

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Nayland Blake

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Zhang, Lisa Yin. "Nayland Blake's Dark Joke is on You." *Hyperallergic*, October 21, 2025.

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Wark, McKenzie. "Nayland Blake's Conceptually Horny Work Traverses the Dungeon and the Studio." *Art in America*, September 15, 2025.

Haddad, Natalie. "12 Art Books to Read This Fall: My Studio Is a Dungeon Is the Studio: Writings and Interviews, 1983–2024 by Nayland Blake, edited by Jarrett Earnest." *Hyperallergic*, September 18, 2025.

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AUTRE

COURTING OBSCURITY: AN INTERVIEW OF NAYLAND BLAKE

July 7, 2026



Nayland Blake

"Haunt": Being the Folly of One Victorya Spectre, 2026

Courtesy Nayland Blake and Art Omi

interview by Emma Grimes

Across decades of practice, Nayland Blake's work has explored identity, desire, power, and subcultures while posing incisive questions around freedom, bondage, gender, shame, and the complexities of human relationships. Born in New York City, Blake attended Bard College before earning an MFA from CalArts in the 1980s.

Blake's newest work, *Haunt*, premiered at Art Omi on June 27. Marking their first outdoor installation, the work draws inspiration from the figure of the ornamental hermit—a historical practice in which wealthy landowners hired men to live in seclusion on their estates for years at a time. With *Haunt*, Blake continues their ongoing investigation into how discourse and exchange can take place beyond the limits of the white cube.

GRIMES: This was your first outdoor installation. How has preparing for this setting influenced what you wanted to make?

BLAKE: I had been out to Art Omi before. I came out for Pippa's [Garner] show, so that was my first time going around the space. When Sara [O'Keeffe] proposed doing something, I was a little panicked, then thought about it some more and was really thinking, *okay, I like the idea of the less-trafficked space*. I've always been really interested in the parts of the space where you can make meaning where it's not normally expected. It's often the overlooked spaces that become the refuge for marginalized activity. I was wondering if there's anything like that around Art Omi. So, we started looking around at potential sites. While we were doing that, I was rolling over a number of ideas in my head because I'm generally not much of an outdoor person. I was like, *okay, I don't want to make something that just seems permanent. How could I make something that shows its age over time?* I've always really liked dark rides at amusement parks and ghost houses. There's something about going on that subterranean trip, even when they're not very convincing. Then, other pieces began to come together as I was thinking about different sorts of ruins or grottos. I began thinking about grottos in English gardens and the ornamental hermit thing. It all relates to decay and things that are falling apart.

GRIMES: How long will the installation be there?

BLAKE: It's up there for five years.

GRIMES: You told *Hyperallergic* that *Haunt* is about your “desire to be a crone. A different kind of invisibility.” Can you expand on that?

BLAKE: When I think about feminine archetypes, I'm not really drawn to youth. I love seeing older folks who are at home in their bodies and at home in who they are. Thinking about a crone as somebody who's satisfied with where they are, and exploring the power of that, but not necessarily power over other people. It's also thinking about obscurity; the possibilities of obscurity, and what we can do with that. I think we're living in a time where the assumption is that you want to be a star. That's the only role that's possible—that you want to be on center stage and exercise a kind of power of attention, right? I really like the stuff that's percolating under the surface. I like the fact that there would be aspects of what I do that would not be immediately apparent to people, but that they could find. For this next phase of my life, I'm starting to explore stuff that I don't know definitively yet. My work has always been a vehicle for that exploration. It's not necessarily about putting it at the center of the art world, but about wanting to be in this more peripheral state. I think a lot about Agnes

Martin in her latter years, living in a double-wide and just painting out in the Southwest. Just there, painting in a matter-of-fact way and not in a showy New York way.

One other thing I will say about that: I like how this piece is going to be up for five years, and I intend to go back and work on it and add stuff over that time. It's my little alchemical lab that I can think about and inhabit in this weird, nest way. I don't know where it's going, or where my physicality will be going, or where my emotions are going in relation to it. I'm grateful to have the opportunity to have something that's a vehicle for that, as opposed to having to make a definitive statement about it and then present that to people.



Nayland Blake

"Haunt": Being the Folly of One Victorya Spectre, 2026

Courtesy Nayland Blake and Art Omi

Grimes, Emma, and Nayland Blake. "Courting Obscurity: and Interview of Nayland Blake." *Autre*, July 7, 2026.

GRIMES: I wanted to ask you about living in uncertainty. You've talked about creativity being a necessary habit to form so we can create and imagine a better future. We're living in a political climate with nostalgia for an idealized past. I'm curious how you understand this widespread craving for certainty.

BLAKE: Because people are in fear. What we've learned is that we're stuck with a generation of politicians who have no interest in governing but a great interest in just manipulating people through fear. Their conception of what human society could be is limited and inhumane. But what they offer people in the midst of their fear is not, *okay we have to think through this together. This is a complex situation that wasn't born overnight, and it will take all of us coming together to solve it.* Instead of that, they're like, *This is the answer. Whatever we've done, we're right. We're never wrong.* Trump cannot say that he did something wrong, even for something as stupid as hiring the wrong guy to deal with his pool issue. He can't even say that. He can only say, no, no, no, somebody else fucked it up. It's not me. That's been his entire business career. It's been his entire leadership style. It's to fuck things up and blame somebody else. And to offer the certainty of the denial as a way of reassuring people that things are okay, which is cowardly.

The only alternative is that we have to connect to our creativity. But creativity is a twin with doubt. You can't make anything meaningful without trying something and being like, *Let me see if this works. How does this feel to me? How does this feel to you?* If we disagree about it, what are we going to do about that? Maybe there are things that we disagree about, and we're both right. When that happens, how do we handle it? How do we let those differences coexist? I think it is a process that people are frightened of because it means that they have to be vulnerable. When you're confronted with authoritarians who get up every day and decide who they want to hit, everyone spends all their time worrying about whether or not they're going to get hit, which makes it nearly impossible to be thoughtful and engage in doubt and to find a solution that isn't an immediate solution.

The idea that there was a better time is very seductive to people. In some ways it's always an appeal to childhood. There was a time when I didn't have to worry about this. When I didn't have grown-up problems. When I could just say, I want a national fair for my birthday, and I want rides, and it just appeared. There's a mournfulness in being an adult with agency who has to think about their role in solving intractable problems. Racism is pervasive and has gone on for so long that there's no way you could just be done with it. There's this idea that we didn't have racism until Black people started talking about it, let's go back to that. When I was a kid, I didn't have to think about it. But you were a white kid, so yeah, you didn't have to think about it. If you were a Black kid, you would have had to think about it. I lay the blame for a lot of this at the feet of Reagan. Carter was, to me, the last American president who said that there are times when the moral right in the world is not the same as the desires of the United States, and we have to deal with that. Reagan got rid of him by saying, I see no problem there. We're always right. Reagan's style was so successful that it became the template for every presidential candidate after him. And thus we're stuck with it. This notion that there was a time before we had to be adults and think about other people's actual feelings, and the consequences of our actions.

GRIMES: Speaking of the need to be creative, can you talk about Victorya Spectre? Who is she?

BLAKE: Victorya Spectre used to be Victor Spector, who had a short-lived career in the adult film industry, and then started to live as Victorya. The name is spelled with a “Y” because it’s about victory and about triumph. It’s also about ghosts and the ways in which, as we age, we feel less like the central character in the places we go to, and the pleasures and pains of being ghostly, in that sense being not really recognized as hot, not recognized as desirable or meaningful. Victorya was born out of the folks that I used to see around New York and San Francisco, who were characters, eccentrics. There was an amazing composer named Moondog, who basically lived on the streets of New York. I remember seeing him on occasion as a kid.

He had a leather cowl with horns coming out of it. If you look him up online, you can find him. I think a lot about Ms. Colombia, who died not that long ago. She’s a really amazing person who would appear at every Pride event in an incredible, gaudy outfit. There’s a pair of famous twins in San Francisco, and going further back in San Francisco, there was the Emperor Norton. People whose presence in the urban space was this fantastical character who didn’t capitalize on it. This is who they were, what they did. To me, they’re a reminder of the possibilities for how you could live your life as a spectacle, but also just as a spirit that inhabits the streets, inhabits other people’s lives in a way that isn’t trying to sell them something. You’re there as an example of a possible way to be. That’s something that has really been stamped out in typical urban spaces. Nobody makes an effort anymore. Most people are dressed in a way that is so bland, or so unconsidered, or safe.

Victorya has also become a way for me to assert more of a femme identity. I’ve been thinking a lot about famous bearded ladies and asserting that identity in a very clear understanding of the gender that I was raised within. But also thinking about how we scramble those signals. How do we engage with the full range of our gender? What does that mean for us going forward? The thing about this piece and most of my work is like, on one hand, I want to make a goofy thing. For me, the goofy things are also the sexy and funny things. They’re also the gateway into the ways in which we think about our presence in the world, and the kind of marks we want to leave, or the people we want to honor. What’s nice about getting this chance to return to Victorya is that it’s opening up new chapters. We’ll see where those go.

GRIMES: You co-curated *A Different Life* in 1995. In our current political climate, how would you approach a show like that?

BLAKE: I really feel like the curatorial strategy that we engaged in in *A Different Life* still holds today, which is that we started from the works of art. We started from particular objects that we wanted to see in dialogue with each other. Then we built out the ideas in the show from the connections that we saw between those objects when they were in alignment. It’s the only real way that I know how to curate—I’m not a trained curator. I’m just somebody who’s been lucky enough to be able to do it for thirty-something years in a bunch of different contexts. To me, shows fail when they start with an idea and then come up with a list of artists who fit that idea, and then go and get a piece

of work from those artists. The thing that's interesting about curating is seeing objects in relation to each other. When I curated the show last fall at Matthew Marks, it was really about like, I have some ideas about these things, but I want to see these things in dialogue. I want to see a Betye Saar box in dialogue with a Joseph Cornell box.

I want to see that in dialogue with a Lucas Samaras box. I want to see these particular pieces next to each other and see what they spark off each other. That's ultimately the approach I would take, thinking about that show today. We were hoping at the time that that show would really spark a whole range of shows, and I feel like it kind of did, but not for at least ten years. What's interesting to me in relationship to that show is that we thought it was really going to build on this momentum, go in a bunch of different directions, and then other shows would come out in response, but it really took at least a decade before that got taken up.

