



## Blake, Nayland (b. 1960)

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Versatile African-American artist Nayland Blake creates--in a variety of media--work that reflects his preoccupation with his racial and sexual identities. Interracial desire, same-sex love, racial and sexual bigotry, and the body are all recurrent themes of his increasingly influential art.

Nayland William Blake was born in New York on February 5, 1960 and grew up on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Both his parents were artistically disposed, and his own early explorations in making art were encouraged. A self-described teenage "art nerd," Blake spent his high school years with like-minded friends hanging out in Soho and East Village galleries and lofts, watching experimental film and performances by artists such as Richard Foreman and Jack Smith.

During this time he also encountered the work of Joseph Cornell and Ray Johnson, the writings of Kathy Acker, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Delany, and the Marquis de Sade, and the music of the Velvet Underground, all of which he has claimed as important continuing influences on his own work.

Blake graduated from Bard College in 1982 and received his M.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts in 1984. In 1984, he moved to San Francisco, where he spent the next eleven years working as a curator for New Langton Arts (where he also had his first solo exhibition) and as an instructor at various local art schools.

Blake's work first came to national and international attention when it was featured in the 1991 Whitney Biennial and the 1993 Venice Biennial.

In 1995, Blake co-curated a show at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum entitled *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*. This was the first major show to exhibit the work of queer artists exclusively. The volume produced from the show has become a standard in queer art scholarship.

Blake's work embraces a host of media, including sculpture, drawing, painting, assemblage, video, and performance, and evinces an ongoing preoccupation with his own racial and sexual identities. Born to an African-American father and an Irish-American mother at a time when such unions were outlawed in many parts of the United States, Blake is a black man by the definition of historical jurisprudence, yet easily passes for white. As a gay man, his sexual identity is similarly subject to either concealment or revelation.

Blake's work perennially theatricalizes, and even eroticizes, the characteristically suppressed linkages between interracial desire, same-sex desire, and the overt displays of bigotry and intolerance that customarily greet such transgressions as these. Accoutrements of "low" or "outlaw" culture such as long hair and beards, tattoos, Confederate flags, pipe-smoking, and professional wrestling, none of which are part of Blake's own heritage and appear antithetical to his identities as a multiracial queer artist, are nonetheless recuperated and infused with a significant (and often problematic) erotic potential.

Additionally, Blake's work frequently probes the changing relationship of the artist's self to his body, its relative health and wellness, and others' perceptions of it. This concern is reflected in his fascination with gory horror movie images of the body's violation and possession, by his use of body weight and fat as erotic signifiers, and by the extensive use of food in his works.

Food is both a sensual pleasure and a snare, both a disguise and a revelation. In *Gorge* (1998), a seated Blake is fed continuously for a full hour by a visibly black man on such foodstuffs as watermelon. The performance is charged with signifiers of racial difference and the possible inversion of stereotypical roles, but also with real affection between the two men. Displayed alongside *Feeder 2* (1998), a fragrant gingerbread house large enough to walk into, *Gorge* may inspire nausea as well as apprehension. A surfeit of what looks and smells delectable may occasion retributions and reversals of a kind that the Brothers Grimm did not suppose.

Through Blake's work bounds the recurrent figure of the bunny rabbit, a seemingly innocuous character often given an ominous cast. The bunnies generally elude being read as a direct metaphor for the artist. Nor are they simply observers and commentators on the action--often they are the agents. They variously suggest a youthful naiveté, a sexual precocity, the stereotype of homosexual promiscuity, or a social slipperiness. The last meaning is perhaps best exemplified by Br'er Rabbit, the "trickster" of Joel Chandler Harris's "Uncle Remus" tales.

Many of Blake's bunnies take the form of suits, designed to be worn by the artist or by imagined others, including a skeletal Tar Baby in *The Little One* (1994). The wearing of the bunny suit suggests a kind of subversion of convention and quotidian authority.

In 1996, Blake returned to New York, and in 2003 he accepted a position as chair of the International Center of Photography and Bard College's joint M.F.A. program in Advanced Photographic Studies.

Through his work as an artist, teacher, and curator, Blake exerts an important influence on queer art, art scholarship, and artists.

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Author**

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