



In Freely Associative States

Jeremy Blake's last, unfinished DVD - a kaleidoscopic portrait of a pop-culture maven - was the centerpiece of two recent exhibitions of his new-media work.

By Edward Leffingwell

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Compelling in their complex imagery, vivid palette and sequential moments of pure visual exhilaration, Jeremy Blake's time-based digital portraits have attracted a legion of admirers, and the late artist's career promised further remarkable achievements in process and thought. In 2006 Blake undertook the production of an ambitious new DVD, a project involving himself as artist and producer in collaboration with one-time punk impresario Malcolm McLaren, his subject. Titled *Glitterbest*, the computer-generated work was to consist of visuals and written material concerning McLaren's life and milieu, the material shaped by Blake, the text recorded by McLaren.

Glitterbest would constitute the final part of a trilogy of "psychological pop portraits," as Blake described them, each focusing on an artist of unusual and in

some circles legendary capacity for creativity and excess.(1) *Glitterbest* was left incomplete at Blake's death on July 17, 2007. The influential 35-year-old artist disrobed and walked into the waters of the Atlantic Ocean from a beach in the Rockaways a week after the suicide of the writer and filmmaker Theresa Duncan, his partner of 12 years. The story was widely reported and sensationalized in the press.

Presented along with Blake's previously completed portraits *Reading Ossie Clark* (2003) and *Sodium Fox* (2005, focusing on the poet, singer and songwriter David Berman), the unfinished McLaren portrait, now known as *Glitterbest Documentation*, became the heart of concurrent exhibitions at Kinz, Tillou + Feigen in New York and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The gallery show included wall works and screenings of 21 DVD pieces. *Glitterbest Documentation* consists of audio track and narration accompanied by sequences of images found among Blake's computer files after his death. Jonathan Binstock, curator of the Corcoran exhibition "Wild Choir: Cinematic Portraits by Jeremy Blake," considers the piece a record of a work in progress; the images correspond to less than half of the existing audio track. For purposes of exhibition and the insight they give into the artist's working process, image and sound were coupled as an 11-minute, 17-second loop lacking the synchronization Blake would have given it. In these exhibitions *Glitterbest Documentation* was shown on a plasma screen, with earphones and benches provided.

While highly regarded in the field of abstract animation, Blake came to disdain the designation "animator" and thought of his works as "moving paintings" or "time-based paintings."(2) Even his digital C-prints are a form of painting. These distinct, independently conceived compositions have occasionally served as a source for DVD imagery or have elaborated on elements of DVD imagery, but they are never stills "grabbed" from the DVDs. From the visual evidence in DVDs and some C-prints of the late 1990s, it seems clear that Blake's work was influenced by the saturated colors and shapes of Ellsworth Kelly's oeuvre, the stains and veils of Morris Louis, the targets of Kenneth Noland and the "zips" through the fields of Barnett Newman. Much of the work also features intersecting representational images - sometimes recalling the paintings of James Rosenquist - culled from Blake's data bank of photos and film stills that he manipulated with relatively unsophisticated computer programs.

In 1999 Feigen Contemporary, as the gallery was then known, presented Blake's first digitally composed animated projections as well as large-format C-prints. That exhibition introduced the projection "Bungalow 8" (1998), which consists of three sequences of three minutes each. It was screened in the recent gallery show. The first segment, *Facade*, is an account of the pastel exterior of a Beverly Hills Hotel cabana, portrayed as a modernist dream, a site for power meetings. *Black Swan* offers a view of the same bungalow's interior with what might be described as a modernist fireplace, the nighttime cityscape in the distance. Through subtle digital changes, the fireplace is transformed into a television screen into which Blake inserts a seemingly sinister clip of a conversation between Robert Redford and Natalie Wood from the film *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965) describing a powerful studio mogul as a "black swan." The third sequence, *Hotel Safe*, introduces a geometric abstraction of a hotel safe through such signifiers as a key code pad, then cuts to an airplane in flight, then an abstraction of a hotel logo (the sunset of the Great Western chain). Taken together, the three sequences evoke essential elements of the Los Angeles experience.

Also included in the screening schedule in Chelsea, "The Winchester Trilogy" (2003) was similarly conceived in three parts, each focusing on the Winchester Mystery House, an enormous gabled mansion in San Jose endlessly built upon during the late 19th and early 20th centuries by an heiress of the rifle manufacturing family, who was obsessed with the care of the spirits of those who had died by the gun. In the first work in the series, the 18-minute *Winchester* (2002), Blake constructed a nonlinear narrative - a montage of images rather than a plot per se - from film footage that will be at least partially recognizable to the viewer, along with photographs, ink drawings and digitally generated forms. The 21-minute *1906* (2003) incorporates much the same technique but focuses on the house's interior and the damage inflicted on it in the great San Francisco earthquake of the title year. The somewhat apocalyptic 12-minute *Century 21* (2004) employs cartoon imagery, vivid splashes of color, movie clips and the dome structure of three "Century" movie theaters across from the Winchester house. The marquee of the second of the three announces a screening of *Star Wars*. The house is the common factor, along with continuing lyrical abstractions and the image of a rifle.