The other thing about curating right now, and I've talked to Sara [O'Keeffe] about this, is that we need more regionalism. We need people to really think about what's happening in their backyard and to make art spaces in different locations that are distinct from one another. This idea that there's a bunch of artists who need to go everywhere is uninteresting. Particularly in an era of social media, where you see these barrages of images all over the place. I want to be able to go to Hudson and find out what's happening in Hudson. I think there needs to be more of that.

GRIMES: You work backwards. I was watching a lecture, and somebody asked, "What does the rabbit mean?" and you were like, "I don't think about what I'm trying to symbolize and get the object. I start working with the object, and then I go back." It's like what you said about curating: you find the works first...

BLAKE: ...and then there is an idea there. Because the idea that emerges is not what you would have thought of at first, and that's where you actually learn something. For me, the luxury of curating is that I get to learn something. It's the same with making this piece here. Don't tell folks (laughs), but I'm getting away with starting my crone training by making this commission. But I mean that's what it is. I don't know what that would mean for me. We'll find out over the coming years. I would say, finally, I want that luxury for everyone. I want everybody to have a working method where they can learn about something through the work, instead of having to decide what something means, turn it out, and get it out into the world. I want all of us to be able to investigate and grow through making something.

"Haunt": *Being the Folly of One Victorya Spectre* is on view through January 10, 2027 in the Newmark Gallery. The exhibition in the Sculpture & Architecture Park is on view until the fall of 2030 at Art Omi, 1405 County Route 22, Ghent.

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HYPERALLERGIC

BEST OF 2025

The Best New York City Exhibitions of 2025

Our staff and contributors look back on a year in art, from museum reopenings to shows that make and remake history.



Hyperallergic

December 8, 2025

It's been a big year in New York City — and not just because we (thankfully) got a new mayor. New and updated museums are everywhere you turn: The Studio Museum in Harlem is back and better than ever after a seven-year sabbatical, and the Frick's spent some of its hefty endowment on an expansion and facelift. A new New Museum will soon follow (we hope). And of course, the gallery landscape has shifted beneath our feet: We bid adieu to some, we say hello to others.

Beyond that, 2025's been a blockbuster year. It includes shows that will make art history — Amy Sherald at the Whitney, Rashid Johnson at the Guggenheim, and Wifredo Lam at The Met being just a shortlist. We've got shows that remake it, from a survey on Indigenous design lineages at the Ford Foundation Gallery to New York's introduction to 20th-century Malian photographer Seydou Keïta at the Brooklyn Museum. We've got surveys of hometown heroes, including the late Queens native Jack Whitten at MoMA, Coco Fusco at El Museo del Barrio, and Reverend Joyce McDonald at the Bronx Museum.

And, of course, as is always the case here, in the city of everything, we've got more still. My fellow New Yorkers, I present to you — in no particular order — the best shows of the year. —*Lisa Yin Zhang, associate editor*

Nayland Blake

Matthew Marks Gallery, September 12–October 25

Organized by the gallery and the artist



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "50 Minutes" (2025), leather, steel, aluminum, PVC, plastic, fabric, glass, mirror, microphone, sound machine, wood, paint, and hardware (photo Aruna D'Souza/Hyperallergic)

An exhibition in three parts, *Nayland Blake: Sex in the 90s*, focused on Blake's work in the wake of the AIDS crisis amid the culture wars, while *Inside: curated by Nayland Blake* next door put his art in dialogue with that of 14 other artists. Finally, *Session*, an installation of new sculpture, fused a psychiatrist's office with an S&M chamber. Sexy, funny, edgy, concise, and generous — pure Blake.

—Aruna D'Souza

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HYPERALLERGIC

100 Assignments From Nayland Blake

While these assignments will not turn someone else into me, they will provide the practitioner with a path to the deviations within themselves.

Nayland Blake November 2, 2025



Nayland Blake at work (all images courtesy the artist)

Editor's Note: The following text has been excerpted with permission and adapted from *My Studio Is a Dungeon Is the Studio: Writings and Interviews, 1983–2024* by Nayland Blake, edited by Jarrett Earnest, published by Duke University Press on November 4, and available online and in bookstores (Copyright Duke University Press, 2025).

I've taught for 30 years in colleges, residencies, and sex parties. I've come to view teaching as a necessity, a way of putting back into the world the culture and ideas the world has poured into me. The bedrock of teaching art is the assignment. And the basis for my own work as an artist is being able to give myself assignments. The right assignment at the right time can answer a need we haven't been able to articulate to ourselves. The assignments we need tell the story of how we view the work and the world, even if they tell it slant. I give my students assignments that were given to me directly in school as well as others that I've gleaned from the writings of artists and thinkers in various fields. Finding a good assignment provides a thrill. I give them to people for various reasons — to build a particular skill or to perhaps lead someone to a different sense of how they could look at what they do. Some of these I've honed over years of classes in various disciplines; some are for no one but myself. When I doubt what I do or am unable to get myself to work, the only thing that has got me out is a self-administered assignment. They have been my technique for creating myself. Good assignments are not easy to come up with, but one principle that has helped me comes out of recovery: Take the action, and let go of the result. Many times people attempt to use assignments to force people to come to a conclusion, to predetermine the outcome. Good assignments awaken us to the breadth of possibilities available to us rather than narrow things down to one possibility. They are the scaffolding we build to touch the unexpected and wild within ourselves. They are how we stretch. There is no right or wrong answer. There is only the next thing to do.

While these assignments will not turn someone else into me, they will provide the practitioner with a path to the deviations within themselves.



The right assignment at the right time can answer a need we haven't been able to articulate to ourselves.

Blake, Nayland. "100 Assignments From Nayland Blake." *Hyperallergic*, November 2, 2025.

1. Reconstruct, without photographs, a childhood toy, including what it felt, smelled, and tasted like.
2. Design a sculpture to be taken internally.
3. Make a crown. Give it away.
4. Purchase an issue of a magazine that you have never opened before.
Treat it as the only surviving artifact of a vanished civilization.
Use it to reconstruct the attitudes and values of that civilization.
Create your own artifact as part of that civilization.
5. Draw the feeling of someone — a relative — lying on top of you and snarling while you struggle to get up.
6. Combine two pieces of your clothing into a garment that neither was designed for.
7. Find a collaborator. Have them touch you fifty times over a period of two hours.
8. Draw the previous US presidents from memory. Draw the next 10 from your imagination.
9. Make a piece using only materials you have obtained by barter, without currency.
10. Make a guardian packet: a bundle to be worn under your clothing to keep you safe. It must have 10 elements. Wear it for a week.
11. Holding your arms out from your sides, measure the distance from your left to your right hand. Make something that is that length, plus two feet.
12. Make daily drawings that cannot contain words.
13. Build your divination deck. Include the activity of adding a new card on your birthday.
14. Design your dream body: How many limbs does it have? How many holes? What is it covered with? Scales? Fur? Where is it most sensitive? What part is it proudest of? What kind of bed is most comfortable for it?
15. Describe your dream body to an audience and ask them the question of how they would care for it. Make drawings of their responses.
16. Build a sculpture that produces the pleasure of being ignored.
17. Make a hopeful piece.
18. Try again if your piece is about how hope never works out.
19. Carve a block of wood and say goodbye to every piece you take from it.
20. Say goodbye to yourself until the word loses all meaning. Then sing it.
21. Describe the subjecthood your upbringing has granted you and ask where you are dissatisfied with it.
22. Draw the feeling of when your genitals feel wrong for how you want to masturbate.
23. Make a piece that lies to you about your heritage.
24. Write a 500-word explanation for a piece you will never make.
25. Cast your elbows, knees, crotch. Use the resulting fragments to make one smiling face, one frightened face, and one asleep face.
26. Masturbate and note the exact qualities of the image or scenario that tips you into orgasm.
27. Every time you take a photograph, shift six inches to the side and take another.
28. Paint a family food onto the side of a building.
29. Once a week, make 10 drawings, each one by four inches. Leave these drawings as bookmarks in nooks on the shelves in secondhand stores.
30. Take a vinyl record and drill a hole 9/32 inches in diameter one inch from its center. Using this as the new spindle hole, play the record and record it, using the recording as the basis for new musical compositions.
31. Practice drawing feet and hands.
32. Tell the story of your family, once as a triumph and once as a tragedy. In both tellings, only whisper.
33. Pick a favorite album. Make one piece for each song.
34. Sit near a wall and trace your shadow. No, the other one.
35. Learn how to program a game for the original Game Boy.
36. Make a piece, and hang it in your home. After one year, revise it. Repeat the process for the next four years.

37. Purchase a potato. Take 50 photographs of it, trying to make each as different from the previous ones as possible.
38. Make a sculpture that confines you until you are comforted.
39. With a chisel, carefully nick the laminate from a dresser you have found that was discarded. Gouge the particle board that is revealed until the entire surface looks fuzzy.
40. Wash until a shape is changed.
41. Fix a problem from a previous piece in a new piece.
42. Tell lies. Enjoy the taste of them.
43. Walk until the ideas come.
44. Draw the feeling of people turning away from you in embarrassment when you ask for help.
45. List your failings; make a piece for every item on the list.
46. In a public library, find a favorite book. Count 10 books to the left and then use that book as the basis for four new pieces.
47. Using scrap fabric, make a flag for the country you will establish after you leave this one.
48. Design two traps.
49. Create a pedestal for a famous sculpture.
50. Make a banner for each of your friends.
51. Install shelves on the street. See what ends up on them.
52. Make a performance for just one person. Show it only to them. Do not document or make any other record of it.
53. Have someone sew ribbons to your skin.
54. Design a holiday and the parade that celebrates it.
55. Every day: a painting made of 10 strokes. Its surface can be any size or material; strokes can be any length.
56. Make a drawing about the statement "I am inside myself."
57. Take the technique of a sundae as the basis for a sculpture.
58. Design a monument to another artist.
59. Build the components for a piece that will be finally assembled 10 years in the future.
60. Make note of every joke your family tells about itself. Rewrite them as songs.
61. Draw on yourself with bruises.
62. Draw the feeling of those around you.
63. Remember the potato you took 50 photographs of? Eat it and write a description of how it tastes on a shirt.
64. Wear that shirt and ask 50 other people to take a photograph of you in it.
65. Paint a recipe — no words.
66. In 10 photographs, show how a particular person does their job. Only do this with their consent.
67. Write two lists of 50 items each: "In my work I always _____" and "In my work I never _____." For each of the next 10 weeks, pick five of your "nevers" and do them.
68. Design a barrier. A sonic one.
69. Take Hamlet. Present the narrative of the play in 10 found images. Edit the play to 100 lines.
70. Practice drawing with feet and hands.
71. Find a painting made before 1600; re-create one object depicted in it in three dimensions.
72. Stash pieces where they will not be found until at least 10 years after your death.
73. Find a black bag. Cut a hole in it. Put a white bunny in the bag.
74. For a day hold every door open for at least six people before you go through it.
75. Create a drawing across a city by tracing your steps. Scribble. Every 10 blocks, observe something and draw it.
76. Sculpt a self-portrait where every part of your body that you feel is vulnerable is rendered at twice its normal size.

