

MIT List Visual Arts Center
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No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake

October 16, 2020 – February 14, 2021



No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake

Hayden and Reference Galleries October 16, 2020–February 14, 2021

For over thirty years, artist, educator, and curator Nayland Blake (b. 1960, United States; lives and works in New York) has been a crucial figure in American art, working between sculpture, drawing, performance, and video. Heavily inspired by feminist and queer liberation movements, and subcultures ranging from punk to kink, their multidisciplinary practice considers the complexities of representation, particularly racial and gender identity. Blake examines the subjects of desire, loss, and power through references to play and fantasy. The artist's sustained meditation on "passing" and duality as a queer, biracial (African American and white) person is grounded in postminimalist and conceptual approaches made personal through an idiosyncratic array of materials, such as leather, medical equipment, tar, stuffed animals, and food. Throughout their career, Blake has foregrounded intimacy, humor, and play as strategies to address challenging times in our collective history when the personal and private have become heavily politicized—an approach as critical and relevant thirty years ago as it is today.

The exhibition begins with works produced while Blake lived on the West Coast, first in the greater Los Angeles area as a graduate student at CalArts in the early 1980s, followed by a decade in San Francisco—years bookended by the advancement of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the "culture wars" of the 1990s. Certain motifs emerged at this time, particularly the desire to reveal the dynamic of interpersonal relationships as a series of transactions with visual references to BDSM and intimate play. In the 1990s, Blake began exploring the use of costumes and toys, particularly puppets and stuffed bunnies, as their surrogate or avatar in a continued exploration of fantasy as a form of embodiment. These works, alongside several full-body costumes, use theatricality and concealment of one's identity to disarm viewers in the interest of approaching difficult topics. Blake's work after 2000 finds the artist closely engaging personal narrative, focusing on race, gender, and sexuality. Blake invokes a number of racial tropes in drawings and sculptures of this period—the cascading metal links of *Chains II* (2000), rendered in heavy charcoal, could refer to consensual bondage or the bondage of slavery; and the recurring iconography of rabbits, which have been connected historically to racial and sexual stereotyping. For Blake, the mining of racist iconography is a way to examine their own racial identity and familial history, bias, and generational trauma, as well as the ways in which identity is both lived and performed.

In recent years, Blake's work has focused on the relationships formed by intentional community making. The artist is active in a number of social groups dedicated to crafting, gaming, and fandoms. The video *Stab* (2013) documents Blake's visit to an artist friend to mend a damaged sock-monkey puppet with great sentimental value, with casual yet heartfelt discussions about personal relationships, loss, and friendship serving as the backdrop. Blake's recent performance, *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)* (2017–18), debuted their "fursona" or "furry" persona, a fantastical, costumed representation of the artist.

A NOTE ON THE EXHIBITION AND COVID-19

While MIT continues to prioritize the health and safety of its communities, in-person visits to the List Center are suspended. We are nonetheless pleased to have installed *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake* and invite you to join us for upcoming virtual programs that offer a deep dive into the artist's work and practice.

Throughout the exhibition's run, we will be sharing video interviews, virtual tours, and other materials related to the exhibition on our website at listart.mit.edu.

We will continue to monitor the possibility of in-person visits in early 2021, and encourage everyone to stay tuned for updates and additional programs.

Half bear, half bison, *Gnomen* is reminiscent of earlier works in which the artist constructs a sense of selfhood through dress-up and blurs distinct categorizations of race and gender, since the visual markers of identity are hidden from view by the costume. This performance, and Blake's practice overall, underscores the artist's ability to navigate between different positions and into troubled terrain. Blake's groundbreaking work articulates the contemporary experience of embodying many histories and identities at once, while using unorthodox materials and sharp wit, and it reveals the radical potential of vulnerability in a world obsessed with power.



Crossing Object (Inside Gnomen), 2017
Mixed media
Photo: Scott Rudd
Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



Dust, 2012. Photo: Elon Schoenholz

Dust, 2012

Print on polyester

Collection of the artist; courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Dust reconfigures the name of The Stud, one of San Francisco's longest-operating gay bars. Located in South of Market's (SoMa) Leather and LGBTQ Cultural District, the black-and-white flag is an iconic symbol of the area's nightlife and a tribute to the history of the leather subculture. Although the first leather bar in the neighborhood was the Tool Box, The Stud followed suit to help create a safe space for the LGBTQ and leather communities.

