

## WINCHESTER

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This is not the first time the New York artist now resident in LA, Jeremy Blake, present his shimmering work at MNCARS. A year ago, in the video program *Metropolis Now* that the subjectively investigated how contemporary artists would respond to Fritz Lang's "Metropolis" <sup>1</sup>, Blake was represented by a DVD animation from the series *Station to Station*. In this series, described by the artist as "time-based paintings", he explored today's experiences of space, time, and architecture. A sequence of vibrant geometric digital patterns, his futuristic architecture conveyed a special way of approaching the theme of the city. Blake's "city" was a computer-generated virtual construct. Not a specific place, brilliantly lit, this imaginary and uninhabited metropolis took animated forms with facades recalling the rationality of Modernist architecture. As part of Lang's legacy we retain an idea of non-reality, fantasy and seductiveness. To both Lang and Blake, it seems that "even in the fantasy realm of science-fiction, the modern city with its bars and boulevards remains a frontier for the imagination." <sup>2</sup>

Yet Blake's current exhibition at the Espacio Uno plays to the viewer's imagination from a different position—from the "nonspace of the mind", in reference to William Gibson's famous description of cyberspace. It presents two DVDs from the still unfinished trilogy *Winchester*, one on a plasma screen, which will immediately provoke interaction and enticement. These two radically unusual computer-based works are not far from the principles of alchemy. Of course, Blake is not looking for the Philosopher's Stone that might transform base metal into gold. The analogy with alchemy comes from the process he uses, he mixes into his work: 16 mm. Shots of old photos, film footage, computer-generated digital effects and ink drawings.

*Winchester's* sculptural and architectural shapes are also theatrical. Rather than constructing a singular or logical narrative sequence, Blake provides dense layers of looped actions that seem to be taking place simultaneously. What Lev Manovich wrote in relation to the history of cinema, can be applied to Blake's expanded computer-generated images: "We no longer think of the history of cinema as linear march toward only one possible language, or as a progression towards more and mores accurate verisimilitude. Rather, we have come to see its history as a succession of distinct and equally expressive languages, each with its own aesthetic variables, each new language closing off some of the possibilities of the previous one—a cultural logic not dissimilar to Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific paradigms." <sup>3</sup>

Because Blake's emphasis is on the radical redefinition of the image, both in its creative and its disruptive potential, his works produce simultaneously a narrative and an anti-narrative situation. This means that the loops structuring the *Winchester* projections perform on a number of levels, that appear on-screen not exclusively as a consequence of the numerous media he employs. The technological aspect is just one, an important one, since it allows him to play with superimposed images-images that seem to be immaterial, and whose blurry quality sometimes

recalls certain classic Henry Fox Talbot photographs. The reference also comes from cinema. The way he mounts the work using film techniques such as jump cut, or a cut that appears to be an interruption of a single shot, blending it with a long shot by framing the scale of the object shown, created an implicit meaning, which it is the reflective viewer's task to discover. In fact, the movie industry itself has benefited from Blake's professional talents: he contributed to P.T. Anderson's latest film "Punch Drunk Love", with several sequence of his artwork.

The theme of the works is the Winchester Mystery House. If you look up these words on the Web, you will find several book and articles with details of what is considered to be one the most eccentric achievements in American architecture. Yet such information is not to be found on the more prestigious on-line architecture sites. The 26-room house that Sarah Winchester built in the Santa Clara Valley in 1184 can be tracked down on quirkier web address, citing *The Haunting of America* by Troy Taylor (2001), or *Ghosts of the Old West* by Earl Murray (1998), among many others.

The Winchester Mystery House is a haunted house. After the death of both her son and her husband—who invented the Winchester rifle—Sarah inherited a large sum of money. A keen devotee of clairvoyance, she believed it when a medium told her: " You must start a new life and build a home for yourself and for the spirits who were the victims of this terrible weapon. You can never stop building the house. If you continued building, you will love. Stop and you will die. For 36 years, she frantically built and rebuilt, altered, changed, constructed and demolished one section of the house after another. Rooms were added to rooms and then turned into entire wings, doors were joined to windows, and levels turned into towers and peaks and the place eventually grew to a height of seven stories Inside of the house, three elevators were installed as were 47 fireplaces and 13 greenhouses, each with its own cupola; every staircase had 13 steps. The house was full of staircases that lead nowhere; closets that open onto blank walls; trap doors; double-back hallways; skylights stacked one above the other; doors that opened to steep drops to the lawn below, and dozen of other oddities. <sup>4</sup>

Blake's Winchester pieces are a non-stop tour through Sarah's predicament. The first work of the series, *Winchester (2002)*, an 18-minute loop and was shown at Feigen Contemporary, last April in New York. This is the first time the two pieces are to be exhibited together, affording to the viewer not only a continuing into the story, but also a sense of how the artist tirelessly renews a techniques inherited from conventional drawing and painting, combines with film and computer technologies. This compound of such diverse narratives energizes the entire field of imagery.

One a different level, the two Winchester pieces possess a cultural background, a real story to tell and a personal message to spread. Over and above their gorgeous aesthetic power, these pieces convey Blake's critique of violence in America. " I want to confront the way in which America mythologizes violence." This social component of the work is expressed in a "gentle manner", as the artist says, but nonetheless the attractiveness of images coming from such a hellhole of futility plays on fragile boundaries between what is human (i.e. fear, greed, death)

and what is technology. Furthermore, the social intention of the work does not interfere with its provocative finish, but rather adds to it a dimension that is hard to resist.

Blake has not fallen under the spell of the machine age, of technophilia and indiscriminate modernization, as for example the Futurists did. His utilization of different technologies, all linked through synergetic relationships, are producing a yet—unaccustomed relation between art and technology—certainly an original aesthetic. His work encompasses a wide variety of social, cultural, and political meanings for it is based on imagination, content, and idea and has also harnessed powerful elements of popular culture.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was curated by Elga Wimmer and included in the program of the Department of Audiovisuals in September 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff. *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. (Routledge, London, New York, 1999, 104.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). <http://www.manovich.net/TEXT/cinema-cultural.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.prairieghosts.com/winchester.html>