

## Art in America

### Nayland Blake at Matthew Marks

Bunnies and extreme physical ordeals—the two main ingredients of Nayland Blake’s work—turned up again in his latest show, “Reel Around.” The recent offerings also found the artist treading, typically, between the sinister and the hilarious, between the transcendent and the banal. A huge, fluffy, white rabbit suit some 16 feet in length, *The Big One* (2003) was sprawled out like an enormous animal-skin rug on the floor of the main gallery, doing a good job of controlling the cavernous space. The oversize costume also brought to mind other times the bunny has shown up throughout Blake’s oeuvre. Though probably inscrutable to the uninitiated, Blake’s lop-eared albino mascot references a range of cultural signifiers related to the artist’s identity as a biracial gay man, including Brer Rabbit, *Playboy*, drugs and the real-life rabbit’s proclivity for fucking. To those not in the loop, however, the piece may have appeared a good, soft spot to take a nap.

The sound of breathing resounded throughout the gallery, creating the sensation that someone (the artist?) was lurking nearby. In fact, the noise was the soundtrack to *Correction* (2004), a series of nine color DVDs playing on small television monitors placed in a row along one wall. Each monitor showed the shirtless artist—he has a formidable, tattooed torso—against a white wall, a tube that appears to be a microphone dangling from one nostril. In each shot, he is positioned and lit slightly differently. Every so often a person steps into one or

another of the frames just long enough to slap Blake across the face, turn and leave. The unflinching artist keeps his gaze fixed straight ahead, his breathing stubbornly steady. Rapt viewers tended toward nervous laughter, sometimes identifying other artists as the ones doing the slapping.

A second, slightly more disturbing video on a 7-minute loop, *Coat* (2001), showed Blake making out with the artist A.A. Bronson. The two are scarcely recognizable since both men have cake frosting smeared all over their faces—one chocolate and the other vanilla.

Blake’s work harks back to the career of performance artist and self-proclaimed “Supermasochist” Bob Flanagan, who made a continual spectacle of his own aptitude for achieving out-of-body experiences via corporeal pain. Blake’s work, however, tends to be much more stylized than Flanagan’s. For instance, the color scheme for the present show was regulated to black and white—with the exception of schmalzy, trailer-park-chic iron-on designs on two black, child-size bunny suits. Strung up by their ears on metal wires, they dangled in a manner reminiscent of lynched bodies. One of the designs riffs on a recent MasterCard ad campaign: “two beers, three margaritas, four Jell-O shots: getting to take home the girl who drank all the above, priceless.” Here, as usual, Blake isn’t completely clear about what he’s driving at. In the end, it may be just this elusiveness that helps keep viewers engaged with this provocative, disturbing artist. —Sarah Valdez

View of Nayland Blake’s exhibition “Reel Around,” 2004; at Matthew Marks.