77. Draw what you miss.
78. Script a performance of your cowardice.
79. Make 10 paintings on the theme "I forgive you." Send them to 10 people picked at random.
80. Narrate the apocalypse as love at first sight.
81. Destroy all the documentation you have of a past piece.
82. Make a piece that everyone will call "intimidating." Make a piece that everyone will call "generous." Show them together and try to guess which is which. Contemplate the extent to which those words are the same.
83. Set up a collection point for other people to donate things that will cover over a piece that you have made.
84. Draw the stacks of books in your home, bringing out the way that they represent a weight that confounds any other small bit of progress in your life. Draw the impossibility of moving them and the ache inspired by that realization.
85. Define your race and then betray it.
86. Make guardian packets (see assignment 10) for five of your closest friends.
87. Design a piece that will provide a thank you for the person who cleans an exhibition space. Make it.
88. At a paint shop, find the color that is the fury you feel when on a vacation with your partner knowing that you will break up with them once you return home. Purchase enough of the color to paint your bedroom. Every morning pour some on the floor and walk through it.
89. Cover up a tattoo.
90. No beards without dresses; no dresses without beards.
91. In any room, measure a space three feet in from the walls. Move any previous contents of the room into this new boundary. Spend three days within this new collection of objects. On the second day, request that collaborators make paintings to record your situation from the periphery. On the fourth day, clean yourself and the contents of the condensed room. On the fifth day, replace the contents of the room with the paintings.
92. Write fan mail.
93. Create a T-shirt; then form the band to go with it.
94. Gather a list from friends of 10 words they associate with private. Wear those words publicly.
95. Go to an exhibition. Note the name of each piece. Go home and draw each piece from memory and your list of names.
96. Take your initials. Draw a self-portrait using the letterforms as the only mark you can make.
97. Once a week, create one object to furnish your Utopia.
98. Devise assignment 99.
- 99.
100. Do what you have left undone.

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HYPERALLERGIC

Art Review

Nayland Blake's Dark Joke Is On You

The artist has perfected a register that is laugh-out-loud funny or absurd, rigorously conceptual, and erotic, edged with simmering rage.

Lisa Yin Zhang October 21, 2025



Detail of Nayland Blake, "Equipment for a Shameful Epic" (1993), mixed media (all photos Lisa Yin Zhang/Hyperallergic)

If the term “darkly funny” were ever to describe anyone, I’d put my vote on Nayland Blake. Their two-room gallery show at Matthew Marks includes erotic forced milk-drinking; a bunch of get well cards (you will not get well — you were on the placebo, the text inside tells you); and the most toxic stuffed bunny you’ll ever meet. “You’re over-rationalizing this,” it tells you in a falsetto, fluffy ears jiggling emphatically. “In honor of the old days, you should just ... let me.”

Blake has perfected this specific register across their work — laugh-out-loud funny or absurd, rigorously conceptual, erotic edged with simmering rage — and yet it’s somehow not repetitive.

Zhang, Lisa Yin. “Nayland Blake’s Dark Joke is on You.” *Hyperallergic*, October 21, 2025.



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "One Down" (1994), plush toy with 56 loose pom-poms

This, even though doubling and repetition are one of their most potent tools. The manipulative stuffed bunny ex-lover of the aptly named "Negative Bunny" (1994), for instance, implies (... hopefully?) the existence of another stuffed bunny who will hopefully not give into its "charms" — that's you, watching.

Stuffed-animal-as-avatar reappears in the vitrine in front of it: "One Down" (1994) consists of a bright yellow rabbit beside a pile of matching pompoms. It looks like the aftermath of a violent crime; I detected (or projected) an "I'd do it again" smirk on its furry little face. Given the behavior of the bunny behind, I wasn't sure whether to root for or against — who did this animal stand in for: the avenging victim or yet another perpetrator?

Other works also consider the ways we make ourselves up or tear each other apart. "Equipment for a Shameful Epic" (1993) contains duplicates of the same Halloweenish props: Two plastic nooses, multiple fake scythes, a pair of rubber heads with matching forehead wounds. They're obviously fake, cheap toy-store wares. And yet their purposeful repetition and careful arrangement infuse them with a sense of uncanny, ritual, even agentive power — you could overpower a singular prop, but taken together, you feel you're in their presence rather than the other way around.

In a similar vein, the nearby "Mirror Restraint" (1988–89) is composed of a BDSM collar suspended by a metal pole between a pair of floor-level mirrors that jut out from the wall. You can walk right up to them, but their tilt ensures you'll never see yourself, not even your feet. Despite or because of that fact, I felt a weird sense of vicarious shame — as if it weren't a trick mirror but my own worthlessness that rendered me invisible — that looped back into a quite uncomfortable eroticism. It's just one of myriad ways that Blake's rigorously conceptual work reroutes your expectations for both object and artwork, not merely implying but actively implicating your body.



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "Gorge" (1998), digital video (color, sound)



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "You were on the Placebo" (1993/2024), set of five greeting cards



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "You were on the Placebo" (1993/2024), set of five greeting cards



Nayland Blake, "Equipment for a Shameful Epic" (1993), mixed media

Zhang, Lisa Yin. "Nayland Blake's Dark Joke is on You." *Hyperallergic*, October 21, 2025.



Nayland Blake, "Mirror Restraint" (1988-89), mirror, steel, and leather



Nayland Blake, "Negative Bunny" (1994), VHS tape transfer to digital video (color, sound), 30 minutes

Zhang, Lisa Yin. "Nayland Blake's Dark Joke is on You." *Hyperallergic*, October 21, 2025.



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "Entrance" (2025), steel, doormats, fabric, leather, acrylic, wood, paint, and hardware, in the back of the gallery's 526 West 22nd Street location in Chelsea



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "50 Minutes" (2025), leather, steel, aluminum, PVC, plastic, fabric, glass, mirror, microphone, sound machine, wood, paint, and hardware, in the back of the gallery's 526 West 22nd Street location in Chelsea

Zhang, Lisa Yin. "Nayland Blake's Dark Joke is on You." *Hyperallergic*, October 21, 2025.



Installation view of Nayland Blake, "Charm 1" (2025), steel, glass, plastic, silicone, leather, fabric, wood, paint, enamel, brush, and hardware, in the back of the gallery's 526 West 22nd Street location in Chelsea

Nayland Blake continues at both locations of Matthew Marks gallery through October 25. Nayland Blake: Sex in the 90s, consisting of works by the artist, is at 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan. Inside: curated by Nayland Blake, composed of works by other artists curated by Blake, is at the gallery's 526 West 22nd Street location. Nayland Blake: Session, an installation of recent works by the artist, is also at the 526 West location.

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ARTEFUSE

From Bunnies to Bondage: Nayland Blake's Unruly Archive Returns at Mathew Marks Gallery, NYC (Article & Video)

Staff Writer · 10/09/2025



Installation view of Nayland Blake: *Sex in the 90s*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, September 11 – October 25, 2025

Nayland Blake at Matthew Marks Gallery

Through October 25, 2025

522 West 22nd Street & 526 West 22nd Street, New York

Images ©Nayland Blake, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Nayland Blake's exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery is a time capsule of queer identity, desire, and vulnerability, unfolding across two Chelsea spaces. The artist's signature mix

"From Bunnies to Bondage: Nayland Blake's Unruly Archive Returns at Mathew Marks Gallery, NYC." *ArteFuse*,
October 9, 2025.

of sculpture, installation, and ephemera retains its raw charge while opening itself to new readings in 2025. Pieces such as *Mirror Restraint* (1988–89) and *Negative Bunny* (1994) reassert the erotic humor and tenderness of Blake’s practice, while recent works like *Entrance* (2025) and the “Charm” series push into sculptural maximalism.

The show’s range is dizzying—fur-covered objects, VHS transfers, makeshift bondage devices—all radiating what the gallery calls Blake’s “investigation into desire, race, gender, and power” (Matthew Marks Gallery). The artist’s ability to reframe personal artifacts as cultural critique feels urgent in an art world still grappling with representation. If the early works read like confessions, the newer ones land as declarations: unruly, excessive, and impossible to categorize.



© Nayland Blake, *Equipment for a Shameful Epic*, 1993, mixed media, 84 x 63 x 32 inches | 213 x 160 x 81 cm

“From Bunnies to Bondage: Nayland Blake’s Unruly Archive Returns at Mathew Marks Gallery, NYC.” *ArteFuse*, October 9, 2025.



☐ Nayland Blake, *Untitled (Bubbles)*, 1991, Seven paperback books and plexiglass, 7 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 4 1/2 inches | 19 x 17 x 11 cm

There's also a sense of communal dialogue. Works by Frederick Weston, Judith Scott, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and others appear alongside Blake's, creating an intergenerational chorus of voices. The curatorial gesture underscores Blake's role not only as artist but as connector, situating their practice within a lineage of queer and outsider resistance.

This work, *50 Minutes* (2025), transforms the language of therapy and BDSM into a site of self-examination. The black leather bench—part shrink's couch, part dungeon furniture—anchors the room, its chains and locks suggesting both restraint and safety. A dangling microphone and mirror add a sense of surveillance and introspection, as if the viewer were

“From Bunnies to Bondage: Nayland Blake’s Unruly Archive Returns at Mathew Marks Gallery, NYC.” *ArteFuse*, October 9, 2025.



📺 Nayland Blake, *Gorge*, 1998, digital video (color, sound), 60 minutes

Walking through, the viewer is alternately seduced, unsettled, and disarmed. One is reminded that Blake's art has never been about easy answers but about holding contradictions—pleasure and shame, intimacy and performance—in the same breath. This show reaffirms their position as one of contemporary art's most uncompromising truth-tellers.

