It began with an experience David Lynch had while painting an image of a garden in his studio one night at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia. “I don’t remember which one, but it was an almost all-black painting. And it showed green garden plants right in the center of the canvas,” Lynch recalled. “I remember where I was. I was in this fantastic room [at PAFA]. . . . It felt really good to be inside this building, and it just had great spaces. It had the smell, and it had good people in there too.” Lynch paused from work and looked at the canvas only to perceive sound and motion coming from within. “I’m looking at the painting and from the painting came a wind. . . . And the green garden plants began to move. . . . And I’m looking at this and hearing this and I say, ‘Oh, a moving painting.’ And that was it.”

This primal scene in Lynch’s life story has been described frequently and it is cast as the turning point that led him to pursue film over painting. In seeking out a means to animate static painting, Lynch first made the one-minute film *Six Men Getting Sick* (1967, plate 2). Hand drawn and shot with a cheap camera at two frames per image, the sixty-second looped film shows six men whose stomachs—rendered in a deadpan anatomy-manual style—fill up with liquid that rushes upward to be ejected out of their mouths. In the process, the word “SICK” flashes across their bodies, they experience excessive organic transformations, searing red fills the screen, and the scene catches fire amidst a constant wailing siren. Lynch submitted it to the second annual Dr. William S. Biddle Cadwalader Memorial Prize competition for experimental work and shared first prize with another student, Nickolai Sibiriakoff. This led to a four-minute combination of animation and live action titled
The Alphabet (1968), which gave Lynch the confidence to make the more ambitious thirty-four-minute film The Grandmother (1970), also featuring animation and live action.

Lynch’s skill and unusual approach in these short films garnered an invitation to be a fellow at the American Film Institute’s Center for Advanced Film Studies in Los Angeles. It was there that Lynch made Eraserhead (1972–76) before going on to become the director of many internationally acclaimed feature films, including The Elephant Man (1980), Blue Velvet (1986), Wild at Heart (1990), Lost Highway (1997), The Straight Story (1999), Mulholland Drive (2001), and INLAND EMPIRE (2006). While his achievement as a writer and director of feature films is enough to secure his legacy, Lynch is also credited with revolutionizing what we expect from television through his work on Twin Peaks (1990–91) and has been engaged in innovative Internet-based projects as well as music.3

This tidy technology–based trajectory foregrounds filmmaking as a primary aspect of Lynch’s identity.4 It also suggests that he chose one path (film) over another (painting), positioning his formative experience as a visual artist in a way that made it tangential to his better-known activities. Six Men Getting Sick and the sound and motion epiphany that preceded it in his studio led him toward something more significant than a media-based vision. For Lynch it was never a question of choosing film over visual art. He developed an integrated way of making ideas manifest that embraces language, light, motion, sound, and texture.

Six Men Getting Sick was important in developing his vision but it was a hybrid artwork rather than “the first film.” Lynch, with the help of longtime friend and fellow PAFA student Jack Fisk, cast his body into a massive three-dimensional screen onto which this animated loop was aimed. The piece was an integrated painting, film, sculpture, installation, and sound piece that set the tone for the kind of work Lynch would pursue—not film alone, but a unified vision of multisensory experience working together. That initial inspiration and realization—that he could make paintings move and that he could hear the painting—has guided him since.

Although the opposite has been asserted, Lynch is an artist who happens to make film as part of his expression.5 His identity as an artist is key to his work. His films are dependent on, flow from, and are inseparable from his identity as a visual artist; they are a painter’s films, concerned with issues that arise from his sensitivity to composition, texture, formal relationships, and how subjects are enhanced
by their presentation in a particular style. Lynch’s integrative vision is related to his spiritual life, in particular his practice of Transcendental Meditation, which enables him to tap into his creative life in unprecedented ways. He uses meditation to become more conscious and open to ideas; he also speaks of it as his way of joining “the unified field” of consciousness that connects all living beings. This explains in part how Lynch’s vision can bear extreme darkness and optimism in the same work. It is why we exist, he claims, “To gain divine mind through knowledge and experience of combined opposites.”

In much of Lynch’s work across media, he is concerned with entering and bringing the audience into a parallel or contiguous world in which, “You can go on a trip to a place you have created, have a story take place there, have abstractions occur, and have an overall feeling erupt out of that world that never existed before. It’s so beautiful to think about, but it’s so hard to do at the same time.”

