Twin Peaks: 20th Anniversary Art Exhibition | Catalogue Essay

It is Happening Again: Returning to *Twin Peaks* | Richard Martin

When we think about something we love, we often long to return to our initial encounter. I can still remember, with corresponding shudders, the first time I saw *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*. Having watched, at this stage, just the first series of *Twin Peaks* and only one or two of David Lynch's films, I was still gloriously naïve about the kind of experience I was about to undergo. Squashed into the back corner of a tiny cinema at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, I already felt rather trapped when those mournful opening credits began. The next thirty minutes proved almost unbearably tense and utterly disorientating. What did the blue rose symbolise? What strange activities had been going on at the trailer park? What was that buzzing sound I kept hearing? Why did David Bowie appear and then disappear without any explanation? Was he even there at all? By the time that familiar theme tune rang out and the Twin Peaks town sign finally appeared, I was more apprehensive than reassured. I was right to be worried: the rest of the film remains as traumatic as anything in cinema. Yet, as the camera soared celestially over the Red Room in the final scene, I knew that I wanted to see this film again, immediately.

Of course, for David Lynch this cinematic prequel also represented a return to something he loved – one final chance, after the cancellation of the television series, to explore this intricate world and the opportunity for an extended encounter with Laura Palmer. We might call it a homecoming, though in the town of Twin Peaks, going home is often when problems begin. Now, twenty years after *Fire Walk With Me* first appeared on our screens, twelve artists from nine countries have themselves returned to *Twin Peaks*. As we encounter their resulting works, what becomes ever clearer is the extraordinary influence this series and its cinematic sibling have had across the globe.

How can we account for the continuing popularity of *Twin Peaks*? What remains so compelling about these characters, their stories and this one small town that they still inspire such rich artistic responses? Perhaps searching too hard for explanations might be the wrong approach. After all, the comments of Javier Jaén, whose eerie composition graces the cover of this catalogue, epitomize the feelings of many viewers: "The first time I saw *Twin Peaks* I was nine years old. I remember that I loved it, even if I did not understand a thing. A few years ago, I saw it again. Still I didn't understand it, but I liked

it even more." We may not be able to comprehend all of *Twin Peaks*' strange features, and we might not want to, either: there can be great pleasure in feeling lost in this labyrinth, in lurking within its endless chambers and corridors. And yet, we can detect some conspicuous themes, images and associations returning throughout this exhibition that indicate why this inspirational series maintains such resonance.

It seems important that *Twin Peaks* began with a map. During the early discussions for the series, David Lynch sketched out a detailed plan for a town on the Canadian border surrounded by mountains, woods and lakes. He explained, "we knew where everything was located and that helped us to determine the prevailing atmosphere and what might happen there."[1] From the outset, then, *Twin Peaks* was characterised by a distinctive sense of place. This was a community that seemed, simultaneously, to be utterly specific to the Pacific Northwest and also representative of small towns across the United States. It was a place that felt instinctively familiar, but which remained full of secrets.

The original emphasis the map placed on the town's natural landscape would continue throughout the series via hypnotic shots of waterfalls and trees. Such images have no doubt inspired many works in this exhibition. Javier Jaén's aforementioned piece suggests that, in *Twin Peaks*, human and natural forms have merged. If it often felt as if Ghostwood Forest should be considered as a character in its own right, then Jaén extends this logic still further by providing his model trees with their own bodies and legs. The accompanying photograph of this sinister army under construction, surrounded by artistic apparatus, is also a neat nod to Lynch, a director always keen to take us behind the curtain.

From folk tales to horror films, we have become accustomed to the idea that woods are magical and terrifying, that they provide a place where transformation or transgression can occur. One of Lynch's defining features as an artist is his ability to make us feel the original power of a cliché. In *Twin Peaks*, the trees form a dense, deceptive and seductive environment in which perception is obscured or distorted. According to Sheriff Truman, "something very, very strange" lies waiting in Ghostwood Forest, but perhaps this is just a rhetorical cloak for the illicit human deeds that take place there. Indeed, while the image of a log cabin in the woods has often provoked romantic associations in the United States – think of Thoreau's celebration of isolated living – then in *Twin Peaks* the connotations are somewhat darker. Gregory Euclide's evocative rendering of a remote wooden abode reminds us where Laura Palmer spent

her tortuous last night. As ever with Lynch's work, the idyllic and the dreadful exist alongside each other.