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CULTURED MAGAZINE

THE CRITICS' TABLE ART CLOSE LOOKS

Nayland Blake's 'Sex in the 90s' is Critic David Rimanelli's Chelsea Pick

In three shows staged across both of Matthew Marks's 22nd Street addresses, our writer finds the icon of queer conceptualism forging a visual language from bunnies, BDSM, and the art history of the very recent past.

WORDS

David Rimanelli

October 3, 2025



Installation view of "Nayland Blake: Session," Matthew Marks Gallery, 2025. All images courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery. © Nayland Blake

Nayland Blake through October 25, 2025

Matthew Marks Gallery | 522 & 526 West 22nd Street

Just before sitting down to write about Nayland Blake's "Sex in the 90s," a retrospective curated by Beau Rutland at Matthew Marks Gallery—the most major of the presentations in the artist's three-part event this fall—I went back for a last look with a young gay artist whose work in some ways unknowingly

Rimanelli, David. "Nayland Blake's 'Sex in the 90s' is Critic David Rimanelli's Chelsea Pick." *Cultured Magazine*, October 3, 2025.

calls back to Blake's. (Maybe figurative painting isn't exactly in eclipse, but it's not quite the inevitable redoubt of identity anymore. And as it wanes, a recurrence of postconceptualist sensibilities c. 1992 is perhaps unavoidable.) My friend remarked in an anodyne tone, "Cool group show." Is it a *lieu commun* that a Nayland Blake show tends to look like a group show? Their exhibitions rarely read as unified by style or form; instead, they operate like polyphonic theatrical stages wherein disparate objects, moods, and references rub against one another. For Blake, that multiplicity is not an accident but a principle: queerness itself enacted as an aesthetic method.

On view in the focused survey (at the 522 West 22nd Street space) are things as varied as wall-mounted plexiglass boxes encasing groups of mass-market paperbacks (*Women Who Love Too Much*, *Helter Skelter*, and *Myra Breckinridge* among them); a cluster of framed graphite-and-colored pencil drawings; a yellow stuffed bunny with pom-pom Kaposi sarcoma lesions (Go, AIDS!); a David Hockney quotation silk-screened on a chalkboard and reeking of Joseph Kosuth and pedagogy; sculptures composed of steel enclosures resembling small animal pens; a canvas strait jacket-like garment, mocking and adopting "formalism" à la Richard Tuttle.

The through line here isn't visual consistency but subject matter and attitude. Blake's work propounds resistance yet admits subterfuge, as well as evincing an interest both poetic and anthropological in the conventions and paraphernalia of something that an ancient friend of mine used to call "the leather and fetish lifestyle," his tone streaked with acidulous sarcasm. (This friend had his own dungeon. It looked like the *Eagle* re-done by Roger Corman.) *Lifestyle* sounds so retardataire—is Blake's radicalism to restore it to the center? I mean, that is the truth of many of our preoccupations, Toril Moi aside.

In the second, smaller gallery at 526 West 22nd, in the back room (appropriately), an installation of new sculpture, titled "Session," most explicitly draws upon a kink lexicon. Artisanal implements of pleasure/



Installation view of "Nayland Blake: Sex in the 90s," Matthew Marks Gallery, 2025.



Installation view of "Nayland Blake: Session," Matthew Marks Gallery, 2025.

pain and roleplay accessories, both plausible and absurdist, even folkloric, are clipped to wall-spanning lengths of black chain—like Sadean, Brobdingnagian charm bracelets. And, like real, wearable charm bracelets, these too have the air of personal narrative, sentiment, autobiography. It's almost impossible for your art not to if you're gay or queer or trans, etc. However fanciful, fiendish, abstract, vitriolic, or assiduously distant it may be, if it engages the realities of your life, the art inevitably touches upon autobiography—or lifestyle. Francis Bacon went to extremes. Still, for all the fancy gilded frames, his booing Princess Margaret at Lady Rothermere's ball, the endless dinners at Wheeler's and vomiting drinks at the Colony, Bacon painted a pretty quotidian reality too, viz., his lover George Dyer's suicide as it tattily was, with Dyer seated or rather crumpled on the toilet. It's this kitchen-sink and from-the-actual-life grotesquery that gives Bacon's art its certain savor; otherwise, Surrealist and/or Expressionist disaster looks as predetermined or scripted as the characters of commedia dell'arte.

Meanwhile, in the front room, Blake has assembled a group show that serves as both homage and, in a way, prolegomenon to his own oeuvre, including mostly small-ish wall-mounted works, reliefs as much as drawings and paintings, with telling standouts by Betye Saar, Joseph Cornell, Richard Foreman, and Nancy Shaver. Lots of boxes: perversely, Blake's group assembly looks at first glance like a monographic exhibition.

Blake has always understood their art less as a set of objects than as a way of staging relationships—between viewer and prop, history and parody, sex and humor. And, yet another way to describe the work is to foreground how insistently it engages with art history. In “Sex in the 90s,” the references come fast and thick: Dieter Roth’s decomposing chocolate sculptures and installations—he did chocolate bunnies too—Jeff Koons’s finish fetish, PC Richards & Sons vacuums, Pictures Generation-style album-cover art, etc. But what’s remarkable is Blake’s fast and knowing recapitulations of really recent precursors, like, people who are maybe only a half-art-generation “older:” Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Liz Larner, Robert Gober, Christian Marclay, and on and on and on. I made a list for “Sex in the ’90s”: 40-odd names. Walking through the show, I saw these echoes before I “saw” sex, insistently, irremediably. Frankly, I prefer Blake’s work the first way—though I know they’re genuinely and profoundly engaged with sexuality and alterity as a real-life thing, not as a dog-eared copy of *Yale French Studies*. (I love *Yale French Studies* and I’m sure Blake knows the special issue edited by Shoshana Felman, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, 1977.)

That delay in finding the eros here is revealing. “Sex in the 90s” calls up a decade of AIDS panic and safe-sex campaigns, feminist sex wars, protease drug cocktails, and Madonna’s Sex book—not to mention MTV’s documentary series of the same name. For Blake personally, it was the decade of writing



Nayland Blake, *Untitled* (*Men Who Hate Women & the Women Who Love Them, How to Have a Smarter Baby, Understanding Media, Women Who Love Too Much, The Pill Book*), 2001.

Rimanelli, David. “Nayland Blake’s ‘Sex in the 90s’ is Critic David Rimanelli’s Chelsea Pick.” *Cultured Magazine*, October 3, 2025.



Nayland Blake, *Controversy* 1972-1977-1982, 1993.

porn reviews, co-curating the landmark queer exhibition “In a Different Light,” and forging the rabbit-prop and dungeon-studio vocabulary that remains central to their work. But the exhibition doesn’t simply illustrate that history. Instead, it filters the ’90s through the formal strategies of Blake’s contemporaries, producing objects that are haunted by both sexual politics and art-world memory.

This is why it would be a mistake to boil Blake down to manifest content. They are too smart, and frankly too gay, for such a straightforward reading. Their work thrives on the slippage between minimalism and dungeon, plush toy and fetish object, pastiche and sincerity. The bunnies and the chains all operate as props, placing the viewer in a scene that is never quite stable. You think you know what you’re looking at, then the script changes.

If a Blake show feels like a group show, it’s because their practice insists on porousness, on the way queer culture builds itself out of appropriation and recoding. They make art that looks plural because its subjects are plural and fluid: Desire, identity, and history refuse to stay in one place. And, of autobiography, the relationship between art and life, the artist explained in a 2013 interview, “If you look at that work as a way of mapping a simplistic relationship to identity it’s not useful. I think what we need now is incoherence. The drive to narrative closure is one of the things that is incredibly debilitating at this moment.”

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Art in America

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Nayland Blake's Conceptually Horny Work Traverses the Dungeon and the Studio

By McKenzie Wark September 15, 2025 5:00am



View of Nayland Blake's 2025 exhibition at Matthew Marks, New York.
Photo Lucas Blalock

Two things stick out for me about Nayland Blake's work. The first is that while there's a kind of cerebral, conceptual dimension to it, there's still something emotional, sexual or visceral going on. The other thing is that there's usually a kind of queerness in play, but it doesn't have much to do with "representation." These two qualities feed on—and get off on—each other. Conceptual, but also horny; horny, but for abstract pleasures. You can see for yourself in their huge show at Mathew Marks Gallery in New York through October 2025, or read about it in their own words in *My Studio*

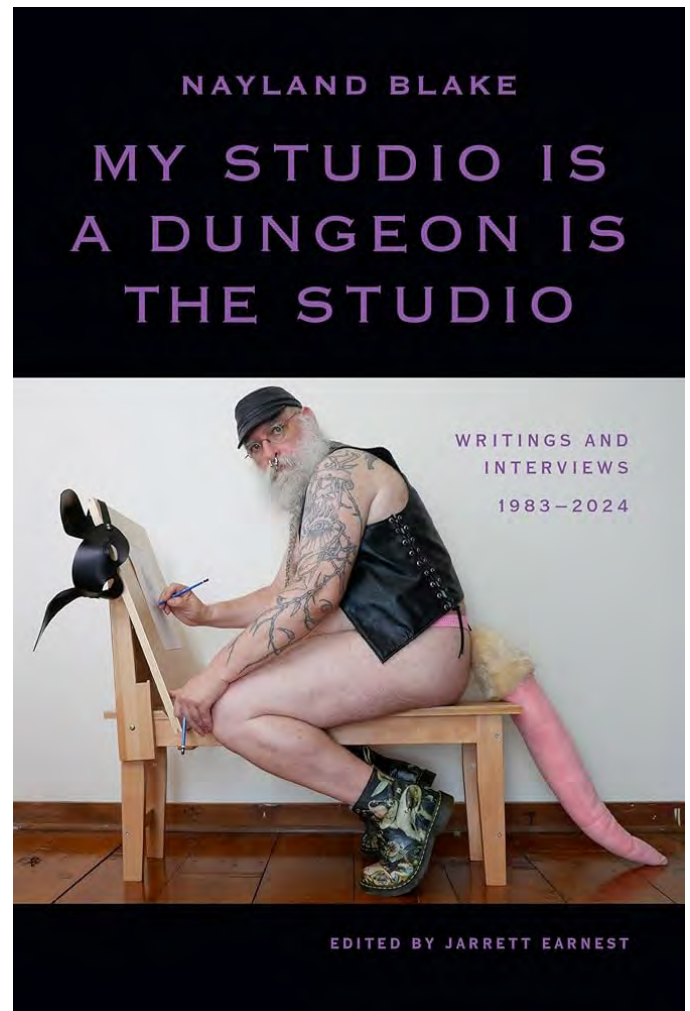
Wark, McKenzie. "Nayland Blake's Conceptually Horny Work Traverses the Dungeon and the Studio." *Art in America*, September 15, 2025.