Lynch’s use of the word “abstractions” is shorthand for a preference that allows images to carry the weight of narrative and the potential for fluid meaning. This approach stems from his recognition that painting is the activity in his creative life from which everything else flows. When asked directly about this he asserted:

It is. There are things about painting that are true for everything in life. That’s the way painting is. Music is also one of those things. There are things that can’t be said with words. And that’s sort of what painting is all about. And that’s what filmmaking, to me, is mostly about. There are words and there are stories, but there are things that can be said with film that you can’t say with words. It’s just the beautiful language of cinema. And it has to do with time and juxtapositions and all the rules in painting. Painting is one thing that carries through everything else.

Painting was Lynch’s first love and he never abandoned it throughout a career that constantly generated new opportunities. Perhaps because of his fame as a director, he maintained a studio practice that was quiet and out of the limelight. However, when others saw this aspect of his life, they urged him to make it more public. It was only in 1989 that Lynch had his first solo exhibition in New York, after actress Isabella Rossellini showed his work to a friend, the Milan-based dealer Beatrice Monti della Corte, who enthusiastically shared it with Leo Castelli. He saw a great deal in the work and presented an exhibition of Lynch’s paintings at his gallery. “This man knows what he’s doing,” Castelli asserted. “Not only in the technique, but there is a mature concept, and there is know-how. And this is very surprising, because you don’t find this professional level in someone who does not devote all his time to painting and drawing. I would like to know how he got to this point; he cannot be born out of the head of Zeus.”

David Lynch: The Unified Field is in part a response to Castelli’s curiosity about Lynch’s origins. Although Lynch has been clear and eloquent about his life as an artist, there has been little attention to his artwork, its presence in his creative life, and the role that Philadelphia played in shaping his vision. Lynch asserts, “I never had what I consider an original idea until I was in Philadelphia. And I got onto a thing that I felt was my own. Something clicked in Philly. That place really helped kick in something. It might have been my age, it might have been Philly, or combinations of all sorts of things. . . . All of it grew out of that and so many things grew out of it, things I’m probably not even aware of. It was staggeringly important. The biggest inspiration of my life was the city of Philadelphia. For sure.”

Philadelphia shaped and prepared Lynch for the challenges in his career and his experience at PAFA gave him the tools necessary for defining an independent artistic practice. Lynch’s direct engagement with the art world has come in waves depending on his work in film, television, and music. His role in the art world has been as much a matter of his influence on peers as it has been a gradual revelation, in recent years, of his cumulative achievement as a draftsman, designer, painter, photographer, and printmaker. This is the David Lynch that has been with us all along, but it is the one we know least.

Lynch was born in Missoula, Montana, but his family moved many times before he was a teenager, living in Sandpoint and Boise, Idaho; Spokane, Washington; and Durham, North Carolina, before settling in Alexandria, Virginia. His father worked for the Department of Agriculture as a researcher, a fact that Lynch remembered viscerally. Lynch’s fascination with organic phenomena, which is prevalent in his work, has its origins in childhood. He recalled:

My father frequently experimented on tree diseases and insects. He had huge forests at his disposal to experiment on. So I was exposed to insects, disease and growth, in an organic sort of world, like a forest, or even a garden. And this sort of thrills me—this earth, and then these plants coming out, and then there’s the things crawling...
on them and the activity in a garden—so many textures, and movements. You could just get lost forever. And then there are lots of things that are attacking the garden. There’s a lot of slaughter and death, diseases, worms, grubs, ants.13

Lynch drew as a child and gradually revealed a talent for art but had little or no exposure to artists or art history until he was a teenager. One example of his early work is a tempera and ink scene showing a row of houses and bare trees (fig. 1). The composition would be unremarkable except that Lynch chose to infuse all of the architectural forms, and even the surrounding environment, with stains of blue, violet, magenta, and yellow, which give the scene an eerie mood. The subject matter—houses and the potential of something lurking beneath the surface of a seemingly quiet neighborhood street—would become a major theme of his later paintings and drawings, and notably the 1986 film Blue Velvet.

It was through a high school friend, Toby Keeler, that Lynch discovered painting as a profession, and even a way of life. Toby introduced Lynch to his father, a painter named Bushnell Keeler, and together they visited Mr. Keeler’s studio in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. The experience altered the course of Lynch’s life.14 It revealed another world and opened up new possibilities for him as a developing artist. Bushnell Keeler became an informal artistic mentor to Lynch. He secured a studio for him, which was eventually shared with Jack Fisk, and hired models that Lynch worked from in Keeler’s life-drawing classes.

