

I can't be/Satisfied/What do you want me to do? Big Star, "Mod Lang"

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In Jeremy Blake's work, the desire for satisfaction and the satisfaction of desires go hand-in-hand, the transcendent aspirations of one pursuit deformed by the blunt terrestrial character of the other. In his newest project, "Mod Lang," Blake once again foregrounds this clash between the physical and the metaphysical, placing it within a more fully elaborated context than ever before.

The exhibition is built around three new DVD loops and three large-scale C-prints, as well as a suite of ten drawings that functions like a storyboard for the show, which takes its name from a raw three-minute existential rave-up by the legendary Memphis pop group Big Star. Loosely tracking a fictional story of dovetailing yearnings-personal and social, lofty and lurid-the show scrambles the vocabularies of high modernist painting and architecture, Hollywood filmmaking, pulp fiction, rock and roll, and tabloidistic pop-culture mythology, to produce an environment where unexpected collisions yield new kinds of aesthetic substances. For Blake, it's along the path from their utopian origins to their dystopian destinies that the full range of the expressive potential of images, things, and spaces is discovered.

Talk about the artist has generally focused on his DVD works; on their languid visual elegance, their formal indeterminacy. Built like paintings, looking like photographs and moving like films, the DVDs are at once digitally-manufactured and thoroughly handmade; alternately abstract and representational; often blankly decorative yet also hauntingly allusive. But if these tantalizing formal ambiguities have drawn many viewers to the work, their visual pleasures have also tended to obscure the content-rich environments they are intended to evoke.

The exceptionally flexible relationships between the symbolic forms utilized in "Mod Lang" and its narrative specifics allow for a wide range of inferences, any number of skittering subtexts. At its broadest, it's the story of Keith "Slick" Rhoades, a fictional protagonist meant to suggest a kind of composite rebel everyman in the mold of Quadrophenia's Jimmy Cooper-alternately too smart and just dumb enough; both sensitive and oblivious; full of hope, frustration and pharmaceuticals. As Blake's tale goes, Rhoades loses control of his scooter on a rainy English road one night. Through the ensuing neurological injuries, the refractory Mod finds his true calling: as a visionary architect whose building schemes bring him fame and fortune while providing a grand opportunity to antagonize conventional propriety.

Highly abstract, the three DVDs obliquely document episodes in the chronology of Slick's post-traumatic success syndrome, while as always seeking new resonances in the modernist motifs from which his favored forms descend. Glowing lozenges and dripped fields coalesce into the architectural body of Mod Lang, an experimental house that marks Rhoades's first post-accident project. Clearly invoking the post-painterly abstraction of artists like Morris Louis or Kenneth Noland, the sequence also reads like a riff on Archigram-style consumerist modernism, its flowing psychedelic hues and soft contours creating a seductively trippy compositional elasticity. In opposition to the backhanded, kandy-colored optimism of Mod Lang, Berkshire Fangs (an evocation of Slick's second project, a home for "stylish vampires" erected on the site of a historic structure he rashly demolishes) suggests a more ominous glamour, its duskier palette and pop-sinister formal tropes-a lunar oculus that glows behind shuddering foliage, a twist of bold flowing color that sprouts fang-like appendages-revealing the dark side of the will to power.

If these two works symbolize the poles of Slick's professional temperament, the final element of the DVD trio, Chemical Sundown, can be seen as a kind of epilogue, boomeranging the protagonist's extroverted ambitions back upon himself. Blake's drawings imply that Slick has been exiled to the lush apocalyptic dreamscape of Southern California after the Berkshire Fangs episode, and has built his own pleasure dome in the Los Angeles hills, where he's now living large with a beautiful sad-faced girl. The DVD images suggest a tour of the interior, culminating in a sequence of slow dissolves that eventually reveals the view from Rhoades's aerie, the glowing metropolitan grid stretching out beneath his perch. As the sunset of the title begins to transpire, hallucinatory waves of caustic color start oozing across the cityscape from the line of the horizon-a multivalent apotheosis of the ongoing combat between the natural and the manufactured, a beautiful product of monstrous process occurring, as we've by now come to expect, right at the place where heaven and earth collide.