

Jon Pylypchuk

What have we missed



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Text by William J. Simmons

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In a recent interview for the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark, Lars von Trier expresses some skepticism about David Lynch, or at least how we theorize Lynch's importance: "We were all knocked over by the first *Twin Peaks*. I thought, 'Damn, this is good!' But it's based on the assumption, which I didn't think about, that you expect all these peculiar things at the end will lead to a greater meaning. He never intended that. That's not his approach, I know that."¹

Von Trier goes on to tell a story of hiding under a desk when he was meant to meet Lynch. There might be a fear, made quite physical by von Trier's shaking (which I would guess is a result of being on lithium), that one's vision of what is great or artistic or avant-garde is fraudulent, that what we consider sublime and revolutionary, like *Twin Peaks*, is merely quirky or a product of hipster irony, hence his self-reassuring "I know that." We likewise want to believe, indeed we must believe, because we must believe it of ourselves, that Jon Pylypchuk's work is not the sum of various inside jokes, abject characters, or ironic statements that are made interesting by pathos or surrealist juxtapositions.

Quirkiness, at least in internet culture, is most often gendered as white and female, especially as regards girls or women who are at their core basic but think that wearing Converse and avoiding, at least publicly, pumpkin spice makes them interesting or alluringly nerdy. Their mantra is "I'm not like other girls." Then, of course, there are actual nerds, girls who really earn the moniker "quirky"—the most iconic among them being, in my mind, horse girls and anime girls, who know every word to "I Write Sins Not Tragedies." Their mantra, cherished secretly and with regret, is "I wish I were like other girls." Girls and the products of culture they interact with become ghostlike, because they are always pointing toward a chimerical version of themselves that exists only in another life. Quirkiness is a constant state of movement among ideal and real iterations of the self, which we certainly see in Pylypchuk's work. Of these ghosts, which were photographed intentionally and thoughtfully in the desert, Pylypchuk's wife and witness to these new sculptures writes: "There are many ways that the ghosts, particularly in the desert, fit us, trying, never belonging. I don't think that Jon was thinking of that when he made them, but he was thinking about time, and belonging and longing, what is lasting and what is not."²

An awareness of lastingness often comes alongside an awareness of materials and bodies—their mutability and their durability. It is no mistake that the poetic and heartbreaking phrases and images that live in Pylypchuk's work often connect to memories of hearing his mother on the phone as she socialized with other women in his family. And it is likewise no mistake that Pylypchuk served as an altar boy at funerals, which were filled by talk, often by women, of death. This experience of death as both a tragic certainty and as a banal certainty surrounds Pylypchuk's work like a gaggle of pallbearers, as it does von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) and *Melancholia* (2011), which both focus on tragic and quirky women who become sculptures of sorts (a lifeless one with a broken neck and another who is reduced to her constituent parts in an explosive flame). Pylypchuk's ghosts therefore are also iterations of the inherently collaborative genres of film or theater, patinaed phantasmagorias that retell lives that have ended and foretell lives just beginning, just as they are products of fingers and casts and metal and the help of his family.

Maybe the quirkiest girl of all is the Log Lady, the spinster-clairvoyant of *Twin Peaks*, who always carries a log that speaks in whispers heard only by her. The log could also be seen as a massive cigarette—a memento mori and a readymade conversation starter. In the introduction to episode three of *Twin Peaks*, which aired on July 2, 1993, the Log Lady theorizes:

There is a sadness in this world, for we are ignorant of many things . . . The tears are real. What is this thing called a tear? There are even tiny ducts—tear ducts—to produce these tears should the sadness occur. Then the day when the sadness comes. Then we ask, "Will the sadness which makes me cry, will the sadness that makes me cry my heart out, will it ever end?" The answer, of course, is yes. One day, the sadness will end.

That day, the day the sadness will end, coincides with death. It is the day when tear ducts will no longer function anyway, when we are made of bronze again. We are reminded thereby that the grandest of emotions, the ones that seem so melodramatic as to slip through our fingers, are always embedded in flesh and other materials. Pylypchuk, like the Log Lady, knows that a distillation of tears into tear ducts is not a deflation or a minimization, nor is it a critical or deconstructive statement about emotions, the body, etc. It is simply a statement of fact. One day (soon) we will become our tear ducts, our underwear, our ashes, our log, and on that day, the sadness will end.

While the Log Lady might have some certainty, I do not know if Pylypchuk's ghosts, whether they identify as quirky or not, believe that the sadness will end or if they ask for empathy or want to be considered grotesque, but poignant, or nerdy, but jaded and self-aware. The humor here is only deflecting if we want it to be. They do not ask to be rescued from cuteness by surreality or pathos. They/we do not assert a critical distance or a lack thereof or beauty in abjectness. They/we do not call out for elevation because they/we do not need to be legitimized by discourse (though of course Pylypchuk's status as a poet is important). Instead, all of us simply live, at times grandiosely and at times with the pastoral picturesqueness of Altadena, at times as flash and at others as bronze. As they go on living, as they and we must go on living, Pylypchuk's ghosts form a *tableau vivant*, not unlike those of Julia Margaret Cameron or other early adopters of photography in the nineteenth century, many of whom were quite quirky indeed for their interest in ghosts and spirit photography. Yet iconography is not the only commonality here. What is more important is Cameron's and Pylypchuk's (and von Trier's and Lynch's) interest in a liquidated, yet still concrete, state that includes life and death, certainly, but also the related desire for a unifying narrative and connectivity, even if it can only be found in death.

