

## GUNSLINGING PSYCHEDELIA: The Moving Paintings of Jeremy Blake *Holly Willis*

"The wires are crossed in my mind," says Jeremy Blake, chuckling as he explains that when he paints, he's thinking about movies, but when he makes his movies, he's thinking about painting. "I tend to do things that painters think are gaudy but that I think are great," he continues. "I'll have a painting of a celebrity - I don't give a shit! That's historically a no-no. But basically I'm trying to get you to make a film in your mind when you're looking at the paintings. So in a way I guess I'm trying to free up the terms of both mediums by crossing them. I'm kind of contrarian...."

Blake, who recently left New York to live in Los Angeles where he works in a small studio on the city's West side, may feel contrarian, but the artworld finds him perfectly agreeable. Having shown work in the last two Whitney Biennials, as well as in the 2001 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibit 010101: Art in Technological Times, along with numerous gallery shows in the U.S. and abroad, the 33-year-old Blake has quickly gained a following of curators and critics who marvel at his large-scale kinetic video projections. Dubbed "moving paintings" by the artist, Blake's DVD projections often shift slowly among luscious panels of luminous color, while evanescent images evoke bygone eras hovering in and out of focus like a slowly turning flipbook of jumbled pop dreams and memories.

Rather than aligning himself with a history of abstract film and video, Blake, who studied at the California Institute of the Arts between 1989 and 1993, insists that his work emerges from the world of painting. And not just abstract painting, but collage. Indeed, pop artist James Rosenquist is a frequent reference point, and it's easy to see in that artist's touted *F-111*, a colorful mash-up of pop and military iconography, connections to Blake's own work, which similarly crashes together disparate yet frequently beautiful images, catching you in the uncomfortable space of delicious pleasure and an unsettling experience of the uncanny. That said, while there are hints of clear images, most of Blake's work overall tends to be abstract. "I like to go in and recreate these abstractions that come and go like mirages, that impress you as forms but then they go away. They're ideologically fluid instead of ideologically fixed. And I think that's a big difference between my generation and the previous generation in terms of approach. But it's also a migration of painting away from the canvas.

Blake's most recent project is *The Winchester Trilogy*, which is a trio of short animated film loops which are to be projected in a gallery space. Each centers on the Winchester Mystery House, a 150-room mansion in San Jose, California, designed and inhabited by Winchester Rifle heiress Sarah L. Winchester; in 1884, she began continually creating the house almost nonstop for 38 years. "As a roadside attraction, it's not that creepy," says Blake, "until you start walking through it. There are hallways that are miles long, stairways that lead nowhere, doors that open out into nothing - basically, it's built for ghosts. Sarah Winchester believed that she had to house the good spirits killed by the guns, and ward off the evil ghosts with the ongoing construction."

Blake clearly admires the obsessive brilliance of Winchester's project, and, as he notes, this sense of admiration or enthusiasm is all it takes for a project to begin germinating. Then he reads and researches. "That's how it starts. Then I'll call up some friends of mine, like Jonathan Karp who does sound editing on movies and who worked on *Punch Drunk Love*. I'll call him up and say, 'Do you know any kinds of music that will go with this?'"

Music is a large part of every project, notes Blake. "And then there's Jayson Whitmore, who is a motion graphics person. I'll hand him a stack of still frames and footage to link together. I'll tell him how to do it. He's really brilliant. He's a classically trained pianist as well, so he knows pace. I mean, he just knows how to get it right."

Blake makes it all seem so simple, but as he talks, it's clear that there's a lot more to the process. For the three segments of the Winchester project, Blake shot Super 8 footage that formed the foundation. He tried video, but disliked the colors.

"The first film, *Winchester*, is a schematic or overview of what I thought about all of this material aesthetically. It has exterior views that are historical and kind of Rorschach shapes and abstractions that eventually begin to incorporate silhouettes from 19th and early 20th century print ads. It's creates this kind of nostalgia that haunts the space."

Blake continues, "In the second film I really penetrate the space with the camera and go from the roof all the way into this earthquake damaged section. It's called *1906* and deals with sections that Sarah left alone - she thought she was being punished by the spirits with the earthquake, and she thought that the parts of the house that fell were not to their liking, so she built around them. For me that was a great example of how we deal with trauma - it's the basic architectural manifestation of trauma. There's evidence of trauma, and then it's built around or hidden. So I liked that."

For the third installment, named *Century 21* after three movie theaters built just behind the Winchester House, Blake follows the myth of the gunfighters away from the house and into the theaters. "The theaters are also in a way haunted by the same thing," he says, adding that the name "Century 21" suggested a kind of time travel that he found very appealing.

Blake, who could easily talk about the layered references in the films for hours, adds that in addition to abstraction, he was also fascinated by psychedelia. "Linking psychedelia and the Victorian era made perfect sense to me because to me psychedelia seems to be the uncanny double or deliberate reversal of the Victorian - it has a similar aesthetic but it's totally open and libidinous; it's about opening up the flow, not blocking it."

If all of this sounds too weighty, no need to worry. Each installment of the trilogy boasts its own beauty, which alone is enough to make watching the pieces a pleasure. And the images work as evocations, pulling from the archives of American pop imagery to craft a dense weave of reference points. Do they add up to a story? Not really. Instead, they hover somewhere between a kind of ambient narrative and a scrapbook that points to one woman's life and the way she manifested her ideas, anxieties and spirituality in material terms. And, adds Blake, they're funny. "As a kid I was a real wise-ass," he confesses. "I think a lot of my approach as I've gotten older and more in-depth, well, my approach is still kind of...." He pauses for a long time, "... well, humorous."

*The San Francisco Museum of Art will present Jeremy Blake: Winchester from February 19 to August 14, 2005.*