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WEEKEND Arts FINE ARTS LEISURE

Strolling Within the Strange World of 'Blue Velvet'

What would it be like to step inside a movie? Filmmakers have often penetrated the "fourth wall," that imaginary divide separating the audience from the action, by having characters break the narrative spell and address moviegoers directly. Woody Allen extended the device in "The Purple Rose of Cairo," when a character in the film-within-the-film leaves the screen and enters "real" life.

ART REVIEW

MARTHA
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In his installation "On Chapels, Caves and Erotic Misery" the Polish-born New York artist Christian Tomaszewski reverses this logic and invites viewers to enter David Lynch's 1986 art-house thriller, "Blue Velvet."

At the darkened entrance to the basement of the SculptureCenter visitors are greeted with illuminated text etched onto a black mirror: "This film has been modified from its original version. It has been formatted to fit your limits." Conflating the standard video warning with psychedelic, psychological posturing ("are you experienced?") invokes a momentary cringe, but its effects aren't irremediable.

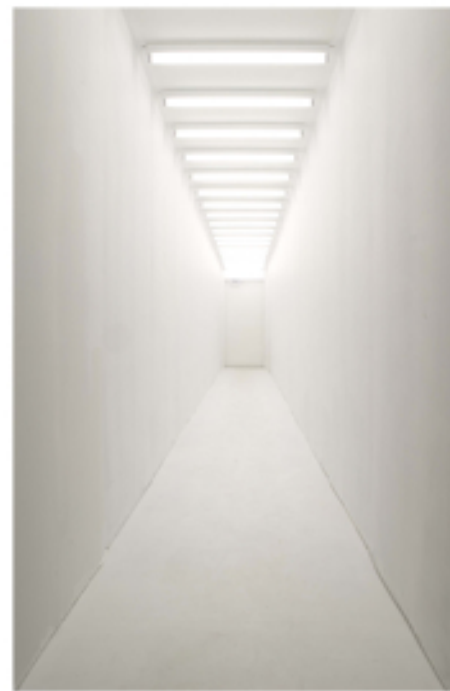
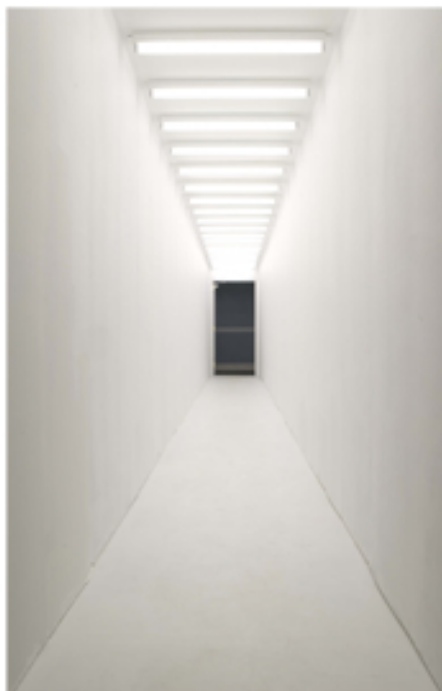
To the right and left are closed doors; the visitor chooses her entrance into the installation. The left door leads into a hallway with gray walls, white wainscoting and illuminated sconces, a skillful re-creation of the hallway in the Deep River apartment building where Dorothy Vallens, the kinky chanteuse played by Isabella Rossellini in the film, lives. The hallway winds around the basement and is lined by doors, most of which are locked and lighted from behind.

Take the door on the right and enter a slightly wider corridor lined on one side with dollhouse-size models of locations in the movie: the booth in Arlene's diner where Sandy (Laura Dern) and Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) discuss what to do after he finds a severed human ear in a vacant lot and delivers it to her detective father; a craftily conceived view through louvered doors into Dorothy's kitchen and living room; three versions of Jeffrey's parents' home surrounded by a white picket fence; and a vitrine with a re-creation of the infamous severed ear resting on a mirrored base.

On the other side of this space is an arrangement of vintage lamps combining Haim Steinbach's shelf-sculpture aesthetic with Mr. Lynch's revivalist kitsch (as well as a version of Brion Gysin's 1960s "Dreamachine," a spinning, perforated cylinder with a light bulb inside). Also in this room is a flashing orange neon sign with the image of a gun and an arrangement of cardboard triangles on the ceiling, which are easy to miss.

Access to two other parts of the installation can be gained through the hallway that winds around the basement. One is a bright, narrow corridor painted white, with Dan Flavin-style fluorescent tubes lining the ceiling. The other is a pitch black hallway with illuminated texts on the wall, including directions from the "Blue Velvet" screenplay.

"On Chapels, Caves and Erotic Misery" continues through July 29 at the SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; (718) 361-1750 or sculpture-center.org.



Photographs by Jason Mandella

Two ends of a fluorescently lighted corridor in "On Chapels, Caves and Erotic Misery."

Christian Tomaszewski
SculptureCenter

Mr. Tomaszewski has done a skillful job recreating "Blue Velvet" objects and locales (most in miniature). This isn't his first crack at the project; it is the fifth and final version. Others have been installed in galleries in New York and Poland and in museums in Germany.

In a catalog interview Mr. Tomaszewski describes Mr. Lynch as an "enigma of Postmodernism," while admitting that Mr. Tomaszewski is "more interested in Modernism and its utopias." The play between Postmodernism and Modernism enters here in both the title of the work — which comes from the original name for Kurt Schwitters's "Merzbau," the famous proto-installation Mr. Schwitters erected in his house in Hannover, Germany, featuring found and created objects and called "The Cathedral of Erotic Misery" — and those easily missed cardboard prisms on the ceiling in the basement, which mimic some of the interior architectural configurations in "Merzbau."

You sense, in paging through the catalog, that Mr. Tomaszewski made a deeper connection between these disparate sources — "Blue Velvet" and "Merzbau"; Modernism and Postmodernism — in earlier versions of the piece. (The installation was enclosed in a prismatic, cavelike structure in Chemnitz, Germany; here it is remade into a subterranean labyrinth.)

Mr. Tomaszewski offers plenty else to chew on. There is the notion of trying to recreate the

fictive, dream space of film in three concrete dimensions; the juxtaposition of different forms of representation, from film and still images to text and objects; the play between memory (assuming you've seen the film) and actuality; and the idea of a Polish-born artist reading America through David Lynch. Mr. Lynch's films, Mr. Tomaszewski says, are "quintessentially American and by and large confirm my own observations," which makes you wonder just what and how much he has seen of these United States.

Despite these rich veins of inquiry, however, the installation feels sterile and flat. "Blue Velvet" is a rich, visceral film full of deep, saturated color and moody music, and it becomes a tough act to follow, particularly when the characters are exiled and what remains is a silent conceptual shell that merely grazes rather than gets under your skin.

Yet "On Chapels, Caves and Erotic Misery" encouraged me to go back and watch a film I hadn't seen in more than a decade and rediscover not only a slice of Postmodern noir but Mr. Lynch's absurdist, neosurrealist sense of humor. This was expressed in everything from Jeffrey breaking unexpectedly into the "chicken walk" on his first date with Sandy, to Dean Stockwell lip-synching Roy Orbison's "In Dreams."

In his effort to address serious issues of art history, theory and film, Mr. Tomaszewski overlooks the humor. He might also be accused of overreaching, of trying to pack too much into a work not built to carry it. But when art leads you to chase down its sources and remember or discover something new, it must on some level be considered a success.