Ears to David Lynch!

Obsessive? Artist Christian Tomaszewski rebuilds the world of the movie Blue Velvet.

BY ROBERT SHUSTER

I: Blue Velvet (1986) by David Lynch. Obsessive? Artist Christian Tomaszewski becomes his high priest, leading a cult that worships at shrines he's created in Poland, Germany, and Queens. For the past three years, in a series of on-site installations (the final new one at Scott’s Center through July 29), Tomaszewski has been remaking the movie's spaces, props, and moods, including the hallways outside Isabella Rossellini's apartment and the room where Kyle MacLachlan witnesses gas-sucking Dennis Hopper commit a brutal rape, and that notorious severed ear.

"It's very difficult to describe," says Tomaszewski, attempting to explain his obsession with Lynch and his hitherto undefined world of shadows, symbols, and domino B-movie kick. "It's just that subconsciously I feel — and maybe it sounds creepy — but I feel very connected to him. Tall and a little shy, with shaggy reddish hair and a voice that often goes quiet, as if he's used to speaking in a movie theater, Tomaszewski, 35, comes across as another love-sick film buff proclaiming his idols. But that's precisely the point of his art, which intentionally conjures our own cinematic desires to enter the film world, to mimic its character after the credits roll, to discuss every last detail, to carry around signs and snippets of dialogue like stinkbottles ("Heineken? Fuck that shit! Pabst Blue Ribbon!"). "I really consider films our common consciousness, our communication," he says. "So much a part of our language is the movie — so much a part of our behavior."

The persuasive power of great film — and the lure of the eerie and violent — came early to Tomaszewski. Born and raised in the Polish city of Gliwice, he remembers one late night as a small child, alone at home and "totally scared," watching Kubrick's expressionist A Clockwork Orange. At 10, he studied painting but had become hooked on classic Italian cinema. He first saw Blue Velvet and (everything else Lynch) had deepened up to that point at a festival of the director's work. Not long afterward, Tomaszewski ditched the canvas for the movie screens. But don't mistake it for another, or other, people's movies, as social forces. "What interested me is to go backward," he says of an approach that deconstructs as much as it reconstructs. "It's culture, architecture, and spaces, without using the film. In 2001, he began creating enclosures (architecture had always attracted him, too) that paid a kind of homage to cinematic fetishism while also acknowledging artistic obsession, particularly by mimicking the monomaniac of that oddball dadist Kurt Schwitters. Through the title of Tomaszewski's Blue Velvet series — On Chapels, Caves, and Erotic Misery — on the film, it's actually a direct reference to Schwitter's best-known work. The Cathedral of Erotic Misery (begun in 1923 and destroyed by Allied bombs 20 years later) was an attic room that became something like a secret Herman's Playhouse, a lair of kinkistically layered panels, scattered icons, and crazy nests dedicated to friends, places, and myths.

Tomaszewski points out a connection between Schwitters and Lynch in their reuse of random objects/images, but, more symptomatically, states the kinship he feels with an artist who "had an obsession with building something for no purpose. Last year's version of Erotic Misery, at a museum in Germany's Chemnitz, was a sculpture that nearly 200 cubes of jagged shapes (assembled from hundreds of cardboard triangles) that housed all the Blue Velvet creations. And while the installation in the Sculpture Center's basement focuses mostly on the reconstruction of the film's dime hallways, too, includes a room of stubby icons — notably an array of table lamps, all hand-made and all copies of those seen in the movie (as well as a couple from Twin Peaks and Mulholland Drive). The effort, weeks of 16-hour days, brought Tomaszewski to the verge of collapse and pushed his viewings of the film up to 300.

Tomaszewski's tastes and projects run well beyond Lynch. An upcoming installation at a Toronto museum, still in preliminary stages, will consist of what he calls "fragments of space — several characteristic corridors from five different films," a list that likely includes one directed by Kubrick (a director who tops his list, "If I have to choose an absolute favorite") and the first chapter of Krzysztof Kieslowski's Decalogue, the series of well-regarded shorts on the Ten Commandments. For an exhibit in 2001 at Dublin's Irish Museum of Modern Art, Tomaszewski selected 35 crime films — Rear Window, Gone Girl, and Perros de Fou, to name three — and using the original scripts and Irish actors, he spent two months filming on the cheap, after midnight their dialogue-only, plot-less escape scenes. Then he projected them, inside a strange horse-drawn carriage he built from scratch, a fusillade of poblons in two seats and getting around restrictions for an outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease at the time) a real horse hitched to each, facing in opposite directions. He had done the Blue Velvet installations, Tomaszewski included no labels or guides for any off. "I was always interested in this surrealistic way of not explaining exactly what is going on."

He hopes that his next major project — a series of posters for non-existent movies — "will totally confuse." They'll use the names of well-known directors and actors, with the usual dense small-town credits, and appear around the city as a kind of street art, pasted up next to those advertising the real thing. "We'll see how far we can go with it," he says, "but it's quite an important part of the concept. I don't want to apply for a permit and all this... I want to create a new story. I don't just want to have posters hanging in a gallery." Individually painted, they won't resemble the typical American version, which Tomaszewski says, with a hint of disdain, "is always about selling the product. Rather, he'd draw inspiration from the Polish School of Posters — renowned in the '60s and '70s for their clean bold styles — as well as other European styles that he's meticulously researching. So look for announcements around town of a trilogy by Lynch, a mysterious tragedy called Aki, and — presented with a striking red-and-black image of a steam engine — "a hauntingly fascinating" work by the masterful Andrzej Wajda. Like fantasies from a film buff's midnight bull session, they're coming soon to a non-existent theater near you.