

Guns and Ghosts: The Winchester Witch Project

By Steven Henry Madoff

The house that repeating rifles built inspires a haunting set of plasma 'paintings.'

JEREMY BLAKE

THE WINCHESTER TRILOGY
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Through August.

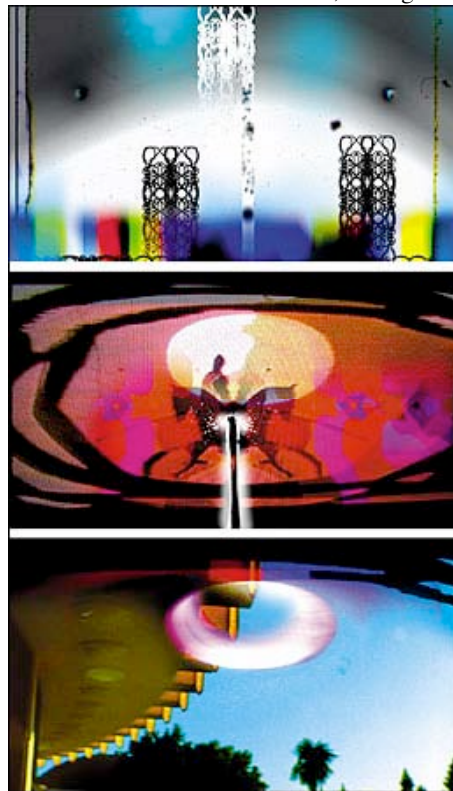
For the last three years, Jeremy Blake has been looking at ghosts. Blending paintings, photographs, film, music and sound on banks of computers, he makes his spirits flit and hover like spectral stalkers. Then they disappear into a real-life towering mansion, the locus of a trilogy of artworks with the feel of a lush yet troubled dream.

The mansion, 340 miles north of Mr. Blake's studio in Santa Monica, Calif., is the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose; a Disneyesque attraction with 160 rooms, mazes of hallways, dead-end staircases and doors that open bewilderingly onto blank walls. Yet for the artist, the 19th-century house, built over nearly 40 years by the widowed heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune, is more than a dizzying distraction for tourists. It's an icon of violence and America's romance with guns in the Wild, Wild West, a fascination that won't go away. "The Winchester Trilogy," three uneasy pieces by Mr. Blake that just went on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, takes that subject head on in works of real complexity.

He calls his pieces "time-based paintings," suggesting that they move as time passes. And they do move slowly and hauntingly, on large-scale plasma screens. Yet technically they aren't films or videos. (The museum calls them mixed-media digital animations.) They are an utterly 21st-century art form, a hallucinatory bitstream of data that is fabricated in Photoshop, After Effects and

the movie-editing program Avid, and then relayed from the computer onto DVD's.

"Fluidity describes the feel of my work, the way I put things together," Mr. Blake, 33, said on a recent visit to New York. Tall, with uncombed brown hair, a few days' beard and aviator glasses, he sat by a glowing plasma screen at the gallery of his Chelsea dealer, Feigen



Courtesy of the artist and Feigen Contemporary, New York

Contemporary.

"I'm using the tools available today," he continued. "The fluidity of information rushing from every direction, and the way we process it, define our culture now. And Sarah Winchester interested me because the jumbled free flow of the house she built seemed like an architectural metaphor, a 3-D symbol for that fluidity."

"Then there's the psychological aspect of the place," he added, "the neurosis and mad logic and creativity all flowing together in this crazy quilt of rooms. It gets unbelievably twisted."

After Sarah Winchester's husband died of tuberculosis, a spiritualist told her that she was being haunted by angry shooting victims, who had taken her husband in revenge. She was told to move West, build a house and keep on building rooms to confuse the ghosts and keep them at bay. Amazingly, with a burden of guilt worthy of Lady Macbeth, she did it. She bought the house in San Jose and took on its renovation as a restless, creative and unending task for her literal salvation, a way of living that seemed like another compelling symbol to Mr. Blake: what it means to be an artist.

"Jeremy's early work was so seductive that while it was praised, some thought it was maybe too beautiful, too nice," said Benjamin Weil, the curator who organized the Winchester exhibition in San Francisco. "But the newer works are more relentless, more layered and disturbing. They seduce you with that

A sequence from "The Winchester Trilogy," left, is called "Century 21," a 12-minute DVD with sound. To the rattle of an old movie projection, sepia photographs of the creepy Winchester house appear on the screen and morph into gun-toting cowboys.

beauty and then turn to their real subjects: violence, power and fear."

The trilogy's sections—"Winchester," "1906" and "Century 21"—have a deepening sense of tumult and struggle. As the sound of an old movie projector rattles, sepia photographs of the Winchester house appear on the screen and morph into Morris Louis-ish floral abstractions, which then change into gun-toting cowboys. In the second segment, named for the year of the big earthquake that shook California, the low lights and slow film shot with a hand-held camera take on the feeling of "The Blair Witch Project" on Quaaludes—something ominous just out of view unfolding in the

dark. The cracks in the house embody the cracks in Mrs. Winchester's mind.

In the trilogy's last section, Mr. Blake's camera floats over to the Century 21 movie complex near the mansion, suggesting that movies have so mythologized the gun-slinging machismo of the American West that the allure of violence is driven ever deeper into our psyches.

Movies are a touchstone for Mr. Blake's art. "When you make paintings and then you watch beautiful shot after shot in a movie, there's this kind of envy," he said. "I mean, I tried to make abstract paintings as a student, but I just couldn't make that party happen, so I went in the direction of film. I wanted to get the emotion of abstract painting some other way, give it some juice by making it move, make it unstable, and then do something like add sound to disorient people and say to the viewer: 'Keep watching, keep watching. Something's going to happen.' "

Something did happen for Mr. Blake when Paul Thomas Anderson, the director of the movies "Boogie Nights" and "Magnolia," wandered through the show "010101: Art in Technological Times" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2001 on a break from making "Punch-Drunk Love." He was captivated by two big plasma screens of glacially moving abstract and architectural forms, their colors emotionally hot and cool. They were Mr. Blake's pieces "Liquid Villa" and "Guccinam." He invited the artist to make new work for the movie, writing three places into the script where the art's rainbow-rich abstractions flow between scenes – three mini-exhibitions with millions of people watching.

The experience had a powerful influence. "What I heard most from P.T. was about manipulating time," Mr. Blake said. "P.T. thinks in sixteenths of a second. He gets this incredible emotional punch layering those moments – fast, shifting, fluid. My work was a little formal before. Then I understood those quick little shocks wouldn't kill my painterliness, they'd add to it. That changed my art."

After appearances in back-to-back Whitney biennials in 2002 and 2004,

Mr. Blake's work has only become more visible as part of a growing wave of what might be called entertainment-based art. Such artists as Doug Aitken, Eve Sussman and Paul Pfeiffer are using increasingly sophisticated means to borrow and twist the sleek look of Hollywood for their own highly personal, poetic and sometimes political ends.

"Jeremy's mix of abstraction and narrative, of painting and the cut-and-paste structure of films, obviously borrows from the movies," said Klaus Biesenbach, the chief curator at P.S. 1 in Queens, who selected Mr. Blake for that museum's "Greater New York" exhibition in 2000. "But it's entirely something else. It was immediately innovative. I already see it being influential on younger artists."

Yet Mr. Blake balks at the word entertainment. "I'm hitting these two worlds, art and entertainment, against each other," he said. "I'm not making a neutral mirror for our complex culture. I'm using the means of movies and paintings to seduce people, to pull them in and open things up." He leaned forward in his chair. "Then we'll see what happens."