

Jeremy Blake Now Playing

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Amid the looping animations and their mutating colors and forms, amid the buzzes, clicks and other purring of high technology, Jeremy Blake ponders a movie project. He calls his suites of drawings "scripts," and often describes his chromogenic color prints and DVD projections as picturing movie sets. What story there is feels half-dreamt, an assortment of fragments, a casting call of cultural references and recollections having to do with sudden success, squandered fortunes, lost weekends. The drawings usually feature a main protagonist, as well as pot twists and memorable punch lines, but they are just drawing turned into restless doodling. What could glue these fragments together is the spatial and temporal continuum presented in the DVD projections, which themselves lack any narrative inflection, unspooling without character or plot, with no beginning, middle or end.

Blake calls the DVD loops "time-based paintings," since, as he likes to point out, they are built-up with layers of translucent color. But beyond that, just what kind of paintings are they? Landscape might be one answer, given the work's standard horizontal formats. Only there is no nature here (the few evocations of foliage, hillsides or mist are so schematized as to make pointed their artificiality.) The recurrence of grand entranceways, halls and dramatic lighting suggest corporate lobbies, high-priced hotels and private places, perhaps the staging grounds for an updated genre or even history painting. Except again there are no actors or events, hence no consequences, drama, story. Periodically the architectural components will dissolve away, leaving flat fields of intense color organized into elementary and symmetrical patterns and logo-forms, designs that recall the heyday of American modernist painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But despite Blake's painterly approach to digital animation and his interest in high modernist formal conventions, there is still no painting here. At least no modernist painting, which depended upon the belief in being able to isolate and render semi-autonomous painting as a practical discipline. In extending the history of that practice, its long tradition of achievements, by revolutionizing such isolatable material and ontological parameters – by, for example, making dramatically perspicacious the tension between the color and physicality of paint, or between the painted field's literal surface and its pictorial depth. Blake only simulates the effects of painting; otherwise he participates in the dissolution of its material identity, and so its chances to advance a history of its own. That history is shown stalled in the past, caught in the purgatory of an endless playback loop.

Think twice, however, before dismissing the sincerity of Blake's involvement in painting, or before quarantining painting in general against the threat of such medium-vaporizing digital technology. Indeed, it is important to take Blake at his word and judge him as a painter. Doing so casts a proper light not only on his work but on painting, too, illuminating a significant aspect of its current predicament. This predicament itself has a history: While modern painting as long sought to revolutionize its particular identity, it has done so not to entirely dissociate itself from the larger forces – technological, economic, bureaucratic – that organize culture and society, but rather to keep pace with them, to stay relevant without becoming absorbed, and thus be able to comment on and model with an independent, critical voice the kind of future toward which modernization rushes. This is painting conceived under the aegis of Hegel and Marx ("the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present," wrote Marx.) At the same time such painting has eagerly anticipated a quantum historical leap when loss of identity would

be celebrated, when progress totally designed social environment. This was the dream of such avant-gardes as Constructivism and De Stijl, but also of much Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. Listen to Michael Fried (who also conceived painting in Marxist terms): “What is at stake in the work of Newman, Stella and recent Noland,” he wrote in 1964, “is perhaps the most radical break to date with the conventions of easel-painting, along with the possibility of replacing these conventions with new modes of organization and seeing...which will somehow *open up* into a zone of freedom as large, in its own way, as that enjoyed by traditional painters during the past five centuries.”ⁱⁱ

Looking back, such a claim of course seems hopelessly naïve. We know, for example, that Morris Louis studied Hermann Rorschach’s writings on perceptual psychology in search of clues about how to open up such “new modes of seeing,” but so did Madison Avenue executives. As always, before the field of history could be historically prepared for a synthesizing turn into a new “zone of freedom,” art and life had already become one, as if through some slow and imperceptible osmosis. Now it is commonly doubted if such heroic jumps ever do occur at all.

Obviously Blake is invested in this history, even if he’s skeptical of identifying his project with it, even if he too is filled with doubts. Instead he talks about fictions, about movies. Perhaps he leaves his movie scripts fragmented and incomplete precisely so they never attain a status similar to that of traditional historical narratives, with their naturalizing cause-and effect inevitability and naïve belief in a revelatory futures now so discredited. If history, or what’s left of it, exists at all for Blake, it’s only as debris. The context and legacy of 1960s modernism feel all the more convincingly present in his work the less clearly narrated they are, the more they are spared what psychoanalysts call “secondary revisions,” the more they are allowed to remain distorted, uncanny, half-dreamt. And maybe this helps explain why the docudrama movie scripts, in the form of the ink drawings, must remain so segregated from the site of their possible staging, the DVD paintings. Compared to the formidable apparatus marshaled by the paintings, the drawings could not appear more low-tech and wisecracking (something emphasized in the past through Blake’s use of a hand-me-down electric typewriter to spell out, and at times pointedly misspell, the drawings’ dialogue and captions). There are other pronounced differences: Whereas a respectful distance is required for proper viewing of the digital animations, the drawings ask for intimate scrutiny. Unlike the generic and unpopulated spaces and designs paraded in the former, the latter are steeped in personal anecdote and small details. The rigidly symmetrical DVD animations represent an overarching system, static paradigm, *langue*; the more haphazardly composed ink-on-paper works reflect everyday use, actual utterances, *parole*. Only these cannot be thought of in terms of separate realms, like inside and outside, since they are interdependent, part of the same basic universe and common language, sharing the same motifs and main reference points. But that only makes all the more disturbing how starkly polarized Blake makes them appear.