Keeler noted that Lynch approached drawing from life in a way he had never witnessed before. Rather than staying rooted in a single spot for the duration of a session, Lynch would move, “all over the place when he was drawing. He’d get within two feet of the model, then go way back to the corner of the room, then come in and lie on his back looking up at her. He produced a fantastic abstraction that segmented the body and broke it apart: one leg was over here, another was up in the corner.”15 Two drawings dated slightly later than these sessions give a hint of what Keeler witnessed (plates 9, 10). Lynch is less concerned with the details of close

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FIGURE 1 DAVID LYNCH (b. 1946), Untitled, ca. 1960, tempera and ink on paper, 30 × 41½ in. Courtesy of the artist

observation than he is with eliciting the essence of form and life in the body. Fragmented, but sensual and vital, and baring the surface and interior simultaneously, they are visions of the body as a mortal machine propelled by spirit.

Keeler also introduced Lynch to Robert Henri’s (1865–1929) The Art Spirit, a book that became his constant companion for many years. Henri, who had lived and worked in Philadelphia and trained at PAFA before establishing his own school in New York, was a source of inspiration for Lynch and Fisk. “I loved that book; I carried it around. And so did Jack; it was sort of our bible,” Lynch recalled. “It led to the idea of the art life. Not the art spirit but the art life. You drink coffee, you smoke cigarettes and you paint. That’s it. And occasionally, a girl enters it too.” The Art Spirit influenced many generations of American artists, some of who had been Henri’s students; others came afterward and looked to the writing and teaching of Henri’s former student, Margery Ryerson. One section stands out for its resonance with Lynch’s discussions of “the unified field” and consciousness. Throughout his career, Lynch has often spoken about allowing the creative act or intuition to guide his work; he is receptive to the fortuitous accident. In an eloquent tribute to another artist, Henri wrote:

> There are moments in our lives, there are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual—become clairvoyant. We reach then into reality. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. It is in the nature of all people to have these experiences; but in our time and under the conditions of our lives, it is only a rare few who are able to continue in the experience and find expression for it. At such times there is a song going on within us, a song to which we listen. It fills us with surprise. . . . They are the pinnacles of our experience and it is the desire to express these intimate sensations, this song from within, which motivates the masters of all art.17

In addition to his experience with Keeler, Lynch took classes at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. After graduating from high school he moved to Boston to attend the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA), while Fisk went to Cooper Union in New York.18 By the end of his first year (1965), Lynch was unhappy with Boston and he decided to travel to Europe with Fisk. With a letter of introduction from T. Lux Feininger (1910–2011), son of Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956) and professor at the SMFA, Lynch and Fisk intended to attend the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, founded in 1953 by Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980) as the “School of Vision,” in Hohensalzburg Fortress. However, due to a combination of poor planning and mismatched expectations, their trip lasted only two weeks. When Lynch returned to Alexandria, his parents had cut him off financially for leaving school and what they perceived as a lack of direction. He took a series of odd jobs and worked on his art when he could. Fisk meanwhile had transferred to PAFA and Keeler decided to push Lynch to join him by a strategy of shunning the young artist to make him want to leave. “I thought he was going to bury himself here: he should be out there involved with people of his generation in the arts, instead of with us old fogeys,” he recounted.19

Keeler’s plan worked. Lynch decided to join Fisk at PAFA and so he applied, hoping his portfolio review would be successful. In support, Keeler wrote a letter to PAFA’s admissions office asserting that Lynch’s visit to campus made him enthusiastic about “all the facets of its life he encountered. Although he is definitely not under any illusions about being accepted, he seems bent on making Philadelphia his residence for he feels that all is there in the way of artistic community, seriousness of purpose among the students, and a structure for discipline and discovery . . . all of which he needs and seems now to want, and, I might add, to which I feel he can make a meaningful contribution.”20

Lynch was accepted, joined Fisk in Philadelphia, and attended PAFA from January 1966 to May 1967 (fig. 2). “It was a great time to be at the Academy,” Lynch asserted. “Schools have waves, and it just happened that I hit on a really rising, giant wave. There were so many good people at the school. And that really started everything rolling. I kind of got a feeling for things in terms of painting, and my own style kind of clicked in.”21 Lynch’s instructors at PAFA included Morris Blackburn, Leon Kelly, Julian Levi, Elizabeth Osborne, and Hobson Pittman. All but Osborne were older veterans of the art world with a wealth of professional experience to impart as they critiqued their students and demonstrated techniques. Blackburn had studied in his youth with modernist Arthur B. Carles and was a master printmaker; Kelly had painted in a biomorphic surrealist mode earlier in his career; and Levi had worked for the WPA and depicted recovering servicemen during World War II.

