

WINCHESTER essay - Weil

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Moving Paintings, Painting Cinema

by Benjamin Weil

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Jeremy Blake's "time-based paintings" are made using cinematic and digital tools he adopted in the mid-1990s, but their aesthetic remains indebted to his formal training in the tradition of canvas, brush, and paint. His work is determinedly rooted in postwar American painting (he openly admires artists such as Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, Richard Prince, Edward Ruscha, and James Rosenquist), and the gestural approach of painting frequently prevails over the more cinematic strategies employed by other artists experimenting with computer graphics, film, and video. Indeed, Blake views computing as a means of "amping" this painterly heritage, alluding to the shift that occurred in pop music with the introduction of electric instruments.

Blake's abstract moving landscapes, first exhibited in 1997, are com-posed of hundreds of animation frames, each created with traditional painting techniques and then assembled like classic cel animations. Interestingly, he often presented the early work on the flat expanse of a plasma screen, preferring his digital imagery to take on the physical guise of a framed canvas. (He has since used projection to contextualize his moving paintings in the realm of cinema, as well as in the tradition of heroic canvases such as James Rosenquist's famous F-III [1964-65].) Keenly interested in the workings of contemporary mythology, he draws inspiration from a wide range of classic mystery novels, films, and cult television series, among other cultural forms. Blending painterly abstraction with more concrete architectural elements, the artist crafts an eerie, dreamlike fantasy world. His references to tele-vision and cinema hint at the artificiality of stage sets-spaces fashioned for no purpose but to mimic reality on film. Blake's vibrant tableaux thus explore the relationship between subjectivity and mediation. In demonstrating how experiencing the world through the eyes of others (filmmakers, photographers, or journalists) can subsume point of view, he underscores the idea that mediated reality is itself a form of fiction, like all modes of representation.

Much of Blake's work of the 1990s delves into illusory space: Elements of mysterious tableaux slide open to reveal others, exploring the interplay of theater, architecture, film set, and two-dimensional screen. In many cases the narrative unfolds from a still viewpoint, indicating a new approach to the notion of perspective that lies halfway between the movement of filmed images and the illusion of painterly representation. Morphing-a technique perfected by digital technology-is another tool Blake exploits to further the complex relationship between reality and representation in his work. Objects gradually change shape, color, and brightness, and the slightest moment of inattention can result in having missed a crucial step: when a panel dissolves to reveal yet another layer of an improbable stage set, for example, or when a seeming brush stroke turns into what looks more like a film still.

The title of *Bungalow 8* (1998), Blake's first: trilogy, refers to the eponymous pool-side cabana at the Beverly Hills Hotel, the frequent site of business meetings and lavish parties thrown by members of the Los Angeles entertainment industry. For Blake, Los Angeles epitomizes the flexible, dynamic relationship between reality and fiction, object and subject—it is a place that reinvents, reinterprets, and represents history and time in much the same way as it produces films. The capital of cinema is as much a fictional construct as it is the stage for an ongoing flow of movies that take the city as their setting or subject; its architecture is as much the result of modernist utopian ideals as the expression of fantasy and grandeur. Fakery is an integral part of the "reality" for which the town stands, exemplified by the vivid, smog-induced sunsets that inspired the later project *Chemical Sundown* (2001). Borrowing freely from urban legends, film, literature, and the landscape, Blake's imagery reflects the city in an abstract yet recognizable way.

A 2001 collaboration with director Paul Thomas Anderson introduced Blake to the realm of commercial filmmaking, offering a new context for his refined animations and enabling him to investigate increasingly complex juxtapositions of filmed and painted worlds (and, hence, fiction and representation). Interspersed throughout the film, the animated inserts he designed for *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002) depict hallucinatory moments experienced by the film's protagonist, an emotionally agitated San Fernando Valley resident played by Adam Sandler. As the camera stops and the animation starts, the contrast between the two modes of representation reveals their formal differences; in depicting "reality," Anderson's moving images are clearly distinct from Blake's abstract renderings of the characters' emotional states. In many ways, this new dynamic prefigures later works by the artist, particularly the Winchester trilogy of 2002–4. His sequences for *Punch-Drunk Love* also parallel the imaginary world inhabited by Sarah L. Winchester, the heiress to the weapons-manufacturing fortune and the developer of the famed Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. The mansion, itself a hallucination of sorts, is the result of nearly four decades of compulsive, nonstop construction—a mania sparked by a spiritual counsel that the sound of building would ward off the ghosts of people and animals killed by the family's firearms.

The overall structure of the Winchester trilogy is based on the concepts of inner and outer worlds and parallel realities. *Winchester* (2002), the first installment in the series, surveys the architectural wonder from the outside. Deploying drawings, archival photographs, and stills from super-8 footage shot at the house, Blake creates a pattern of animated inserts that suggest shifting states of consciousness, evoking Winchester's conviction that the house was inhabited by spirits. This impression is further accentuated by the soundtrack: While the photo-based footage is presented to the tickering noise of a film projector, the animations are accompanied by a digital composition that evokes the sounds of Blake's earlier work.

The second film in the series, *1906* (2003), surveys the inside of the house, specifically the section destroyed by the 1906 earthquake. Winchester interpreted the damage as a sign that the spirits disapproved of her efforts in one specific area of the dwelling. Rather than attempting to fix the damage, she walled off that part of the mansion and continued to build around it. Blake sees these remnants as "scar tissue," or as physical traces of trauma—yet another motive behind the frenzied building. In a formal departure from earlier work, where the viewpoint is static and motion is suggested by the layering of images, *1906* introduces camera movement to establish a sense of claustrophobia and to construct a metaphor for a mind passing over a lifetime of memories. The cinematic journey through the house begins and ends at the highest point of the rooftop, a Victorian architectural feature known as a witch's cap. The camera halts only to hone in on architectural details, whereupon the image morphs into animation

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curator Clarissa Dalrymple. A companion piece titled Sodium Fox, a portrait of the poet and musician David Berman, is due to be completed in the fall of 2005.

Winchester therefore represents a pivotal moment in Blake's artistic practice. A true trilogy, it develops in three distinct "movements." Formally, the first is rooted in earlier work yet introduces the notion of collage, something that was never prominent in his previous digital animations. In the second, the use of camera movement relates more directly to the depiction of parallel worlds in Punch-Drunk Love. In the third, which is more overtly narrative, the animated inserts become less abstract and the filmed images more painterly. With Winchester and other recent work, Blake asserts a newfound fluidity between film and painting while continuing to blend idiosyncratic references to mainstream culture and high art.