Is a Dungeon Is the Studio: Writings and Interviews 1983–2024, out next month.

Blake is my age. We both came of age at the start of the '80s. It's thrilling to see the artist negotiate their way through the artistic and intellectual tendencies of the last 40 years, and to do it so well. They always seem to ride the edge between the inside and outside of any given cultural or aesthetic moment. Never quite seduced by the new thing, but not claiming the purity of innocence of the outsider. It's the collage method applied to history itself.

They're always looking for the diagonal move, a way to mess with the habits of thought of a moment. Take, for example, the grand and now enduring obsession that is psychoanalysis, and its *idée fixe* of "sexuation." In a 1989 essay reproduced in *My Studio Is a Dungeon Is the Studio* and in their installation *The Schreber Suite*, Blake follows Freud and Lacan by taking up the case of Judge Daniel Paul Schreber, via Schreber's *Memoir of My Nervous Illness* (1903).

Blake: "Schreber is compelled not only to become female but to become a woman engaged in the sexual act with herself, to provide God with the spectacle of a doubled femaleness. Duchamp's women exist without orifices, and their virginity exists as an ironic critique of the phallus. In both senses, these are models of a woman who does not lack. They are not castrated males but truly other. I would like, at this point, to suggest a line of inquiry about homosexuality and meaning. I see in the homosexual, as well, certain aspects of a refusal of the phallus, and I wonder if this refusal can be the genesis for a different type of meaning—one that is aleatory, connective, and diffuse, rather than centralized. It may well be that when conclusion is denied, the way is opened for horizontal reading." For Blake, "these structures are not equivalent but are rather variants of the same myth, a myth of potential redemption denied. I have attempted to construct yet another variant of this myth in my work...."



Courtesy Duke University Press

I like this. The suggestion of another way to read Schreber, a connection to weird Duchampian femininity, and on to a hint of what the actually queer wing of queer culture could become. I learn a lot from how Blake looks at other artists and writers. The way they inhabit the subject sympathetically and yet draw back. Blake sees Jack Smith, for instance, as more of a religious than an artistic outsider, always siding with decay against form, against the encrusting power of culture industries.

Blake: “[Smith’s] work rests on two aesthetic assertions: first, that art is being made around us all the time—every time we arrange something—and that everyone is acting all the time; and, second, that the organizations supposedly dedicated to presenting, preserving, and fostering art are actually engaged in endless attempts to stamp it out and bury it beneath layers of plaster and crust.”

Blake has to think and feel their way out of some of the enduring tropes of gay culture to arrive somewhere else. A queer aesthetic that, for example, isn’t defined by (or entirely defined against) camp, of which Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963) is probably the apotheosis.

Blake: “Camp is a thorny subject, a cultural gesture that both subverts and reinforces convention, but one thing is true: Camp has become an impossibility today. Camp, as Jack Smith practiced it, is an attitude of profound seriousness and connoisseurship directed at an inappropriate subject.”

There are no longer any inappropriate subjects. The forensic practices of fine art, rendering everything into its material, combined with the internet’s incessant harvesting of every last morsel of culture, leaves nothing outside its economies. Even camp itself becomes internal to both the high and low culture machines.

As for drag, that draws Blake’s most cancelable take: “Much of the performing tradition of today’s drag is derived from vaudeville and, ultimately, from minstrelsy:



View of Nayland Blake's 2025 exhibition at Matthew Marks, New York.

Photo Lucas Blalock

working-class forms of gender and racial anxiety. In the same way that donning blackface allowed whites to illustrate both their desire for and difference from Black bodies and Black cultural expression, most drag allows men the luxury of playing at female identification without losing phallic power.”

Finding ways to sidestep phallic power is a through line in Blake. Finding that potential as something always on the margins, neither in nor out, of gay cultures (plural). Neither gay homosexuality, nor trans femininity. Somewhere off the grid of sex and its representation altogether.

“What does liberation look like?” This crucial question comes up in the latter part of the book, and it turns out it’s been running through the whole inquiry. One dimension of it is the question of what a specifically queer liberation looks like. Blake: “We may define ourselves by our struggles, but it is in the compilation of our joys that we fly free.”

Blake: “The civil rights model and representational politics in this country lead us to ask the following questions: Where’s my slice of the status quo? Is it the same size as my neighbor’s? Is it predicated on an assumption that I am supposed to be both myself and the representation of a social group, an abstraction?”

Blake at their most programmatic doubles down on this: “Fuck the status quo. I don’t want my fair share of ignorance, jingoism, and billionaire worship. I’m not waiting outside the chapel to get my love validated. I got into the cocksucking racket because I thought I wouldn’t have to worry about any of that crap.”

Much of the energy of Blake’s writing, like their art, comes from kink and furry communities. The dungeon meets the studio.

Blake: “Let’s talk about the spaces where meaning can happen, the spaces that inform



View of Nayland Blake's 2025 exhibition at Matthew Marks, New York.

Photo Lucas Blalock

my making: One is empty, white, brimming with illumination and possibility at the top of five extra tall stories of stairs. A studio. The other is dim, cluttered with tools and toys, filled with sound, but set up so that sound cannot escape. A dungeon. I need both because very different things happen in each, and one without the other leaves me arid and incomplete.”

There are refreshing ways here of playing along the borders between art, politics, and queer sexual life. I learned a lot from Blake that I find I can apply to the frictions I find between writing, rave culture, and transsexuality. I put an enthusiastic “hell yes” in the margin next to this: “The tools developed by kinky people would be helpful in an art world that professes an interest in social movements and interactions but remains quite naive about how to cultivate trust and safety.”

If you’re involved in any kind of queer demimonde, there’s a constant demand to account for what this contributes to “real” politics. As if what we’d created there through the difficult art of both expressing and meshing desires wasn’t already a laboratory of another space for another life. An aesthetic of how life can be *expressed*, not represented.

To talk of “representation” and “identity” is to be stuck in an old timey realist aesthetics before it’s even a politics. One not without its uses, but limiting for an artist, and probably limited as a politics as well. It’s an artist’s job (or a writer’s job) to propose other kinds of possible connection between the aesthetic and the political, not merely to decorate the latter with the former in the style to which it is long accustomed.

There is, however, a pedagogic dimension to Blake. Teaching in a classroom or a dungeon are different practices, but trust and safety feature in both in specific ways. It’s delightful to see how these kinds of teaching inform each other, particularly in scripts Blake wrote for their performances. Editor Jarrett Earnest has mixed in interviews and brief comments from Blake that help set the scene for the more performative pieces.

Blake: “From very early on, I have had the vision of a utopic space: a living space where art could be created, where it could be displayed, and where it could generate more art. An environment that grew and changed through the actions of its occupants. I’ve spent a lot of time daydreaming about that space, and over the years I have had the chance to try to concretize various versions of those dreams. I’d say that all my work is an attempt to call that utopia into being.”

This book is itself such a utopia.

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HYPERALLERGIC

Guide

12 Art Books to Read This Fall

A Louise Bourgeois biography, Joe Sacco's latest graphic investigation, a Wifredo Lam catalog, a study of diasporic Nigerian women artists, and more.

Lakshmi Rivera Amin, Lisa Yin Zhang, Hrag Vartanian, Natalie Haddad, Bridget Quinn and Alexandra M. Thomas
September 18, 2025



Curl up with an art book this autumn, from Kareem Khubchandani's drag field guide to Joe Sacco's new graphic investigation. (image edit Shari Flores/Hyperallergic)

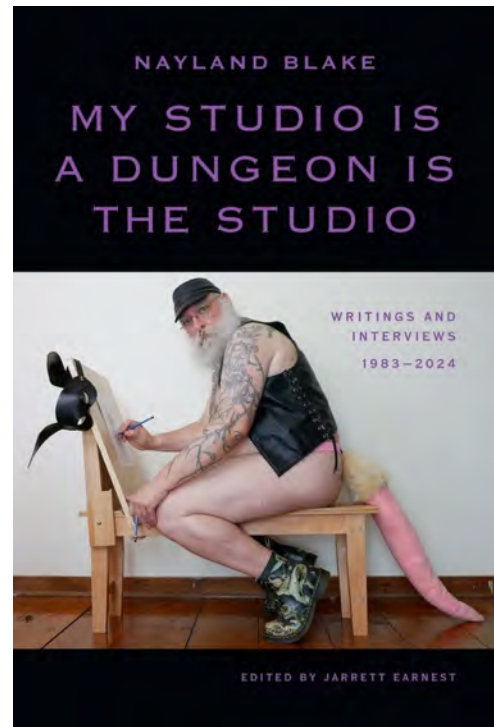
Autumn, in all its crisp color, has long been a muse for artists and poets — and for good reason. The shorter days and early darkness often cast a spell, encouraging us to spend more time indoors and chip away at our to-be-read piles. These 12 new and forthcoming art books are well worth adding to that list, offering insights into the decades-long practice of Nayland Blake, the curatorial vision of the late Okwui Enwezor, the artistic life of Louise Bourgeois, and more topics we're eager to explore. We're also keeping an eye out for other upcoming releases, including *Native Visual Sovereignty: A Reader on Art and Performance* (Dancing Foxes Press, November 11); Brandon Taylor's novel *Minor Black Figures* (Riverhead Books, October 14); and innumerable others. Get your pre-orders and library holds in now — and happy reading! —*Lakshmi Rivera Amin*

Haddad, Natalie. "12 Art Books to Read This Fall: My Studio Is a Dungeon Is the Studio: Writings and Interviews, 1983–2024 by Nayland Blake, edited by Jarrett Earnest." *Hyperallergic*, September 18, 2025.

