

TEMA CELESTE - Hunt

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"Recasting the American West"

In "Winchester", Jeremy Blake explores the dead end hallways and sealed rooms of the mind.

by David Hunt, May 2003

Antonio Negri has argued that the only way to combat Empire is through the blackmail of bourgeois realism. The ransom, one assumes, is upped as the ever more poignant details of social inequity and structural breakdown are trotted out to galvanize the indignant mob. The fact that this humanist agenda did little to reform English orphanages when *Oliver Twist* was banging his utensils on the table crying out for "food, glorious food!" or Victor Hugo was penning a more comprehensive indictment in *"Les Miserables"*, seems to elude Negri. I mention this because a program of social realism seems to scoff at the notion of beauty, to consign it to the realm of mere analgesic confection of par with the diversions of your average blossoming orchid or framed art nouveau mirror.

Pretty vacant, indeed. Despite the most hopped-up effusions of our best rhetoricians, the discourse of beauty never manages to evince more than a protracted gasp or melancholy sigh,

And even the alienated majesty of the finest Wordsworthian "Lyrical Ballad" never stopped a bullet or fed a starving village. The new beauty, however, unyoked from the passionate exhalations that cling to a Rothko or a Pollock or a Barnett Newman like a particularly acrid dew, is no longer an egregiously poetic lamentation pitched at the level of a dog whistle. Now it is an elegy, as loud as reveille through a base camp loudspeaker and designed for the same reason: to wake you up.

Jeremy Blake, whose two previous solo exhibition at Feigen, straddled references as disparate as Rothko's colorfields and Archigram's visionary cities, drummer Keith Moon's nouveau riche crash pads and British Mod scooter culture, reaped a slew of glowing press that fixated on the ultra-slow animated dissolves at the expense of the humorous narrative beneath. "Bungalow 8," so named for the infamous cabana at the posh Beverly Hills Hotel where many an insider junk bond deal went down, and "Mod Lang" which describes the character Slick Rhodes, who, after wrecking his scooter one rainy London night, demolishes an historic castle to build "Berkshire Fangs," a home for stylish vampires on the same site, both shared the same syrupy drips of cascading color, but had a Matthew Ritchie-esque hermeticism that only the most informed gallery hopper was clued into. "Winchester" (2002), Blake's latest animated DVD, thankfully strikes a perfect balance between a cryptomystic narrative percolating just beneath the surface - what he terms "the threat of narrative intrusion transforming the work" - and the fantasias of psychedelic color glowing like kryptonite that characterize all of his opulent video work. "Winchester's" 18-minute loop begins with the staticky image of a California Ranch Style house.

Sara Winchester, the heir to the Winchester rifle fortune began building this house in the late 1800s. Construction spanned thirty-eight years because Winchester, a deep believer in Spiritualism, maintained the paranoid belief that the vengeful spirits of those killed by Winchester guns had cursed her.

She was advised to make additions and improvements on the house in the hopes that constant building would ward off evil spirits. The resulting mansion is a labyrinthine penitentiary for wandering, pesky ghosts and a kind of sound dampening bell jar for all things that go bump in the night. No haunted, dilapidated Bates Motel on a high wandering hill, the Winchester Mystery House - as the tourist attraction is now called - is a palm-tree-shrouded, California Gothic with doorways that open up onto empty space and a topiary driveway that would appease any arriviste Bel Air movie star. Blake, however, is not interested in the Spielbergian poltergeist rising from the haunted Indian burial ground to pop out of your television and shake up your appliances. The narrative he seems intent on invoking draws a parallel between American Manifest Destiny - the staking out of land and consequent building - and a kind of comforting manifest destiny of the mind, where hands - not to mention paranoid imaginations - are never idle enough for greedy devils, aggrieved ghouls, and vindictive goblins to take possession.

For Winchester, it was never "divide and conquer," but subdivide the anxious regions of her own cobwebbed mind to stave off feeling of guilt she felt sure she would be held accountable or in the afterlife.

Where early American pioneers were obsessed, Winchester was obsessive-compulsive. Winchester, smartly, never appears in the video; her house, with its sepia-toned hues, stands proxy for her. Manifest Destiny, however, comes knocking like Marley's ghost: dark silhouettes carved like shadow puppets Doppler in and out of the frame dressed like rugged American frontiersmen. Blake explained to me that the figure of the gunfighter, whether lawman or outlaw, is meant to coincide with an American national identity of spiritual regeneration through violence, and indeed you see this in films beginning with John Ford's "High Noon" all the way through to "Dances With Wolves."

So far, though, you'd think that Blake was a social realist in the Dreiser mode with all the attention to biographical detail and the central image gleaned from archival photos. And, indeed, the first few minutes evoke an early zoetrope at a penny arcade as the sound of the projector clicks away, yet without any ensuing filmic movement. In fact, that sound of a humming reel becomes, in Blake's hands, the signal of an ominous swarm. It's as if the ghosts are gathering themselves to commune in one of Winchester's many attics or closed off bedrooms. Moody, haunting, atmospheric, ambient...yes, poetic descriptives such as these have repeatedly been attached to Blake's previous high Modern paintings-as-videos. But here he sheds that cocoon of rapturous yet useless beauty on the one hand stark social critique on the other to fuse both into a kind of strange outsider art. Outside of my own dreams at least, which bear none of the kaleidoscopic otherworldliness of what follows. A single doorway, blackened, becomes centrally framed as the rest of the house quite literally melts away. That doorway morphs into a burn, a gunshot would, a portal to another opiated universe whose soundtrack is an atonal gong stuck on reverb.

The hand-drawn animated clusters that follow are pitched somewhere between exploding multicolored confetti and a constellation of silk scarves floating in a shallow pool. The embarrassment of liquid riches on display here hints to a new estuarial imagination. The Freudian "oceanic" is no longer a sense of cosmic unity consciousness - some kind of thin strand connecting all beings - but a compression of all respiratory cadences, depicted as constant dissolves like tablets effervescing in a glass of water, into a kind of underwater grotto from which all life once emerged. Blake, no doubt, has intuited the cardinal omission inherent in previous invocations of beauty: namely, their failure to deal with the mechanics or the sequential nature of beauty as anything other than a kind of kinetic vibration

along the viewer's finely strung tuning fork. Blake's vibrations, or more to the point, melancholy morphologies, take place squarely on the screen. I felt not consoled, but enervated. And, moreover, the piece put me in a mind of all the studied loucheness in current figurative painting, the exercises in teenage dissipation meant to invoke envious nostalgia in a forty-something crowd that can no longer afford that idle luxury. Winchester, with its Rorschach totems and deep sky celestial objects practically burned into your mind's eye like sun-scribble, possesses the lugubrious mood, of transgression - the global gutter punks and lithesome mannequins - must find themselves returning to in the dim, unflattering light of their audience-free bedrooms.

Blake's video is suffused with the retrospective calm of one who knows where he is taking you. Where he intimates a universal void (beauty's gaping maw), much current theatrically staged work, shorn of the insouciant posing, indicates the void within. Now, in the battle against Empire which would you rather have: a curdled vanity that demands your pity, or the hush of an extended séance exploding like a Roman candle that only asks that you believe?