

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The New York Times

Nayland Blake

*Matthew Marks Gallery
522 West 22d Street, Chelsea
Through Nov. 28*

The single piece in the first room of this compact two-part show is a child-size walk-in house constructed entirely of fragrant gingerbread. The main work in the second room is also about fantasy and eating: a video of the artist, seated, nude to the waist, being hand-fed various foods by a man standing beside him. The feeding ritual goes slowly. The second man, who is black and whose face is edited out by the top of the screen, is gentle but insistent in his nurturing. He supports Mr. Blake's head from behind, occasionally pauses to wipe his mouth with a towel, or to run a hand caressingly over his torso.

Maybe it is the sexual nature of the gesture, or the sight of Mr. Blake, a very large man, being plied with food, that the audience found amusing, at least on the two visits I made to the gallery. But the work is emotionally intense and conceptually suggestive. Race is certainly one of its subjects. The fairy-tale Hansel-and-Gretel house is also Uncle Tom's Cabin (an image this artist has used before); the two men play out roles — parent-child, nurse-patient, servant-served — that correspond to clichés of racial power relationships, complicated here by the fact that Mr. Blake is himself part black.

Sex is the other other theme, in the interplay of domination and submission à la Marquis de Sade, but also in the often sensuous dynamic of male-to-male care-giving that has been so much a part of gay life during the AIDS crisis. All of this comes together in a show chock full of ideas and powerful precisely because it is disconcerting.

HOLLAND COTTER