***My Studio Is a Dungeon Is the Studio: Writings and Interviews, 1983-2024* by Nayland Blake, edited by Jarrett Earnest**

The words “queer” and “transgressive” are common in the art world these days, and all too often they’ve become diluted shadows of their former selves. But once upon a time, they had real meaning, and they were (and are) embodied by Nayland Blake, one of the OGs of queer and transgressive art. Blake’s career has been crucial in bringing topics once on the margins of art to the center of conversations — not only queerness, but also BDSM, pornography, cosplay, the nuances of gender and race, and more. This collection of writings and interviews spanning 40 years offers valuable insight into the artist’s processes and preoccupations. It also opens the door to subjects that many people are still hesitant to discuss. As the title declares, there’s no separation between the studio and the dungeon here. If you’re already a Blake fan, this book is a welcome opportunity to peek inside their mind. If you’re new to their art, take it as an invitation (leather and latex optional). —NH

Duke University Press, October 21, 2025



THE NEW YORKER

NEXT ART PROBLEMS



The multidisciplinary artist Nayland Blake was once a child gazing in wonder at Alexander Calder's "circus" in the lobby of the Whitney Museum. "Who's the circus now?" Blake said the other day, some fifty years later, gesturing around a conference room across from the museum's education center. Blake, bearish, Merlin-bearded, soft-spoken in the manner of a blacksmith teaching kindergartners, was preparing for a session in their performance series, "Got an Art Problem?," part of this year's Whitney Biennial.

In June, Blake threw a "Gender Discard Party" in the museum's lobby, to which guests were invited to "bring your own baggage" and dance away the woes of classification, in view of the artist's "Rear Entry," a reproduction of the door to the Mineshaft, the former gay club in the meatpacking district. Blake thought the curators would never go for "Rear Entry." "But they were, like, 'Sounds great, where do you see it going?'" Right past the gift shop.

On the third floor, "Got an Art Problem?" consists of scheduled tête-à-têtes—more intimate than office hours, less clinical than therapy—in which artists, community groups, and Whitney staff divulge to Blake their most gnawing creative crises, in plain sight of gallerygoers. Blake harbors great respect for museum staff; they were the heroes who looked out for Blake five years ago, when the artist dressed as a bison-bear chimera and stood in the elevator of the New Museum, entreating riders to affix

pins to their hide. "I couldn't see a whole lot in the suit," they recalled.

Blake asked the guests to illustrate their art problems. One re-created "Massacre of the Innocents" in a whirl of stick figures; another sketched a smudge of charcoal clocks. Some suffered from a lack of time, others from too much. Many clients were suffering from what Blake called a "block."

Blake's six-o'clock appointment arrived: an artist who goes by Zaun, and works in the visitor-and-member-experience department. They wore a gray hoodie with the Whitney's logo on it. Blake leaned forward and asked about Zaun's childhood.

In their native Korea, Zaun said, they'd had little encouragement to pursue art. "I was just a troubled teen-ager," Zaun said. "It wasn't until I was a high-school sophomore that I really questioned the meaning of life." They decided that it probably had something to do with art. But their parents weren't enthused.

"That is a big one," Blake said.

"The deal was that I major in graphic design," Zaun said.

"Because people always need graphic designers," Blake said.

During a school trip to Italy, Zaun stumbled into the Venice Biennale. The contemporary exhibition humbled them—Lee Bul's wall of bagged fish, Louise Bourgeois's severed head. "I couldn't believe you could live a life like that," Zaun recalled.

"I'm getting a little teary," Blake said.

A covey of teen girls peered into the conference room. One walked over to the "Art Problem" placard, then looked at her friends and shrugged.

"Can you speak a little more about your conflict?" Blake asked.

Zaun pulled a notebook from their bag and read aloud, "In one sentence, 'My art problem is: How to Maintain the Autonomy of My Art Work.'"

"I see, and how do you feel this problem is expressing itself?"

"At the core of my work is the grid. The grid has been the symbol of the twentieth century, but now it's the next century. I'm looking to visualize the living grid," Zaun said.

"Hmm, right." Blake nodded and paused. They asked, "What is a game?" Zaun readied a pen over a blank notebook page to record what came next.

"A game is a system of rules that organize behavior," Blake said. "Successful games have rules that are easily legible, but not so rigid that you can determine the outcome from the beginning. You can't look at the setup of a chessboard and know how it'll end. What's delightful is seeing somebody operate within those rules and yet do this unexpected thing."

"Understand . . . the . . . system but . . . outcome unpredictable," Zaun repeated, scribbling. The problem had been solved.

"We've run long," Blake said, glancing at the clock.

After Zaun left, Blake reminisced about their own time studying art at Bard. The Abstract Expressionist Agnes Martin had come to campus to deliver a lecture and conduct studio visits: "I was probably nineteen or twenty, this very brainy student who had constructed a whole line about why I was making what I was making and how it was all related to history. Agnes Martin comes in and I start giving her my spiel. I went on and on—she just let me talk myself out. I expected to be patted on the head. Then she looked around the studio and said, 'You think too much about other people,' and walked out."

—Hannah Seidlitz

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Frieze



As 'No Wrong Holes', NAYLAND BLAKE's most comprehensive survey to date, runs at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, *Shiv Kotecha* examines the artist's three-decade practice, which revels in the infinite variations of identity and pleasure

BEAR HUG

THIS PAST SUMMER, I spent a muggy morning with the artist Nayland Blake at their central Brooklyn apartment, where they've lived for the past 17 years. On their walls hung a few drawings by Tom of Finland, a graphic painting by Margaret Kilgallen, columns of collectible baseball caps and several hooks for leather harnesses. Piles of books were stacked at eye level, while a collection of meerschaum and chillum pipes lay in a bowl on the mantel. Hidden below the artist's great beard, a bubblegum-pink shirt advertised a pigunicorn, with a smiley face for its snout. I flipped through several binders of Blake's drawings, which, since 2015, have become a daily routine. Some are minimal sketches of orifices with protest signs sticking out of them: 'NO WRONG HOLE,' reads one. Some depict decorative scenes and fluffy animals; others celebrate what sex and gen-

der might feel like. 'Cunt Envy Is Real!' reads the caption for one early drawing; 'A Guy I Like to Fuck' reads another, in which the artist is portrayed naked, smoking a pipe and strapped to a corner. As Blake's retrospective, 'No Wrong Holes', was opening at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, they spoke to me about the freedom granted by writing and drawing which, in their words, 'can transform and transmute bodies' and 'means I get to have a cunt, too!'

Blake's remarkable sculptures, videos, performances, drawings and writing revel in the infinite modes of communal pleasure and in the attendant transmutations of gender that they allow. Furry costumes, mangled puppets, marionettes, leather restraints and other props populate the artist's work, often taking the form of animals or animal-hybrids. For Blake, who is nonbinary and pan-

Birthday Present, 1993, mixed-media sculpture with metal chain and plastic tag, 8.5 × 7.9 × 4.7 cm. Courtesy: © Nayland Blake, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; photograph: Elon Schoenholz

sexual, the child of a white mother and a black father, the practices initiated by queer subcultural communities – such as kinky play and furry fandom – establish the foundations of an art that traverses possible constructions and reconstructions of identity, both within and without the category of ‘human’. In relishing the forms a body might want to take – from a femme Bugs Bunny to the racially ambiguous Br’er Rabbit and a bloodless homunculus – Blake draws our attention to the ways in which commodities can be wrenched from the morass of our cultural debris only to become, as the novelist Kathy Acker wrote in *Low: Good and Evil in the Work of Nayland Blake* (1990), ‘commodities unrelated to meaning. Commodities that, at best, pretend to mean.’

Acker reads Blake’s works as if they were detached from normative modes of making meaning and, instead, suspended in a nether, libidinous region ‘between hysteria and restraint’. The operations of pleasure, both Acker and Blake recognize, do not always express themselves in terms we already know: a new vocabulary may need to be invented. Take Blake’s early sculpture *Restraint Chair* (1989), for instance. To a sleek Breuer chair – the classic coil with two taut pieces of black leather for one’s back and buttocks – Blake attaches extra leather restraints, presumably to hold the sitter’s arms and legs. Rope hangs below the base of the chair for another user or play partner. Blake conflates Bauhaus minimalism with restraint play, turning sleek modernist design into an erogenous zone of sexual enactment. The work articulates their private preferences concerning sexual behaviour while also functioning within a porous public space – that of the gallery – as a realization of possibilities originally created within queer spaces. As Blake writes in a 1995 essay about Tom of Finland’s drawings of well-hung, half-naked men, these works provide ‘the props for the viewer to hang a fantasy on rather than a specific person for the viewer to be aroused by’.

Born in 1960 in New York, Blake attended Bard College before moving west, in 1982, to attend California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Los Angeles, where they received their MFA. After graduating in 1984, they moved to San Francisco, a city that promised a bounty of queer-centric communities. They showed at, and



THIS PAGE ABOVE
Restraint Chair, 1989.
Breuer chromed metal, leather,
chains, steel cable and mirror,
84 × 61 × 62 cm. Courtesy:
© Nayland Blake, Grey Art
Gallery, New York University,
and Matthew Marks Gallery;
photograph:
Nicholas Papananias

THIS PAGE BELOW
Crossing Object (inside Gnomes),
2017–18, installation
view, New Museum, New York.
Courtesy: © Nayland Blake
and Matthew Marks Gallery;
photograph: Scott Rudd

OPPOSITE PAGE ABOVE
Dust, 1988, print on
polyester, 1.3 × 1.9 m. Courtesy:
© Nayland Blake and Matthew
Marks Gallery; photograph:
Elon Schoenholz

OPPOSITE PAGE BELOW
6.1.16, 2016, coloured pencil on
paper, 31 × 23 cm. Courtesy:
© Nayland Blake and Matthew
Marks Gallery; photograph:
Alan Wiener



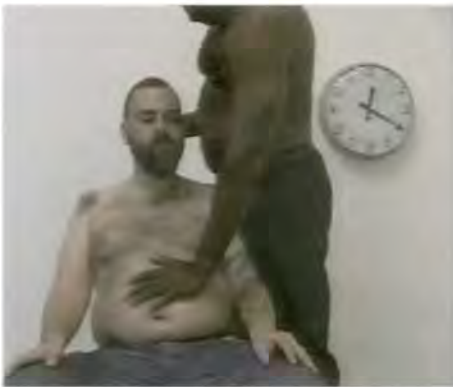
“Blake’s sexual and social experiments became extensions of the ways they worked in the studio.”



eventually curated exhibitions and worked as the programme coordinator for, New Langton Arts in the city’s SoMa district – then a sparsely populated but cruisey area where small galleries, like New Langton Arts, were neighbours with various kinky bars and clubs. Blake recalls seeing men ‘right outside the gallery window’ visiting The EndUp, a nearby leather bar, ‘where they’d pop the trunks of their cars and change out of business attire into leather gear’, harnessed or ball-gagged, ready to explore the night. Blake joined the more inclusive bear scene, which had broken off from the militant – and predominantly white – leather community to make room for the scruffier, hairier, bigger bodies that didn’t fit in. ‘I love those cultural moments’, the artist told me, ‘where a group of people [...] come to a definition of themselves and the things that they like doing.’ According to Blake, San Francisco was New York’s biggest blind spot in the early 1990s: the former’s art, literature and music scenes were, like the gay bars and clubs, scrappier and more hybridized, without the visible definitions demanded by their respective markets. While the artist’s peers at CalArts stayed in Los Angeles or rushed to the east coast to hustle and sell work – or get lost in the process – Blake chose a place where they could fuck as well as ‘fuck up for a little while’, as they told me, ‘without too much scrutiny’.