Other locations in Twin Peaks remain equally memorable. The Great Northern Hotel, the Roadhouse, the Packard Sawmill, the Double R Diner, Ed's Gas Station: all these places have their own special atmosphere. Part of the fun in watching the series was wondering *where* the action might head next, regardless of *what* might actually occur. In *Fire Walk With Me*, though, the Palmer household, so secluded in the television series, becomes the undisputed centre of the story. In its cinematic incarnation, we learn the true horror of that uncanny ceiling fan and the ominous staircase. A similar sense of domestic catastrophe can be sensed in Peter Russell's diptych and in Wu Xiaohi's work. The latter features a sequence of unnerving rooms. The dimensions of these spaces seem somewhat awry – just as the interior of the Palmer house was often shot from unusual angles – and their shadows and shadings suggest an unwelcome presence, human or otherwise: we can easily imagine seeing Bob emerge from behind the sofa or nestled in a dark corner. In Russell's piece, we are presented with a house collapsing into bloody oblivion, another strangely familiar structure which can be placed into a rich artistic, cinematic and architectural lineage – a building that brings to mind the American Gothic of the Bates Motel in *Psycho* (1960) and the Edward Hopper painting that inspired Hitchcock. The exposure of this home in the right-hand panel of Russell's work echoes Lynch's own approach to domestic matters. "Some people open windows in houses," the director explains, "but I like to go deeper into a house and find things underneath things. Maybe that's where they are."[2]

It also feels productive to view Russell's piece in a more metaphorical sense. As the artist himself points out, while Twin Peaks appeared to be an exemplary community based around hospitality and friendship, on closer inspection it "concealed so many secret liaisons." It would be Agent Cooper, an outsider, who "would lead the charge to lift off the roof." Thus, the disintegrating structure we see in Russell's work reminds us that *Twin Peaks* expertly removed the façade from small-town life, unveiling the interior lives of the local population with all their fascinating contradictions.

Perhaps the most remarkable environment in *Twin Peaks* – or, for that matter, anywhere in Lynch's oeuvre – is the Red Room. Only on rare occasions do we enter this space (in the second and last episodes of the series, and three times during *Fire Walk With Me*), but its mysterious power is undeniable. Possible interpretations of this location are almost endless; indeed, the very purpose of the Red Room might be to provoke the

fears and desires of each individual inhabitant (and that includes us). Lynch himself describes the Red Room, in typically open-ended terms, as "a free zone, completely unpredictable and therefore pretty exciting but also scary."[3] In Gordon W. Robertson's work, the Red Room's jazzy flooring has inspired a succession of rhythmic patterns that come to suggest an infinite environment. What is more, by using the two-dimensional images of a television series as the catalyst for his own hand-etched metallic desk object, Robertson echoes the strange mutations of material that take place in the Red Room, where even the consistency of coffee cannot be trusted.

During Dale Cooper's terrifying visit to the Red Room in *Twin Peaks*' finale – surely one of the most incredible sequences ever broadcast on television – the space becomes increasingly disorientating. It is as if all the key ideas of the series have been collected together within an endless structure of chambers and corridors, with strobe lighting and overlaid images creating further confusion. The Red Room, then, becomes a place where impossible events naturally occur, where contradictory forces (giants and dwarves, good and evil) sit side by side. Indeed, one extraordinary feature of Lynch's work in general is the way a variety of competing emotions can be entangled within a single scene: anxiety follows wonder which leads to sorrow trailed by terror topped with love. One room or one character can house multiple, often paradoxical, feelings. Will Maw's pieces, which involve the superimposition of iconic imagery from throughout *Twin Peaks*, including the Red Room's curtains and zig-zag flooring, seem to follow a similar logic. In juxtaposing disparate moments from the series, Maw creates startling new combinations imbued with a dream-like atmosphere.

Lizzie Vickery's work emerges from an opposing perspective. As the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once wrote, "There are minds for which certain images retain absolute priority."[4] This seems especially applicable to David Lynch, whose work repeatedly returns to particular symbolic elements, brimming with potency. Vickery takes two such images from *Twin Peaks* – the "damn fine" coffee served in the Double R Diner and the roaring flames that engulf Bob's victims – and presents them in complete isolation. Freed from their original context and rendered with absolute clarity – the background to the coffee is, to adopt Cooper's words, "black as midnight on a moonless night" – these images become even more primal. What drives David Lynch, claims the American critic Greil Marcus, is the belief that "a whole country, all of its history, made and unmade" may be "present in a single image."[5] Vickery's work hones in on the key

materials that make up Lynch's world, the objects that for him hold excessive meaning. In so doing, she gives us a history of *Twin Peaks* in a single image.

