burned images of screaming babies, crucified nudes and radioactive heads — or stared at the grainy video of a ski-masked face floating on an antique TV screen, the installation continues to suck you in without losing its initial, welcoming presence.

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It's a deliciously ineffable sensation, suspended between piercing images of extreme *noir* and the silky ambiance of a burnished, incandescent oasis, an exquisite coupling of comfort and dread.

The dualities of Brill's art recur in four works by Llyn Foulkes, "Edna Three Years Old," "Anna's Dress," "Three Sisters," and "Miss Lydia Josephine Thorn" (all 2013), in which strokes of oil paint — gray, purple and pale, gradated blue — obliterate the heads and occasional arm of fancy-dressed children posing in lustrous 1920s-vintage portrait photographs.



Llyn Foulkes, "Three Sisters" (2013),  
oil on photograph, mounted on board,  
7 15/16 x 5 15/16 inches.

These works, with their achingly beautiful veils of cool, mostly monochromatic color against the warm sepia prints, present themselves almost as trophies, self-enclosed objects of admiration or even veneration, classically elegant and, with their de facto decapitations, brutishly violent. Foulkes' other contributions to the show don't maintain the same level of paradox or emotional intensity, perhaps because the pictures cited above are violations of Foulkes' own family photographs ("Three Sisters" is of his mother and two aunts), but they are suffused with a bloody-minded mystery that can't help but pull the viewer in, despite what the show's [press release](#) calls — with unusual candor — "a relentless, even myopic, focus on work so personal that its intrinsic value is much greater for the artist than for the audience."

To be clear, this is a characterization that the gallery statement applies as a unifying trait to all the artists in the show, along with "obsessiveness, idiosyncrasy, and disregard for the mainstream." A badge of honor if I've ever heard one.

There are only two sculptures by Jill Spector, but they can be ignored at your peril. Discomfiting combos of polished shapes and scruffy surfaces, their plaster clouds, wooden panels and swaths of cheesecloth rise up from the floor like life forms aspiring to self-awareness but succumbing to bewilderment.

Or, looking at them another way, they could be subconscious thoughts remaining stubbornly beneath the surface despite your best efforts to draw them out: discordant, erratic and vexing, but concealing indigestible truths.

Aleister Crowley is represented by an untitled work from 1918 done in watercolor, tempera and oil on black paper, one of three pieces that survive from the years 1914 to 1918, when he started painting. The gallery [describes](#) the subject as "one of the few overtly occult themes in

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Crowley's visual oeuvre [...] an imaginative interpretation of the tarot card of the Moon," which includes "the golden Sun disc, inscribed with an eye in a triangle," a scarab beetle and other symbols.

With the occult being the occult, either you're cued in or you're not. While the painting possesses an outsider-ish charm, it doesn't carry much of a charge beyond its historical interest, perhaps because so much of its meaning is buried in its obscure content.

With David Lynch in the lineup, it is unavoidable that all eyes will turn to him even though he is cast as an ensemble player in the scheme of the show. If you want, you can find connections to his films in the other artists' work: Brill's table lamps might remind you of the buzzing bulb in *Inland Empire*, or you could associate Spector's plaster blobs with the deformed baby in *Eraserhead*.

However, the most Lynchian work in the exhibition is the one that bears no superficial relationship — Pablo Helguera's "*Conservatorio de Lenguas Muertas / Conservatory of Dead Languages*" (2004-present), an ongoing project that has become (according the gallery's [notes](#)) "a kind of symbolic museum of dying languages."



*Pablo Helguera, "Conservatory of Dead Languages: Cristina Calderón (b.1929) and Marie Smith Jones (1918–2008)" (2004–present), wax cylinders, display case, two color photographs, Edison Gem phonograph, and transcripts of interviews with Cristina Calderón and Marie Smith Jones, dimensions variable*

Helguera records the speakers of these languages on wax cylinders, "the method invented by Thomas Edison in 1877," and in doing so he closes a loop:

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*Edison's wax-cylinder recording represents the oldest means of sound reproduction and consequently is the first technology to ever record the human voice.*

In 2006 the artist began a journey from Anchorage, Alaska, down the Pan-American Highway to Tierra del Fuego at the southernmost tip of South America.

Near Anchorage he found the last speaker of the Alaskan language Eyak, Chief Marie Smith Jones, an 87-year-old woman whose Eyak name means “the voice that you follow.”

As curious as all that sounds, the tale gets stranger still. Helguera writes in an accompanying [essay](#) of his subsequent travels south:

*When I started my long journey through the Americas, I realized that Yaghan — the language spoken by the indigenous groups from Tierra del Fuego — was also near extinction. Just by coincidence, and maybe for some reason connected to the poetic symmetry of fate, there was only one Yaghan speaker left — a woman who lived in the southernmost village in the world.*

Along with Helguera's wax cylinders and a Thomas Edison Gem phonograph, there are photos on display of the two women from the polar extremes of the earth, Chief Marie Smith Jones and the Yaghan speaker, Cristina Calderón. Chief Marie died in 2008 but Calderón is still with us. As he closes his essay, Helguera's thoughts turn back to Chief Marie:

*We live in the luxurious oblivion of plenty, not particularly concerned about the sounds that draw us, not particularly worried if there may be some kind of blindness in us of which we would like to get rid of.*

*Leaving Marie Smith Jones, we drove through the night, down the Alaskan highway. It must have been 4:00 a.m., and yet the sky looked as if it was six in the evening. The sun never appeared to touch the horizon. Instead, it started rising again.*

[Hypnotherapy](#) and John Brill: Every Boy's Dream continue at Kent Fine Art (210 Eleventh Avenue, 2nd floor, between 24th & 25th Streets, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 29.