It was the end of the 1960s that such terms as *langue* and *parole* were borrowed from French structuralism and used to replace history as the leading paradigm for thinking about art. Whereas 1960s modernism conceived painting as centripetal and diachronic, a project built dialectically through time, painting after the demise of modernism came to be seen more as one institution among others – including galleries, museums, magazines – within a centrifugal and synchronic field. No longer a category with intrinsic properties, with an essential spine that it builds around, like a figure has a spine, painting is today more likely to be considered a frame capriciously delimiting a spread of atomized practices, less figure than landscape – or, better still, not landscape but matrix, a network of codes and power relations, an implacable (art) system.

Rather than living, historical things, traditional art categories are now thought of as packages imposed by curators – imposed upon, not built out of, the work of artists. But this more “postmodern” view can also be extended retroactively to encompass the whole of modernism, re-envisioning it entirely in terms of system. Recast in this way, this doppelganger modernism can be traced from the current “global” art scene beyond 1960s institutional critique, past Duchamp, all the way back to the second half of the nineteenth century, where it emerges most emblematically not so much with Manet but with Baron Haussmann’s reorganization of Paris as a totalizing matrix of interconnected relations. Only now modernism no longer appears as history, as a story: from Haussmann to the Internet, modernism as system never really undergoes rites of passage, or confronts decisive moments, or experiences life changes. Staying itself, it only increasingly intensifies.

Rather than “official” and “underground,” or “mainstream” and “subculture,” perhaps more adequate terms for describing the growing distinction between the world’s rigid systematization and the ghostlike ephemerality of our everyday lives within it can be found in Michel de Certeau’s opposition between “strategies” and “tactics.” “The dividing line no longer falls between work and leisure,” he writes, as if describing the ambiguous status of Blake’s architectural settings (are they corporate offices or hip subterranean lairs?). “These two areas of activity flow together...[Consumer] products are all the less visible because the networks framing them are becoming more and more tightly woven, flexible, and totalitarian.” De Certeau goes on to propose “differences of another type.” Strategies he aligns with ordering and controlling systems because they “create places in conformity with abstract models... strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces.” Tactics, on the other hand, characterize the mode of operation employed by those dependent upon systems they otherwise do not embrace. “Tactics do not obey the laws of the place” but rather “only used, manipulate, and diver these spaces... The imposed knowledge and symbolisms become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them.”ⁱⁱⁱ Following De Certeau, it could be said that the antics noted in Blake’s drawings fall under the heading of tactics, while the spaces unfolded in his paintings count as the domain of strategies. But again, these represent only different forms of existence sharing the same turf: what Blake designates as “mod lang,” for example, comes across in the drawings as British hipster lingo, or the name of a song by the little-known Memphis band Big Star; as the title of one of the artist’s DVD works, “mod lang” seems more like a computer code or a bureaucratic abbreviation (like a university English course listing). Blake’s invented character Slick Rhoades appears one moment like a hooligan, the next like a Hollywood mogul – but either way his exploits do not aim to guide, critique or otherwise change the established order of things. In a system at once “tightly woven and flexible,” in which diversification defines the center, attempts at participation feel isolated while renunciations and refusals are recouped as participation.

A system both tightly woven and flexible seems a good way to describe the spatial make-up of Blake’s animated paintings. The relentless symmetry of his pictorial fields reinforces a sense of the rigidity of the frame, as if it were an ultimate, totalizing horizon, and yet the image bound by this horizon is not conclusive but rather constantly changing. What at first may seem formal motifs eventually turn into a keypad or combination lock; a declarative, iconic form splits apart into sliding doors, only to have new panels converge and fasten together into yet another emblem. Facades dissolve into and cloak over only more facades. Here the historically decisive visual statements Noland and Louis aimed for appear fractured and kaleidoscopic, trapped within a hall of mirrors, processed through a system of perpetual exchanges in an otherwise completely closed set. No wonder Slick never makes an appearance; no cultural hero could walk these halls without feeling transformed into a zombie-like Manchurian Candidate.

But who today doesn't walk these halls? In a couple of recent interviews Blake has observed, "Dealers and collectors are more interested in my digital animations than I expected. Maybe it was the millennium."^{iv} Recall how eagerly anticipated that even was, how people the world over sat glued to their TV sets, not to join in a global rite of passage, not to contemplate the grand symbolism of such a well-rounded number, certainly not to fill that gaping symbol with a significance about momentous history. Rather, everyone wanted to see if the system would hold up, if it could withstand the strike of midnight as it sounded in one time zone after another, an hour-long thriller looped to cover a full turn of the earth, an unprecedented mass ritual choreographed to the tick of the clock and the level hum of the digitized planetary machine. Slick Rhoades, stoned as usual, was probably watching his TV as well, and no doubt asking somebody what day it was.

ⁱ The *Marx-Engels Reader* (Second Edition), edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978): 89.

ⁱⁱ Michael Fried, "New York Letter," *Art International* 8, no. 4 (May 1964): 41.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 29-35.

^{iv} Quoted in Reena Jana, "Jeremy Blake," *Flash Art* (May/June 2001): 118; see also Steve Bodow, "The Whitney's Digital sampler," *New York Magazine*, (March 26, 2001): 77.