Perhaps, though, all this talk of trees, cabins, rooms and materials neglects the vital characters that animated *Twin Peaks*. Just as each location felt distinctive, every inhabitant of this town had their own peculiar qualities. Take Jerry Horne with his fetish for baguettes or his niece Audrey, who enjoyed nothing more than tying her father (as well as cherry stems) in knots. The town housed such diverse personalities as Garland Briggs, an encyclopaedia of classified military information; Lucy Moran, a vocal connoisseur of *Invitation to Love*; and the Log Lady, whose enigmatic pronouncements should never be treated with anything but respect. Characters could surprise us (Leland's hair turning white!) or embarrass us (Donna, James and Maddy singing together!); they could have us in stiches (Andy and his troubles with a plank) and they could break our hearts (Norma and Ed's doomed relationship). Even Albert, the archetypal urban cynic, would eventually learn to love the ways of this world.

Yasuhiro Onishi says he was fascinated by *Twin Peaks* "for its depiction of ego" and admits to a "close affinity" with "the people and places in my paintings, even though they don't exist." His small, unsettling portraits add a grotesque and darkly comic edge to the likes of Sheriff Truman and Agent Cooper, while his version of Laura Palmer, bloody and emaciated, is distinctly ghoulish. In Hiram To's installation, we meet a figure and a scenario that has served Lynch well throughout his career: a mysterious, glamorous woman, holding a charged object, in a shadowy room. Amidst the disparate references in this piece – which include *Grease*, religious iconography and the Capitol Records Building in Los Angeles – To perfectly captures the dreamy atmosphere of *Twin Peaks*, a languor so rarely found on television. That the woman in this image is examining a vinyl record is crucial. For *Twin Peaks* was a television series obsessed with other media – from the intercom messages at the Sheriff's Department to the telephone calls with Gordon Cole, from melodrama on *Invitation to Love* to dirty pictures in *Flesh World*, from tunes on the jukebox to wanted posters on the walls. Our encounter with Laura Palmer is, above all, an encounter with media: her televisual self is spliced together from diary entries, home-video footage, photographic portraits and audio-tape messages. This was a series, like many of the works in this exhibition, made of 'mixed media'.

The vinyl record in To's installation also reminds us of what many consider to be the pivotal moment in the entire *Twin Peaks* project – the revelation, in episode fourteen, of Laura Palmer's killer. Whatever the lame executive anxieties that forced it to occur,

the episode itself is a frightening piece of television. Leland's murder of Maddy Ferguson is, unforgettably, prefigured by the disturbing sight (and, even worse, the relentless sound) of a needle skipping in a groove on the Palmers' phonograph. As the record revolves eternally, we become aware that something terrible is about to be repeated, that a reenactment is in process, that a cycle of abuse is about to claim its latest victim. During the subsequent violence, so brutal and prolonged, the action switches to the Roundhouse where the giant appears on-stage to tell Agent Cooper: "It is happening again." He repeats this incantation, as if to underscore the serial nature of the crime: "It is happening again." For all the fun of *Twin Peaks*, the jokes about curtain drapes and the two-tone shoes, there remains something shocking at its core. To return to the television series is to be reminded of this murder and abuse. To watch *Fire Walk With Me* is to be reminded that Lynch chose not to return to cozy chats about doughnuts and cherry pie, but to focus unsparingly on traumatic incest. Twenty years on, the extraordinary affect of this decision remains undimmed.

Author

Richard Martin is a writer and academic based in Berlin. He completed his PhD on David Lynch at the London Consortium and has taught film, literature and critical theory at Birkbeck (University of London) and Middlesex University. The organiser of a series of public courses and events at Tate Modern, including the 2009 international symposium on Lynch, Richard is currently completing his first book, *The Architecture of David Lynch*.

Notes

[1] Chris Rodley (ed.), *Lynch on Lynch* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 158.
[2] Ibid., p. 18.
[3] Ibid., p. 19.
[4] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1958; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 127.
[5] Greil Marcus, *The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 123.