—William J. Simmons

¹ "Lars von Trier: The Burden from Donald Duck," interview by Christian Lund, Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, November 2020, video, 52:16, <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/lars-von-trier-the-burden-from-donald-duck>.

² Lynette Wiebe, email message to author, June 2, 2021.

³ *Twin Peaks*, episode 3, "Rest in Pain," directed by Tina Rathborne, written by Harley Peyton, aired April 26, 1990, on ABC.





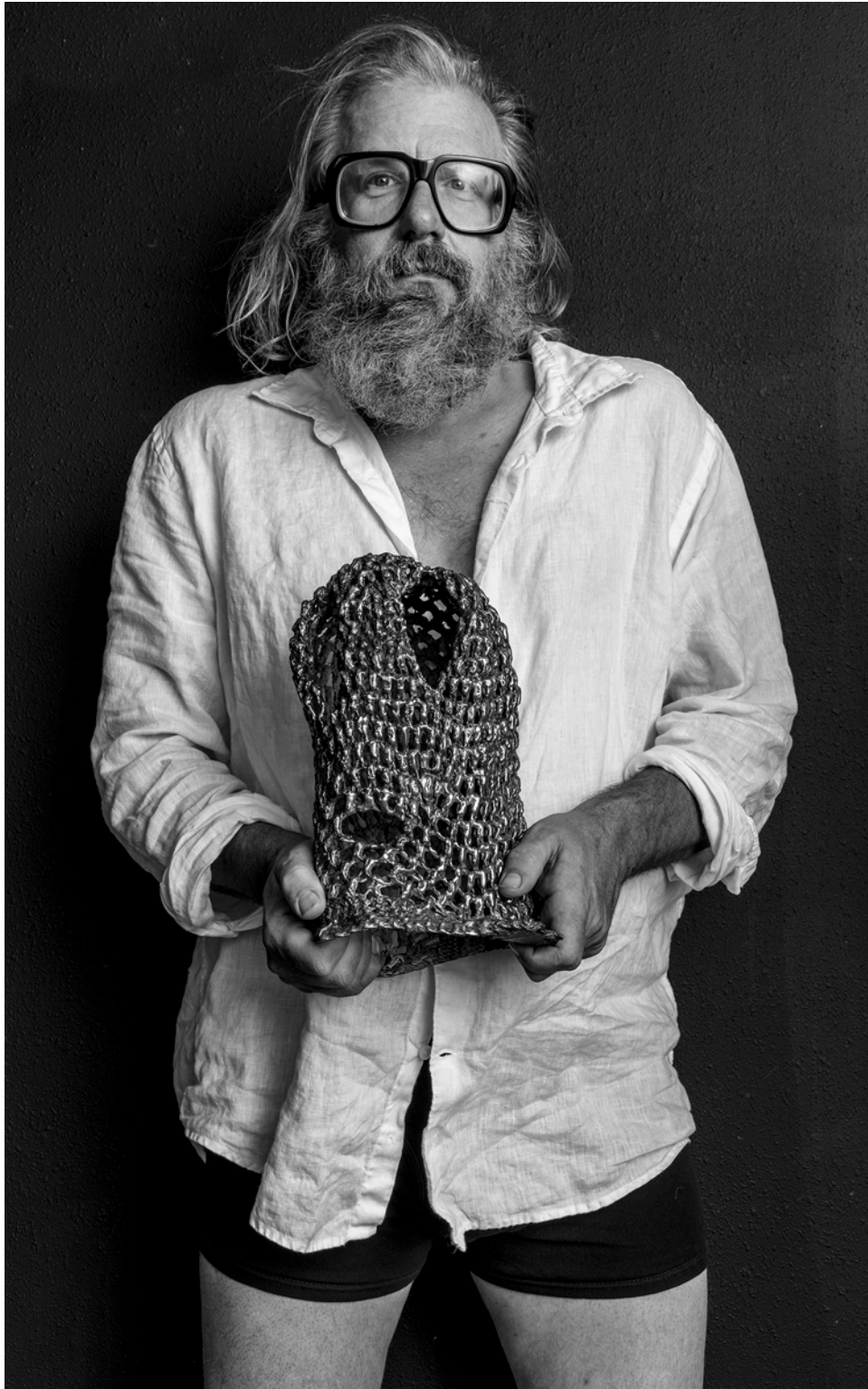












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Since 1998, Jon Pylypchuk continues to be an indelible figure of the Los Angeles art community—as a fixture of the 2000’s Chinatown art scene, a leader in the 2010’s DTLA art scene, and an artist that embodies the independent and maverick spirit of Los Angeles. He maintains a studio in Altadena, however, all work of the last year was produced in his backyard, in his underwear.

Jon Pylypchuk’s works are in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Saatchi Collection, London; the Museum of Old and New Art, Berriedale; the Whitney Museum, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit; the Albright–Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; the Henry Art Gallery, Seattle; S.M.A.K. (Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst), Ghent; the National Gallery of Canada, Ontario; the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto; and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba.

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