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Being Tim Burton TIFF Bell Lightbox exhibit takes you inside the mind of Hollywood's most beloved misfit

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BY DAVID BALZER December 09, 2010 12:12

EDITORIAL RATING:

TIM BURTON

To April 17, 2011. \$15.93 to \$22.75; special member prices and packages available. TIFF Bell Lightbox, Reitman Square, 350 King W. 416-968-3456. www.tiff.net.

TIFF Bell Lightbox's new Tim Burton show comes with the shadow of the New York's Museum of Modern Art, who initiated it last year. (Indeed, it wasn't Burton's idea to begin with; MoMA approached him.) Those who saw its original incarnation will note the differences here, a few stemming from the Lightbox's considerably smaller space. Yet although MoMA, known for its insistent branding of its touring exhibitions, has micromanaged a lot, it has permitted one fundamental change. Toronto's version runs chronologically, according to Burton's filmography, rather than conceptually, by themes like "body modification" and "armoring."

This is right for many reasons. Burton is not the fine artist MoMA wants him to be. He is not even a pop artist, at least not in the Andy-Warhol, Jeff-Koons sense (despite the deer totem from Edward Scissorhands on prominent display). Burton is for real—his pop is either unproblematic and nerdy, or full-on social critique. His filmmaking is concerned almost exclusively with two things: narrative and art direction. And his drawings and props, arranged here more or less by year, tell the same story that he does in his films, over and over—one of a creative misfit trying to make his eccentricities legible to a bland, mainstream, commercial world.

It makes sense, then, that little in the show stands on its own. This is a career trajectory. The drawings—blatantly in the style of MAD, Cracked, gonzo illustrator Ralph Steadman, Edward Gorey and Ed Roth (Rat Fink)—are voluminous and, due to (one assumes) space limitations, hung on the wall in clusters, salon-style. This suggests, appropriately, how cramped and active Burton's mind is—and also how circular. The props remind you of the films—Burton's grand achievements, of course—and so are interesting, but only in a Universal-Studios kind of way. Marvel, while beholding the catsuit from Batman Returns, at how petite Michelle Pfeiffer is; or, while beholding Edward Scissorhands' getup, how surprisingly tall Johnny Depp is. An exception is The Penguin's black wicker baby carriage from Batman Returns, with a big leather belt around it—so minimal and disturbingly Freudian it could be a conceptual sculpture.



The best part of the show is a room off the Main Gallery which goes back to Burton's adolescence, exhuming dozens of drawings, photos, letters, films, etc. Burton began, after graduating CalArts, as an animator at Disney, and early in his career learned the hard lesson of having to compromise his twisted vision in order to get it out there. Here, however, is Burton in the raw: violent, hypersexual, crassly humorous, adoring of trash culture and thoroughly neurotic. Even in Burton's best films, one gets only hints of these qualities. Without them, though, MoMA, and TIFF, could never have staged this exhibit as successfully as they have.

EMAIL DBALZER@EYEWEEEKLY.COM; TWEET @DAVID BALZER

Email us at: LETTERS@EYEWEEEKLY.COM or send your questions to EYEWEEEKLY.COM 1 Yonge Street, 2nd Floor, Toronto Ontario, M5E 1E6

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