



MULTIMEDIA DARLING Jeremy Blake takes a stand at his Feigen Contemporary show.

He paints, he digitizes, he works with Beck. Jeremy Blake's new exhibition in Chelsea is just one more pixel in this artist's big picture.

By Martha Schwendener

It's the Saturday after Thanksgiving and Jeremy Blake is standing outside the Chateau Marmont in West Hollywood, a spot more often associated with rock stars and film big-wigs than with visual artists. He's taking photos for "Winchester Trilogy," a series of three short films to be exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art late next year. The series started in 2002 with a DVD installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego; the work tells of a mansion that heiress Sarah Winchester compulsively added rooms to, in hopes of warding off the spirits of people killed by Winchester rifles. Now Blake is obsessed with the area near the hotel on the Sunset Strip.

"There used to be a Marlboro cowboy right in front of the hotel," he explains. "They took him down a few years ago when cigarette billboard advertising was banned in California. But he seemed to represent some irrepressible California spirit. He was like a land-based astronaut, which, in my opinion, can also be one definition of a successful artist."

Strange, violent and sometimes idyllic histories fuel Blake's work. The centerpiece of his current show at Feigen Contemporary, titled "Autumn Almanac" after a 1967 Kinks song, is a nine-minute DVD projection called Reading Ossie Clark, based on the life and diaries of the British designer who dressed Bianca Jagger, Twiggy, Penelope Tree and Jean Shrimpton in the '60s and '70s.

In this piece, which has been selected for next year's Whitney Biennial, found images from London's Swinging '60s merge with morphing, spectral animations. Excerpts from the diaries are read in the smoky drawl of Clarissa Dalrymple, a British expat and longtime denizen of the New York art world.

"Early spring," Dalrymple reads. "Burnsall Street. SW3. Jagger brings Bianca. First meeting to make her a wedding dress. Forgets to tell me she's pregnant." Or: "Night of passion with an insatiable Scorpio. ...One snort of cocaine makes me into a new man, and that new man wants two snorts." The lurid end of this history is Clark's death: He was murdered by a lover in 1996.

When it comes to his own work, Blake, 32, is no stranger to mining the mod generation. He first attracted attention in the late 1990s, with videos that took their inspiration, in part, from such '60s abstract painters as Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis. Borrowing some of their signature motifs, Blake created "time-based paintings," computer-generated animations that transformed their static compositions into pulsing, psychedelic meditations. "I suppose it's the intersection of cosmopolitan and utopian fantasy that keeps drawing me back to the '60s and '70s," Blake says, though interestingly—and quite by accident—these blasts from the past are also what put him on the digital-art frontier. "I wasn't really interested in film, because of the cost and all the equipment. I liked the computer because there wasn't the same attention being paid to it. It seemed out of the way. Then, all of a sudden [in the late '90s], it turned into the place to be."

These days Blake splits his time between Los Angeles and New York, where he first made a splash in 1998 in group shows of young emerging artists, like "Spectacular Optical" at Threadwaxing Space in Soho. By 2000 he was in the Whitney Biennial, and he had a repeat appearance there in 2002. (That same year, he was in the Whitney's digital-art survey "Bit-Streams," following his inclusion in SFMOMA's "010101: Art in Technological Times.") Throughout, Blake has typically been the focus of press coverage for these exhibitions, making him one of the first true art stars of the millennium.

Despite the way he was presented in the early shows, Blake distances himself from the "digital boy" tag, as Feigen Contemporary's director Lance Kinz puts it. "I don't really think of what he does as digital art, because it's not about writing code," Kinz says. "For Jeremy, it's just a medium—he could have done it with film or painting. But he pioneered the presentation, combining film with painting. He got the proper balance."

Digital boy or not, people from the film and music worlds started calling Blake. "I thought it was my friends, joking around at first," he admits about the initial inquiries from musician Beck and filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson (*Magnolia*). "They each were initially excited by existing pieces and then called me and asked me to think about fitting my work with theirs. In both cases I was a huge fan, so I said yes without hesitation. In some ways their love for the work actually made certain decisions easier than they tend to be in the isolation of the studio."

Blake created animations to wind together scenes in Anderson's *Punch-Drunk Love*. (A more experimental collaboration between the two, "Blood Blossoms," appears at the end of the *Punch-Drunk Love* DVD.) Beck asked Blake to design the cover for his *Sea Change* CD and used some of his animations as video projections in his tour last summer. Blake also made a music video for "Round the Bend," which will be released Tuesday 16 as part of an enhanced version of *Sea Change*.

Music has long been important to Blake, dating back to his high-school days in Washington, D.C., where he was good friends with Guy Picciotto from Fugazi. "Growing up in the D.C. punk scene influenced me in that the more interesting people tended to be aggressive about rejecting conventions," Blake says. "In a town like D.C., which is built on political double-talk, it can be a kick just to get to the fucking point."

While attending art school in Chicago, he lived in an apartment above members of the band Tortoise, who kept a painting of John Coltrane in their studio that bothered him because "it was on a canvas that was unstretched," Blake says, laughing.

"Autumn Almanac" also includes a series of works painted from photographs; they're soft-focus depictions of objects ranging from folds of fabric or an ashtray to Alec Guinness playing the painter Gully Jimson in the 1958 film *The Horse's Mouth*. The paintings wrap horizontally around the walls of the gallery; the artist likens this part of his installation to "a filmstrip."

Blake still identifies himself as a painter first. "I got into [graduate school at] CalArts with a portfolio that looks kind of like the current show. So I feel like I'm returning to that. But it's always been about painting on some level."

And what about being the poster boy for digital art? "I don't really know what digital art is," he says. "I'm sure great interactive works exist, or will soon. But I've been busy exploring other things."

"Jeremy Blake: Autumn Almanac" is at Feigen Contemporary through December 20.



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