

Flash Art

NEW YORK

REVIEWS

NAYLAND BLAKE

MATTHEW MARKS

In the performance *Gorge*, Nayland Blake sat stripped to the waist, as a gaggle of onlookers waited in line to stuff him with increasing amounts of food. Pizza, carrots, donuts, and other simple fare were strewn across a nearby folding table, giving the event a mundane ambiance. However, the intense delectation with which Blake patiently chewed each successive morsel, pushed his action into the nether regions of human experience.

The current of S&M in Blake's previous work, from re-readings of De Sade to puppets, theater pieces, and aluminum installations, found its most convincing articulation in this setting. Watching the artist being tenderly fed, one could see his stomach painfully bulging, yet he seemed to be enjoying the event greatly. Daily acts we take for granted — caring for babies, ingesting food — the fluids and objects which interpenetrate our bodies, became in Blake's performance a ballet of exchanged pains and the acculturated imposition of sadistic delights.

Interesting comparisons could be made with Marina Abramovic's early performance where the audience members — given similar access to the artist's body — left her bruised, naked, and bloody, or to related gestures by Chris Burden or Vito Acconci. But Blake's was perhaps the most genuine representation of the masochistic impulse. No one went out of bounds, there was no spectacle or Hermann Nitsch-style shock fest. Everything was still, hushed, in perfect control as a true masochist would want it.

The transformation of the every-day into seedy pleasures made one wonder which socially sanctioned enjoyments — sex, expensive foods, high-rent accommodations, and the up-scale jobs, alcohol, and entertainment — are really so good for you anyway? Blake's performance encourages individuals to make their own distinctions, as those between excessive and useful behavior are often highly artificial. A freedom to choose even if, as Blake seemed about to demonstrate at the end of the performance, such indulgences make you sick.

Michael Cohen



NAYLAND BLAKE, *Gorge*, 1998. 60 min. video tape (color, stereo).