Produced in 2012, *Dust* foreshadowed the near closure of The Stud in 2016, when its rent tripled in price and forced its owner,

Michael McElhaney, to retire. Steep rent increases have been the unfortunate reality for many LGBTQ spaces in San Francisco, as gentrification continues to change the landscape and culture of the city. In recent years, SoMa and the adjacent neighborhood, the Mission District, have seen a sharp reduction in the number of gay bars still in operation. Due to the activism of local nightlife professionals, The Stud survived, exemplifying the ways in which activists have historically worked in concert to protect the spaces that provide refuge and support to the community.



Stills from *Gorge*

Gorge, 1998

Single-channel digital video (color, sound)

TRT 60:00 mins.

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Blake's 1998 performance for video, *Gorge*, depicts the artist, seated and shirtless, as they are repeatedly force fed over the span of an hour by a companion. During the initial time of *Gorge's* production, Blake and their collaborator were involved in a subcultural fetish scene referred to as "gaining and encouraging," that focuses on the support and encouragement of weight gain for oneself and others. In the early phases of the video, Blake's intake of the food being given to them appears oddly erotic, even comical. As the video progresses, their eccentrically sensual consumption turns into a test of physical endurance and devouring the various food items becomes grotesquely visceral. The interaction between Blake, who is fair-skinned (or

"white passing," informally) though biracial (African-American and white), and their collaborator, who is visibly Black, brings up important social dynamics concerning race and power, with Blake progressively losing control as time goes on.

Blake later restaged this as a live performance in 2009, this time being fed by an audience composed of individuals with whom the artist shared intimate histories. Relying on the sustained presence of Blake's passivity, the iterations of *Gorge* highlight how the varied participants play a key role. An exploration of the duality of power play, *Gorge* offers its audience an occasion to assert their dominance and, at their discretion, to enact either care or punishment on Blake.



After the Turner Diaries (from the *Bunny Group* series), 1996–97. Photo: Ron Amstutz

After the Turner Diaries

(from the *Bunny Group* series), 1996–97

Graphite and colored pencil on paper

Savory Truffle

(from the *Bunny Group* series), 1996–97

Graphite and colored pencil on paper

Assorted drawings, 1997–2016

Graphite and colored pencil on paper

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Blake debuted the *Bunny Group*, a series of eighty drawings, in *The Black/White Album*, a 1997 exhibition that explicitly foregrounded Blake's biracial background (the exhibition also featured a suite of works inspired by African vernacular sculpture, including *Ibedji* [*Quick*], also on view). Blake has long been fascinated with literary and pop-cultural

representations of rabbits, among them Bugs Bunny, the Br'er Rabbit, and Harvey, an oversized, imaginary character from the 1950 film of the same name. This series utilizes and expands upon such depictions to address unresolved anxieties and complexities regarding race, gender, and sex.

Several drawings in this selection from the *Bunny Group* series make sharp reference to the history of racial violence in the United States. In *Savory Truffle*, Blake alludes to the history of lynching through a noose hanging from a tree, a close-up rendering of a rope, and the text, "swing from tree to tree." *After the Turner Diaries* references a dystopic novel about a race war that has become an influential text for white nationalists and anti-Semites since its publication in 1978. One drawing shows a white bunny, possibly mid-coitus, holding a sign that reads, "I betrayed my race." Here, Blake points to racist anxieties associated with interracial unions, especially those producing children (of which Blake is a result), as well as anti-miscegenation laws, many of which were

still in effect throughout the United States until the landmark Supreme Court decision *Loving vs. Virginia* struck them down in 1967 (shortly after Blake's birth in 1960 in New York, a state that never enacted such laws).

Since producing the monumental *Bunny Group*, Blake has maintained a rigorous drawing practice. Drawing has aided Blake through personal difficulties: first, following the death of their ex-partner in 2005, and then again in 2015, when Blake struggled to get into the studio to produce new work. In both instances, Blake aspired to draw every day and has done so steadily since, proclaiming, in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, that they "never said they had to be good drawings."

Starting Over, 2000

DVD video projection (color, audio)

TRT 23:00 mins.

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

For their 2000 performance, *Starting Over*, Blake takes on the dual subjects of relationships and identity. Dressed in a 147-pound white bunny suit, filled with navy beans, Blake relentlessly attempts to tap-dance to a Michael Jackson soundtrack that plays in the background. Visibly agitated and uneasy from the heavy, restricting suit, Blake takes instruction from an off-camera voice, calling out various steps. The voice is that of their former partner, the late performer and choreographer Phillip Horvitz, whose weight is the physical point of reference of Blake's large bunny suit. Although we never see Horvitz, his presence plays an important role in Blake's performance. Straddling the line between cooperation and conflict, Blake's guided actions point to the "give and take" nature

of relationships and how this can influence or curtail one's autonomy.