Osborne was a rising star in the art world, in her third year of teaching, and closest in age to her students. By 1966 she had
received many grants and prizes for her paintings and in that year had her fourth solo exhibition in Philadelphia. At the time she was engaged in a series of paintings that incorporated actual windows, doors, and other structures juxtaposed with figures emerging from darkness (fig. 3). Somber and reflecting the cumulative impact of many personal losses, they strike a balance between suggestion and tangibility, extending the ways in which painting can function in image-making. While Osborne was the only instructor who consistently gave Lynch A’s in class, it was Pittman who Lynch credits with having the greatest impact on him at PAFA. According to many accounts, the students who were doing “experimental” or “adventurous” work gravitated toward Pittman, who gave them the support and encouragement to find their own voices. Lynch recalls:

Hobson and I, we traded work. I have a drawing of peaches in a bowl. And he had this big painting of a mechanical woman. I don’t know what happened to that. The thing about Hobson Pittman, as I remember, he could separate his likes, he was good at critiquing any kind of work. It was, I’m not kidding you, constructive criticism. It wasn’t ever a put down . . . he gave you something to talk about or think about and it was never a downer. . . . So it was a good-feeling class. And it was easy-going, not heavy. There was a lot of humor in it as I remember.22

Pittman was known for holding daylong open sessions in which students could come and have their work critiqued on the spot before their peers. Bruce Samuelson, who participated in these events with Lynch, noted that Pittman’s critiques left students energized and that he spoke about immediate work at hand in a way that had reverberating residual meaning for others lingering in the room after their reviews were finished.23 Pittman’s own work ranged from spooky street scenes and interiors to gorgeously observed pastel still lifes imbued with a supernatural atmosphere (fig. 4).

Lynch asserts though that the most exciting and challenging aspect of his PAFA experience was being immersed in a community of artists that extended from peers at the school to older artists.
living and working in Philadelphia. Fisk made a point to introduce Lynch; they also lived together during Lynch’s first semester. “We drove each other,” Lynch asserts. “We really did—inspired each other, always seeing each other’s work. That was a huge part of the system that was so positive.”

Dianne Vanderlip, who ran a gallery in Philadelphia, referred to Fisk, Lynch, and their friends as “the Aspen street gang” because their friendships were so close and mutually supportive. Among the artists who were integral to their broader circle, and thus Lynch’s most important creative friendships at the time, were Murray Dessner, Tom Hatton, James Havard, Ben Kamihira, Noel Mahaffey, Virginia Maitland (who starred in The Grandmother), Eo Omwake, Tom Palmore, Peggy Reavey (née Lentz and soon to be Lynch’s wife), Bruce Samuelson, and the poet C. K. Williams (credited with script advice for The Grandmother).

Havard, an older artist who was attracting national attention, provided an example of how to balance a career and marriage while fully immersed in work. He worked playfully in a wide range of approaches, from quickly executed line drawings to tightly composed observations from life and photography. An etching from 1966 titled The Swedish Film Editor shows these multiple ways of looking juxtaposed together and arranged around the motif of a screen and film projection (fig. 5). When Havard had his 1967 Crayola exhibition at the Vanderlip Gallery in Philadelphia, Lynch brought a camera and shot a short film of the opening. Kamihira, who was teaching at PAFA but mingled with students, inspired Lynch because of his ability to make realist painting modern by incorporating surprising details, uncanny shifts of perspective, and a haunting choreography of light (fig. 6). Samuelson and Lynch discussed making films together, inspiring Lynch to acquire his first camera.

Artists making films as a serious part of their practice or as an experiment was not unusual at the time—there were innumerable examples in the art world of artists who made films, from Red Grooms to Andy Warhol and Bruce Connor. While Lynch pursued it, Samuelson focused on painting.