Blake shows doors that open on walls and stairs that go nowhere. Spectral gunslingers prowl the edges of the screen, kitted out in Stetsons and dusters, and gables and doors slip into shadow while the audio track suggests the sound of a movie projector. Rorschach-like images appear and alter in form and intensity of color, and a music box plays as the house dissolves. *Winchester* shares some imagery with the C-print *The Witch's Cap* (2004), exhibited at the gallery in an adjacent room. Architectural elements of the house, a mysterious woman half-masked in shadow and a gunfighter are overlaid with diamond shapes.

At once fragmented for the evocative value of the retinal experience and orchestrated to create a specific composition, Blake's late portraits have a more explicit narrative structure based on materials gathered from his subjects, with the vivifying introduction of voiceover and autobiographical notations derived from their writings and Blake's own editorial emendations. His subjects are diverse cultural figures of importance to him: Clark, who died in 1996, was a star with influence far beyond his fashion-world milieu; McLaren was at one time manager of the Sex Pistols. The nine-minute *Reading Ossie Clark* (2003) focuses on the designer's creative work during the era of the swinging, pharmaceutically fueled London of the 1960s and 1970s. A narrative crafted from Clark's posthumously published diaries is presented in throaty voiceover by British-born curator, dealer and onetime actress Clarissa Dalrymple.

Blake used digital process as a medium, and gave more than a year to the painstaking creation of each of his portraits. In the 14-minute *Sodium Fox*, he devised a vibrant characterization of the Nashville-based Berman, an engaging poet and indie rock singer in the laid-back, narrative-driven manner of Kris Kristofferson, Leonard Cohen and Lou Reed. The work is a psychedelic barrage of multiplied images and vivid color, visited by a briefly animated photographic figure of Abraham Lincoln, neon signs, skulls and indolent nude models with cosmetically perfected breasts. There is also a repeated image of modernist houses on a beachside slope and eyes emitting laserlike beams that anticipate the shifting imagery of the unfinished *Glitterbest*.

In the freely associative state of *Glitterbest Documentation*, McLaren's richly

accented voice is arresting and at times hilarious, the sequences an imaginative kaleidoscope of imagery. In this text, Blake offers altered lines from Longfellow ("by the shores of Grabee-Gime") and Whitman (his ode on the passing of Lincoln, "O Captain! my Captain! Our fearful trip is done. . .").⁽³⁾ There are references to McLaren's Teddy Boy haberdasher venture with Vivien Westwood, Boy George in his incarnation as Lieutenant Lush, Adam Ant and McLaren's brilliant hip-hop mix of *Madame Butterfly*. Among such collaged and cartoon passages, bits of advertisements, erotic images to be assembled with arcane visual and verbal asides, Blake inserts shafts of intense light that flash from the eyes of grotesque figures, and the image of a skull recurs. He collages the exposed tip of a gargantuan lipstick on the butt end of a dirigible marked by the Maltese cross. Such images elude rational interpretation, but their pacing engages the eye. Although it is at times arresting in this moment of gestation, this last work leaves us with questions of how it might have differed from the previous portraits had it been finished and how the artist might have continued his explorations of media.

Blake first exhibited in a group show, "Aftershocks," at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994, during his master's candidacy at California Institute of the Arts. His work appeared in three Whitney biennials and in numerous solo shows at galleries and museums from 1999 on. Blake contributed visuals to filmmaker Paul Thomas Anderson's tortured romantic comedy *Punch-Drunk Love*, where his painterly manipulation of abstract color becomes a perceptible force, like an aura before a grand mal seizure. His abstract, painterly side was particularly well represented at Feigen Contemporary in 2001 [see A. i.A., Mar. '02]. Blake's work is in the collections of Yale University, the Whitney Museum of American Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the museums of contemporary art of San Diego and Los Angeles.

1. Interview by Jonathan P. Binstock in *Wild Choir: Cinematic Portraits* by Jeremy Blake, Washington, D.C., Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2007, p. 22.
2. All Blake's DVDs were created in the computer and are either projected or shown on a plasma screen. They are not films or videos, although those terms are sometimes loosely applied in publicity materials. The gallery checklist calls them "DVDs with sound" and others, including the Corcoran, call them "digital animation with sound on DVD" despite Blake's resistance to the term "animation."

3. From *Glitterbest Script*, 2007, Estate of Jeremy Blake.

"Jeremy Blake: Memorial Exhibition" was seen at Kinz, Tillou + Feigen, New York [Nov. 10, 2007-Jan. 19, 2008]. "Wild Choir: Cinematic Portraits by Jeremy Blake" was presented at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. [Oct. 27, 2007-Mar. 2, 2008]. His work is included in "Animated Painting," organized by the San Diego Museum of Art [Oct. 13, 2007-Jan. 13, 2008], which travels to Antigo Colegio de San Idefonso, Mexico City [Oct. 1-Dec. 31, tentative], to Falconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Grinnell, Iowa [Feb. 6-Apr. 19, 2009], and to Centro Cultural Tijuana [May 22-Oct. 4, 2009]. Several of Blake's DVDs are part of "Old, Weird America" at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston [May 3-July 20].

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