Starting Over is a pivotal work in Blake's career, in which the recurring bunny motif in earlier drawings and sculptures makes an important departure into performance. The caricature of the rabbit/bunny/hare is part of the artist's ongoing meditation on Bugs Bunny, the lore of the Br'er Rabbit, and the connection of this imagery to racial and sexual stereotyping. Br'er Rabbit is a trickster character originating in African storytelling and indigenous folklore, later appropriated in the American South after the Civil War and Reconstruction by Joel Chandler Harris for his problematic "Uncle Remus" anthology, and once again by Walt Disney in the suppressed 1941 film, *Song of the South*. In a 2016 interview with the



Stills from *Starting Over*

Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, Blake also draws a parallel between the negative associations of gay men with the tendencies of rabbits: "Rabbits...are known for shitting a lot and they're known for fucking a lot and gay men are associated with having a lot of sex, with being

promiscuous [and] fucking like bunnies." In Blake's work, the rabbit becomes a symbol standing in for both racist and homophobic stereotypes associated with their own identity, as well as an avatar for the artist as they negotiate the complexities of representation.

Equipment for a Shameful Epic, 1993

Mixed media

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Originally imagined as the costumes and props for *Asses Together*, a mock screenplay written by Blake, *Equipment for a Shameful Epic* functions as a critique of politicians, whose disconnection with the people they serve often has disastrous ends. The work incorporates elements of narrative to formulate a "shameful epic," visually constructing a story of conflict and tragedy. Symbols and figures from American culture can be seen throughout the assemblage, including a folded American flag garment that hangs at the center, as well as masks depicting the likenesses of former Presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, both of whom served during Blake's youth.

The policies and actions of these two presidents informed a certain brand of American conservatism, which purportedly shifted to a more "compassionate" model in the late 1980s with the election of George H. W. Bush. The legacies of the

Nixon and Reagan presidencies are marked by their policies or lack thereof: Nixon's insistence on prolonging the Vietnam War, which resulted in further mass casualties and economic and health difficulties for returning veterans; and Reagan's willful dismissal of the developing AIDS crisis in the 1980s and antagonism towards the many lives impacted, particularly gay men and African Americans. Alongside and within social uprisings in protest, artists and activists also came together, forming organizations such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) to vigorously advocate for more effective research, public policy, and legislation. Likewise, artists working in the mid-to-late 1980s and 1990s were working to challenge public attitudes toward certain communities and to address questions of identity and representation, situating lived experience and politics side by side as a response to the social climate of the time.



Equipment for a Shameful Epic, 1993

Joe Dallesandro as Augustin

(from *The Philosopher's Suite*), 1994

Painted wood, cloth, and metal

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



Joe Dallesandro as Augustin is one of several works that Blake produced for the 1994 exhibition *The Philosopher's Suite* at Thread Waxing Space in New York. In addition to a stage, a guillotine, and a pulpit, Blake created marionettes modeled after historical, literary, and countercultural figures, such as artist Hans Bellmer, drag performer and playwright Ethyl Eichelberger, and Andy Warhol "superstar" Joe Dallesandro. Blake deployed these characters as actors in a puppet-theater reinterpretation of the Marquis de Sade's transgressive book *Philosophy of the Bedroom* (1795), a text that straddles the line between pornography and sociopolitical allegory and touches upon several contentious topics, including sex, politics, and the existence of God.

Blake invites viewers to meditate on the themes in Sade's text, projecting their own biases, desires, and perspectives onto the marionettes. Just as the marionette is held up by strings, viewers can consider how their lives and societal roles are likewise animated by varying influences and power relations outside of the self. Sade's influence on Blake can be traced to the artist's earlier works and the associations of control, play, and performance they evince. With the *Philosopher's Suite* series and other works of this period, Blake uses a surrogate—be it a toy or a puppet—to guide a deeper inquiry into what motivates our actions and behavior in the world, and to foreground imagination and fantasy as a means of escaping societal expectations and conventions.

Joe Dallesandro as Augustin
(from *The Philosopher's Suite*), 1991–94

Ruins of a Sensibility, 1972–2002, 2002

DJ equipment, records, plywood, cardboard boxes, painting

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Comprised of Blake's expansive collection of over three thousand LPs, *Ruins of a Sensibility* is an interactive installation that invites visitors to take on the role of a DJ while becoming acquainted with Blake through the artist's own personal effects. The work is perhaps one of Blake's most personal in that it directly references their coming of age through music; additionally, the Jackson Pollock-inspired splatter painting included in the installation is the first artwork the artist ever produced, made in collaboration with their father when they were a child.