Blake moved fluidly between these aesthetic scenes and the emergent leather, bear and BDSM communities; the artist’s sexual and social experiments became extensions of the ways they worked in the studio. The ritualistic forms of permission enacted within kinky bars – consent, for example, or revealing your HIV status – became conduits by which Blake could, in early performance and video works, explore the rhetoric of play that these communities engaged with in offering a safe place to express their fears and anxieties in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis. *Negative Bunny* (1994), for instance, is a 30-minute video in which the artist ventriloquizes a plush red rabbit that manically repeats its negative HIV status, cajoling the viewer’s sexual

“Gorge is tense, as the question of who’s on top – who has the power in the situation – keeps flipping back and forth.”



Gorge, 1998, film stills. Courtesy: © Nayland Blake and Matthew Marks Gallery

affections: “Cus yea, why not, come on. I was just tested a little while ago, two or three hours ago, and they said I was negative, and I’ve got a note somewhere – I’ve got it written down that I’m negative – and I really, really feel like you should really face up to this, and let me, and why not? What the hell, it’ll be fun, because like I told you, I’m really good at it, and I’m negative, and I’m really negative. I’m really, really, really negative.” Blake’s caricature, perverse and tragicomic, calls attention to the modes of refusal possible within a sexual encounter as well as to the false hegemonies that delimit the pleasure that can be had by non-white or not-muscular bodies, even within the space of queer sex and inclusion. The sculpture *Hole Variations* (1996) provides an antidote. It is comprised of a wooden slab set atop two emptied Hershey’s chocolate syrup tins. Several holes are drilled through the wood and five black and brown abstract cloth figures, with one or two buttons for eyes, are squeezed through the holes and tucked in different positions – none of which is ‘wrong’.

This dynamic is, perhaps, most apparent in *Gorge* (1998) – an hour-long video and, throughout the 1990s, a durational performance staged in various galleries – in which Blake, who is biracial but white-presenting, sits shirtless on a chair and omnivorously accepts whatever is given to him by a ‘feeder’, who is, in this case, a recognizably black man. (The performance is a visual play on Édouard Manet’s *Olympia*, 1863, in which a nude white woman reclines while a black servant hovers by her side, proffering a bouquet of flowers.) To each of the feeder’s offerings in *Gorge*, Blake acquiesces: slices of pizza, tummy rubs, a sandwich popped into their mouth, a towel wiped across their beard, glasses of wine and milk. These actions incorporate the subcultural behaviours of ‘gaining and encouraging’ – a fetish community to which Blake and their fellow performer belonged. The video is tense, as the question of who’s on top – who has the power in the situation – keeps flipping back and forth. By presenting various modes of interaction, including some that carry potential risk, Blake’s performance gives both participants the chance to discover the limits of their engage-

ment with one another, and raises questions about how both race and consent are enacted.

In the more recent video *Stab* (2013), Blake depicts the ambient ways in which queer friendships can enable both physical and psychological healing. Here, the camera follows the hands of the artist Liz Collins (whose practice at the time involved 'knitting interventions') as she repairs a sock monkey, an important memento of Blake's relationship with their former partner, Philip Horvitz, which had been mauled by Blake's dog. Offscreen, Blake talks to Collins and two lesbian friends about pets, queer coupledness and their shared interest in cult films. (They laugh about one movie in which a twink is, like the puppet, 'fed to the dogs'.) It's a sweet scene of repair, of re-memberance, which reveals how queer relations, like the scenes of sexual play in Blake's other works, are enabled by expressions of empathy and the mutual acknowledgement of trust.

For *Crossing Object (inside Gnomes)* (2017–18), performed as part of the exhibition 'Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon' at the New Museum in New York, Blake wore an animal-hybrid costume – part bear, part bison – of unfixed gender, and stood in the museum's elevator. There, the artist held out a tray of badges for visitors to whisper secrets into before pinning them to the creature's fur. Then, once gallery-goers had given their permission, Blake would hug them. This is a work that speaks to its audience about sex and protection in a language all lovers would like to hear.

As with these video and performance works, Blake's sculptures restage social and sexual situations familiar to the kink and BDSM communities, but often with their terms – and accoutrements – appearing only in scrambled quotation. In *Dust* (1987–ongoing), for instance, Blake rearranged the letters of the name of an iconic San Francisco leather bar, The Stud, so that it read 'Dust' and hung it, as a flag, at a gallery just three blocks from the bar. By offering a potential slippage – whereby the audience might see the artwork before encountering its real-world referent – *Dust* enables its viewers to engage with the world of the other without imposing a prescriptive reading. 'The delayed reaction', Blake told me, 'is a thing that art can do really well, but we normally don't let happen.' A similar effect occurs in *Flahp* (1990), a neon sculpture that spells out the titular portmanteau in lowercase letters, conflating a sexual position (a 'flip') with a possible furry accoutrement (a 'flap') and the quick, breathy utterance that might accompany penetration or flatulent release ('ah'). By opening up the word, Blake dissociates it from its purpose as a code or identifying marker and renders it – like a body – a composite of feelings, movements and daily functions. The slippage leads to something new.

Blake told me that their interests have returned lately to the comics and cartoons they grew up with – not only as images, but as stand-ins for their cultural and racial heritages. They described becoming transfixed by the figure of the bunny and its various connotations within popular culture: specifically Uncle Remus's Br'er Rabbit, a trickster character whose songs resemble racist minstrel songs and whose 'tricks' are rooted in folkloric tales from western Africa. Blake's practice indulges in derivation and in the minute shifts of meaning that any one image can try on or dispose of. Upsetting received images of wholesomeness (the icons of our youth) by relocating them within the contexts of BDSM and kink, as well as within a history of racial caricature, Blake's works prompt viewers to consider how desire is as tied to childhood experiences and to the operations of gender across racial divides as it is to the erotically charged present. The artist's daily drawing practice has the gleeful abandon of a fan-fiction writer who – rather than contribute to the culture industry's churning-out of character-themed commodities – enthusiastically creates artworks that can be shared with other fans and artists at themed conventions and on online forums.

Blake also teaches workshops within the kink community: one on cigar and pipe play, one on using impact and one titled 'The Artist's Way to Designing Scenes', which shows students how to set up an S&M scenario to facilitate both pleasure and safety. When I confessed that I was keen to engage in the kink and leather scenes, but had been hesitant due to attendant anxieties (my fursona being more sheep than bunny), Blake responded reassuringly: 'You don't have to overextend yourself, honey.' They then gave me a whole set of protocols and resources that might help me figure out my own desires in arenas outside of the bar or club; I could go to a 'munch', for instance – a casual daytime meet-up of kinky fellows, where I could explore my interests without the imperative to play. Blake's penchant for interactivity is intrinsic to their exploration of understanding how a body feels in different circumstances – in costume or furs, tied up or strapped down with restraints that serve only to liberate our minds. 'It's more than okay,' Blake assured me, 'to make up your own fun.'

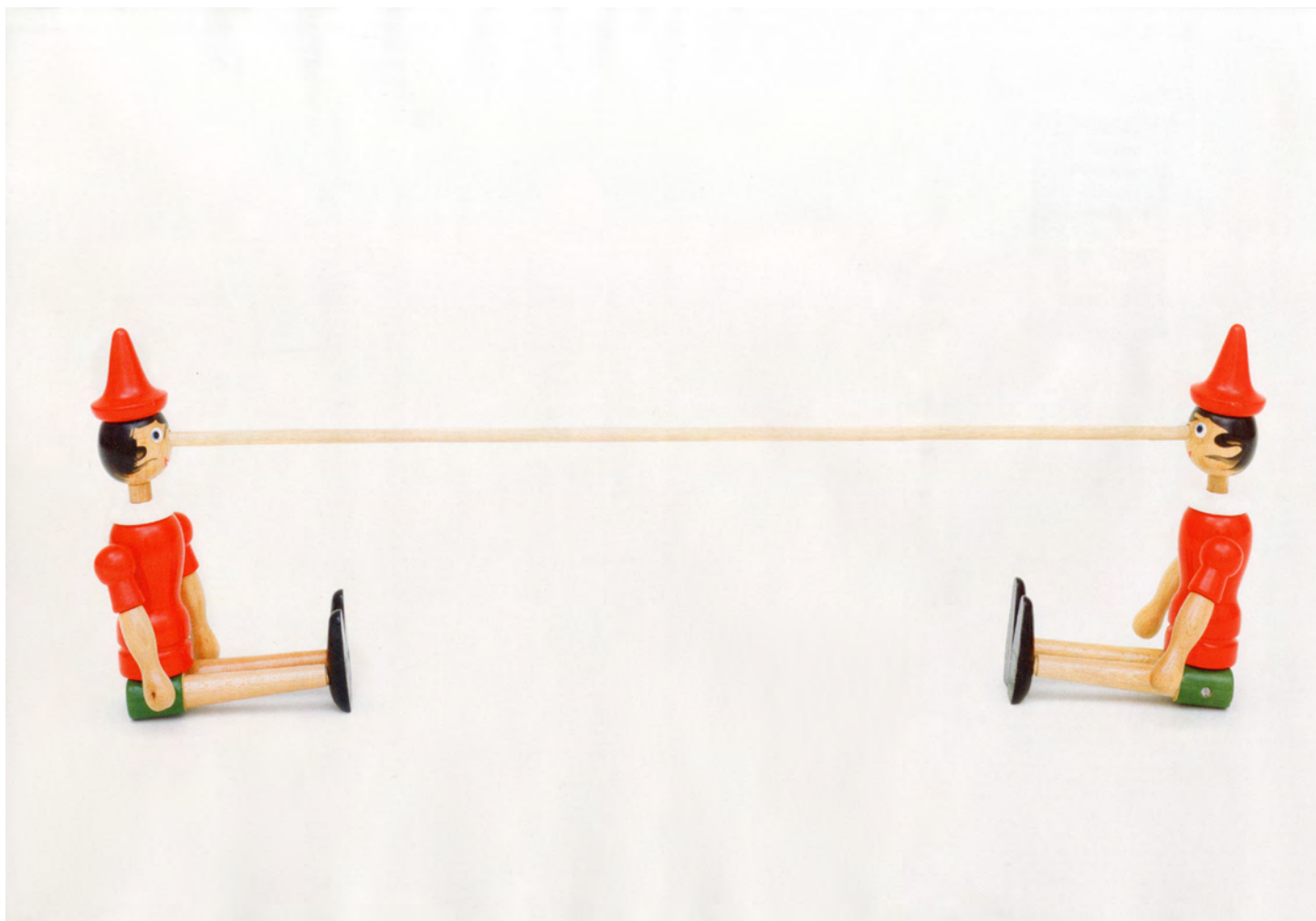
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NAYLAND BLAKE is an artist, educator and curator based in New York, USA. 'No Wrong Holes', at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA, is the most comprehensive survey of the artist's work to date and is on view until 26 January.

