



MIT List Visual Arts Center

Press Announcement



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

CAMBRIDGE, MA, September, 22, 2020— The MIT List Visual Arts Center announces *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake*, which will open virtually with [an online conversation between artist Nayland Blake and curator Jamillah James](#) on Monday, October 26, 2020, at 6:30 PM. First presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the exhibition marks Blake's first museum survey since 2003 and their most comprehensive presentation to date. It will be installed at the List Center through February 14, 2021.

While MIT continues to prioritize the health and safety of its communities, in-person visits to the List Center galleries are suspended at least through the remainder of 2020. We are nonetheless pleased to announce this exhibition and invite the public for [upcoming virtual programs](#) as we take a deep dive into the artist's works and practices. We'll also be sharing exhibition videos, educational brochures, and other materials on our website at listart.mit.edu.

We look forward to welcoming visitors back as soon as we can. Until then, please watch for updates on our website and social media and join us online for conversations and virtual programs throughout the fall.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

For over thirty years, Nayland Blake (b. 1960) has been a critical 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 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 post-minimalist and conceptual approaches made personal through an array of materials, such as leather, medical equipment, tar, stuffed animals, and food.

In addition to presenting a selection of new works and a large suite of the artist's drawings, the exhibition highlights major works produced in the years bookended by the advancement of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the "culture wars" of the 1990s. Since this formative period, Blake has continued to explore the radical potential of vulnerability and the complex intersections of identity and power.

The exhibition begins shortly after Blake completed their studies at the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts) in 1984, and upon their relocation to San Francisco, where they lived for over a decade. Work from this early period explored queering the visual austerity of minimalism with medical equipment and bondage gear, such as handcuffs, collars, and chains, to invoke associations of play, danger, pleasure, and control.

In the 1990s, Blake began exploring the use of costumes and toys, particularly puppets and stuffed bunnies, as their own surrogate or avatar in a continued exploration of play and fantasy as forms of exchange and understanding. In several works, Blake uses stuffed bunnies as actors in darkly comic scenarios: performing a sacrifice (*Satanic Ritualized Abuse* [1994]), attempting to persuade a viewer's affections by repeatedly sharing its negative HIV status (*Negative Bunny* [1994]), or dressed up in leather and studs (*Top Bunny* [1994]). These works, alongside full-body costumes, use theatricality to entice and disarm viewers, challenging their perceptions and interactions with deceptively playful objects.

Personal narratives, focusing on identity, grief and loss, and kinship through community, were introduced into the artist's work in the early 2000s. Blake invokes a number of racial tropes in drawings and sculpture of this period: the cascading metal links of *Chains II* (2000), for example, rendered in heavy charcoal, could refer to consensual bondage or the bondage of slavery. For Blake, mining racist iconography is a way to examine their own racial identity and familial history, generational trauma, and the ways in which identity is both lived and performed.

In recent years, Blake's work has focused on the relationships formed by social interaction and intentional community making. *Stab* (2013) is a video documenting Blake's visit with artist friend Liz Collins to mend a damaged sock monkey puppet bearing great sentimental value, with casual discussions about personal relationships, loss, and friendship serving as the backdrop. Their recent performance *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)* (2017–18) debuted Blake's "fursona," a fantastical, costumed representation of the artist. The performance allowed Blake's costumed presence to interact with the public, who were encouraged to whisper a secret to the artist and pin a pink ribbon on their fur suit as a symbol of this exchange. *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)*, considered alongside Blake's earlier costume-based sculptures underscores the artist's ability to navigate between different positions and articulate the contemporary experience of embodying many histories and identities.

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

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nayland Blake is an artist, writer, educator, and curator. Born in New York City in 1960, they attended Bard College and then California Institute of the Arts. After receiving their MFA, they moved to San Francisco in 1984.

They have had one-person exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; University Art Museum, Berkeley; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston; and the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College and their works are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art; the Whitney Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Brooklyn Museum; The Studio Museum in Harlem; and many others.

In 1995 they were co-curator, with Lawrence Rinder, of the landmark exhibition *In A Different Light* at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, the first museum exhibition to examine the impact of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer artists on contemporary art. In 2018, Blake organized *Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward* for the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.

They are currently the founding chair of the ICP/Bard MFA program at the International Center for Photography in New York. In 2012, they were awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Blake is represented by Anglim Gilbert Gallery in San Francisco and Matthew Marks Gallery in New York.

SUPPORT

No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake is made possible thanks to lead support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Generous support is provided by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, Beth Rudin DeWoody, Marieluise Hessel, Linda Janger, Matthew Marks Gallery, and *Friends of Nayland Blake*: Karyn Kohl, Stephen J. Javaras and Robert A. Collins, and Marla and Jeffrey Michaels.

Additional support is provided by the ICA LA's Curator's Council, Fieldwork, and 1717 Collective.

Exhibitions at the List Center are made possible with the support of Karen & Gregory Arenson, Fotene & Tom Coté, Audrey & James Foster, Idee German Schoenheimer, Joyce Linde, Cynthia & John Reed, and Sara-Ann & Robert Sanders. Additional support for the List Center's presentation of *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake* was generously provided by Matthew Marks Gallery.

General operating support is provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Council for the Arts at MIT; Philip S. Khoury, Associate Provost at MIT; the MIT School of Architecture + Planning; the Mass Cultural Council; and many generous individual donors. In-kind media sponsorship provided by 90.9 WBUR. The Advisory Committee Members of the List Visual Arts Center are gratefully acknowledged.

Image: Nayland Blake, *Untitled (Pinocchio)*, 1994. Painted wood. 11 × 32 × 4 ½ in. (28 × 81 × 11 cm). Collection of Gretchen and John Berggruen.



For more information contact:

Mark Linga,
mlinga@mit.edu