This work offers an opportunity for the public to become an active participant in an artwork. Blake began collecting records as a teenager, developing their taste and sense of self, and forming bonds with others through the music they gravitated toward. *Ruins of a Sensibility* illustrates Blake's overarching interest in identity and representation, how people tend to connect their identities to their personal belongings and interests; and how our personalities, interests, and selfhood shift as time progresses.



Ruins of a Sensibility, 1972-2002, 2002. Photo: Oren Slor



Stills from *Negative Bunny*

Negative Bunny, 1994

Video (color, sound)

TRT: 30:00 min.

Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Negative Bunny addresses the entanglement of fear and intimacy at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States. Blake voices a stuffed bunny who repeatedly asserts their HIV-negative status in the hopes of having sex with the viewer. Over the course of the video, the bunny's initially cute and humorous rhetoric shifts to evoke existential feelings of rejection and desperation, giving "negative" a different meaning.

The bunny's inability to assure the viewer of their negative HIV status engages the anxiety and fear associated with the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, whose stigma was bolstered by lack of public education and misinformation, homophobia, and political inaction. In 1994, when Blake created this video, AIDS-related complications were the leading cause of death for Americans aged 24 to 44 years old. Although treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS has since advanced dramatically, the video serves as a potent reminder of its impact on LGBTQ communities and communities of color.

Magic, 1990

Mixed media with puppet and armature

Collection of Igro DaCosta and James Rondeau

This mixed-media assemblage is Blake's tribute to the openly gay puppeteer Wayland Flowers and his infamous puppet Madame. The duo was a fixture on 1970s game shows and variety television programs such as *Hollywood Squares* and *Laugh-In*, and starred in the 1980s sitcom

Madame's Place. The title refers to the 1978 cult horror film *Magic*, in which Anthony Hopkins portrays a ventriloquist whose dummy appears to have a mind of its own. A glamorous and self-described "alcoholic sex fiend," Madame's ribald, quick-witted persona represented the decadence



Magic, 1990. Photo: Ron Amstutz

and flamboyance associated with 1970s America. *Magic* is also reminiscent of the work of artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972), whose celebrated box sculptures employed Surrealist combinations of old photographs and trinkets structured behind glass frames, often in homage to various movie stars and pop icons.

A replica of Madame Blake purchased from an auction house in San Francisco, is the focal point of a box-shaped cornucopia,

from which artificial flowers, a small pink ladder, and S&M paraphernalia spill. Without her comedic partner, Madame sits silently, surrounded by objects from her past and dried flowers from adoring fans—a solemn memorial to Flowers, who succumbed to Kaposi's sarcoma, a complication of HIV/AIDS, in 1988. In the context of the early years of the AIDS crisis, when *Magic* was produced, the work also commemorates the impact of the disease on a generation.

Feeder 2, 1998

Steel and gingerbread

Courtesy of Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College,
Saratoga Springs, New York; Gift of Peter Norton

Produced with assistance from Flour Bakery + Cafe, Boston and Cambridge, MA

One of Blake's best-known works, *Feeder 2* takes the form of a one-room gingerbread house. Each panel is composed of real gingerbread, and its visual presence and scent evoke thoughts of whimsy and fantasy. Laid over a steel frame, the scaled structure references the famous children's fairytale Hansel and Gretel, which tells the story of two children who stumble upon a seemingly magnificent cottage built of cakes and candy, but quickly learn that it is merely a tool of deception and a trap. Fairy tale and fantasy are themes to which the artist often returns as a mirror onto

society and culture. Further, duality and the act of revealing are critical to Blake's practice: as a biracial, white-passing, queer, gender non-binary person, Blake's identity is one that is not obvious and is predicated on existing in two spaces at once. Though initially captivating through its inviting sight and scent, over time, the once pleasant sensorial experience of *Feeder 2*, with its cold, empty interior, becomes overwhelming, even nauseating, as it challenges the truth of perception and association.



Feeder 2, 1998

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nayland Blake (b. 1960, New York) lives and works in New York.

No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake is organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and is curated by Jamillah James, Curator. The List Center presentation is organized by Selby Nimrod, Assistant Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

VIRTUAL PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Nayland Blake and Jamillah James
Monday, October 26, 6:30 PM EDT
Live captioned online event

Join us for a virtual conversation with artist Nayland Blake and exhibition curator Jamillah James.

Behind the Scenes Preview for Members
Thursday, October 15, 6:00 PM EDT

Programs are online, free, and open to all. Advance registration is required.
For more information about events and to register: listart.mit.edu/events-programs.



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