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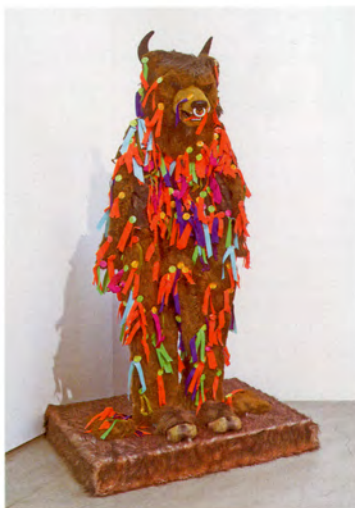
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ARTFORUM



Nayland Blake, *Untitled (Pinocchio)*, 1994, painted wood, 11 x 32 x 4 1/2".

DECEMBER 2019 **211**



Left: Nayland Blake, *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)*, 2017, mixed media, approx. 72 x 34 x 34".
Below: Nayland Blake, *Mirror Restraint*, 1988–89, mirror, steel, leather, two mirrors, steel pole.
Installation view. Photo: Jeff McLane. Right: Nayland Blake, *Dust*, 2012, print on polyester, 72 x 49 1/2".



Nayland Blake

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES

Andy Campbell

"NO WRONG HOLES" is the apt title of Nayland Blake's most comprehensive survey to date, on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—apt because it immediately opens onto the wit, optimism, and profundity that characterizes the artist's work. Though ambitious in scope, this survey is not, strictly speaking, the artist's first. That honor goes to Blake's MFA thesis exhibition at CalArts, which was styled as a retrospective with the saccharine title "Nayland Blake, The Wonder Years: 1982–84." Excoriating the growing cult of personality around contemporary artists, Blake opened their show with an enlarged headshot in which they look boyishly queer, with curly hair cascading down their forehead just so. The main event of that retrospective was a reproduction of the most absurdly literal of mythicizing curatorial tactics: Blake installed their own worktable in the gallery. The artist has always been acutely aware of how they and their work may (or may not) be readily consumable within the format of a monographic exhibition.

Be that as it may, the efforts of curator Jamillah James are notable in that her survey eschews the format's most hackneyed schemata—strict chronological ordering, cheesily christened thematic rooms, overt aggrandizement—and instead revels in the materials and concepts that undergird Blake's decades of work. What emerge are thrilling iterations of the artist's thoughts on power, race,

gender, pleasure, and performance, as well as on ingestion, gnomes, and puppetry. The first room contains pieces that explicitly address the erotic significance of various materials associated with power. *Mirror Restraint*, 1988–89, in which an anchored steel bar and attached leather collar are flanked by steel-and-mirror portals, shares space with *Dust*, 2012, a polyester flag bearing the rearranged letters of *STUD*, referring, in this case, to the name of a long-running bar in South of Market, San Francisco. Long on the brink of closure, the venue remains open only because a group of committed queer folks came together to collectively run it. Blake's banner announces their affinity with the space and extols the minor, inconclusive, and dissipated remains of its history. In arranging these works together, James connects the materiality of leather (as a useful erotic extension that complicates binary models of power) with the vicissitudes of communal belonging and coalition politics.

In James's expansive curatorial conceit, weirdness and inconsistency are not merely tolerated but embraced. Such is the case with *Device for Burning Bees and Sugar*, 1990, which shares the sleek stylings of the artist's contemporaneous "kit" assemblages while diverging from them with the inclusion of a bowl of desiccated bee bodies, a material unique to this sculpture. Other kits on view are cool and menacing—*Work Station #5*, 1989, for example, is structured by a small metal table on casters from which dangle cleavers on chains. *Device for Burning Bees and Sugar*, by contrast, suggests an abstract alchemical or homeopathic procedure and is lighter on the erotic force. Another example of a distinctive work in the exhibition is *Untitled*, 2008, an airy assemblage of wire, chain, beads, and plastic, strung together to resemble a Gego sculpture on a disco bender. The work's glamour registers in a queer octave,

with the tacky faux gems and round mirrored sequins standing in for the more heroic masculine materials of some of Blake's other works.

The ICA's survey ends where it begins: with costume's ambivalent significations and uses. The final gallery features the video *Starting Over*, 2000, in which the artist follows tap-dancing instructions while wearing a weighted bunny suit; the sculptural kit *Equipment for a Shameful Epic*, 1993, which contains all the elements needed to stage a Reagan-era political-protest play; and *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)*, 2017, a physical incarnation of the artist's bear-bison "fursona" festooned with ribbons and buttons that index secrets softly spoken to Gnomes during performances at the New Museum in 2017–18. In these works, dressing up is fraught and liberatory (imagine playing Reagan, a political leader whose inaction on the HIV/AIDS pandemic assured its swift growth), an awful gift and solemn heresy. *Starting Over* is particularly moving; the out-of-frame directions are spoken by Blake's then partner Philip Horvitz (a performance artist and choreographer), whom Blake obeys with greater or lesser success given the physical limitations imposed by the 147-pound costume.

In these works, dressing up is fraught and liberatory, an awful gift and solemn heresy.

Hanging above the gallery's exit in large gold plastic letters, and highlighting the tensions that thread through the exhibition, is the phrase IT'S KISS OR KILL, the final words of X's song "We're Desperate." Given Blake's impassioned embrace of a polymorphous perversity, one would hope most viewers will see the exhibition's (literal) final words as a false binary choice. □

"No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake" is on view through January 26, 2020; travels to MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, MA, May 15–July 26, 2020.

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carla

Issue 18



Diehl, Travis. "The Briar and the Tar: Nayland Blake at the ICA LA and Matthew Marks Gallery." *carla*, no. 18, Winter 2019, cover, pp. 10–15.

The Briar and the Tar

Nayland Blake at the ICA LA
and Matthew Marks Gallery

At either end of a stainless-steel industrial countertop are two sprays of white nylon on poles, hacked somewhere between a mop top and a Warhol wig. The table is stocked with three cardboard buckets of tar. *Workstation* (*_baby, _baby*) (2000) stands ready—for what, it's unclear: either a backstage dance routine à la Britney Spears, or to concoct a monstrous asphalt doughboy. Either way, for your safety or your pleasure, a pair of leather cuffs hangs from a chain.

Nayland Blake's 30-year retrospective at the ICA LA, *No Wrong Holes*, bristles with suggestive work. The artist practices a found-object formalism of loops, collars, straps, and restraints; some sculptures demonstrate their potential uses on stuffed toys, while others imply that the viewer could be next. Some look ready to fit the body, others' proportions (such as a series of long poles with cuffs, or a tabletop with a rod in its center) might require some contortions. The results aggressively obey the rules of contemporary art, the better to define their own freedom. This from a queer, mixed-race artist buoyed by the "identity art" of the 1990s, yet—as the present bounty of work makes clear—irreducible to any one moment or movement. Blake is known for their daring collapse of categories, often taking up the formal limits of both art (minimalism, appropriation) and society (repression, bigotry) in the same object. As a result, the petroleum acidity in their work is often sweetly masked and must be sussed out.

The momentum of Blake's formalism is such that even decontextualized lists of their materials can seem

portentous: "Sock monkey and wooden chair"; "Two stuffed bunnies, wood, leather, rope, plastic knife, birthday candles, and plastic bell"; "Steel and gingerbread." The east gallery at the ICA, in fact, features the scent emanating from the gingerbread shingles of a small cabin (*Feeder 2*, 1998), part Brothers Grimm, part Uncle Tom. (Part spiced molasses; part tar.) Blake's work leverages its charged subtext, in which the pain of bondage simmers within the pleasures of BDSM, against its pinioning on the artworld floor and wall.

Just as important as their kineticism, though, is the sculptures' inertia. Meaning arrives in bursts—a stuffed rabbit hanging from a plastic Christmas tree in *Wrong Banyan* (*After P.*) (2000), is obviously lynched—yet it is also viscous, like the six glass bottles of "Brer Rabbit" brand molasses harnessed together in *Molasses Six Pack* (1998). For most folks, that's a lifetime supply—a grotesque amount of syrup. (That is, unless—like Blake—you need to bake enough gingerbread to shingle a small log cabin.) For most folks, too, the thick problematics of those six bottles will take a minute to pour out. Today, molasses conjures up those items printed on its label: pecan pie, a gingerbread man. Molasses also has a history as the sweetener of the poor. Further back, in more colonial times, molasses arrived in the United States from sugar plantations in the Caribbean; it still retains the bitterness of slave-grown commodities.

You may know the story of Br'er Rabbit—a cautionary tale brought to North America by enslaved Africans, racistly deformed into Uncle Remus, then bastardized by Walt Disney—about a wily hare who uses reverse psychology on his captors (a bear and a fox). He convinces them to throw him into the briar patch then breaks out laughing: the briar is his beloved birthplace. You may not remember how Br'er Rabbit got himself in a position to be tossed in the first place. The canny predators, Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear, construct a little black child out of tar (yes, it's a racist story). When Br'er Rabbit, passing on

10

Travis Diehl



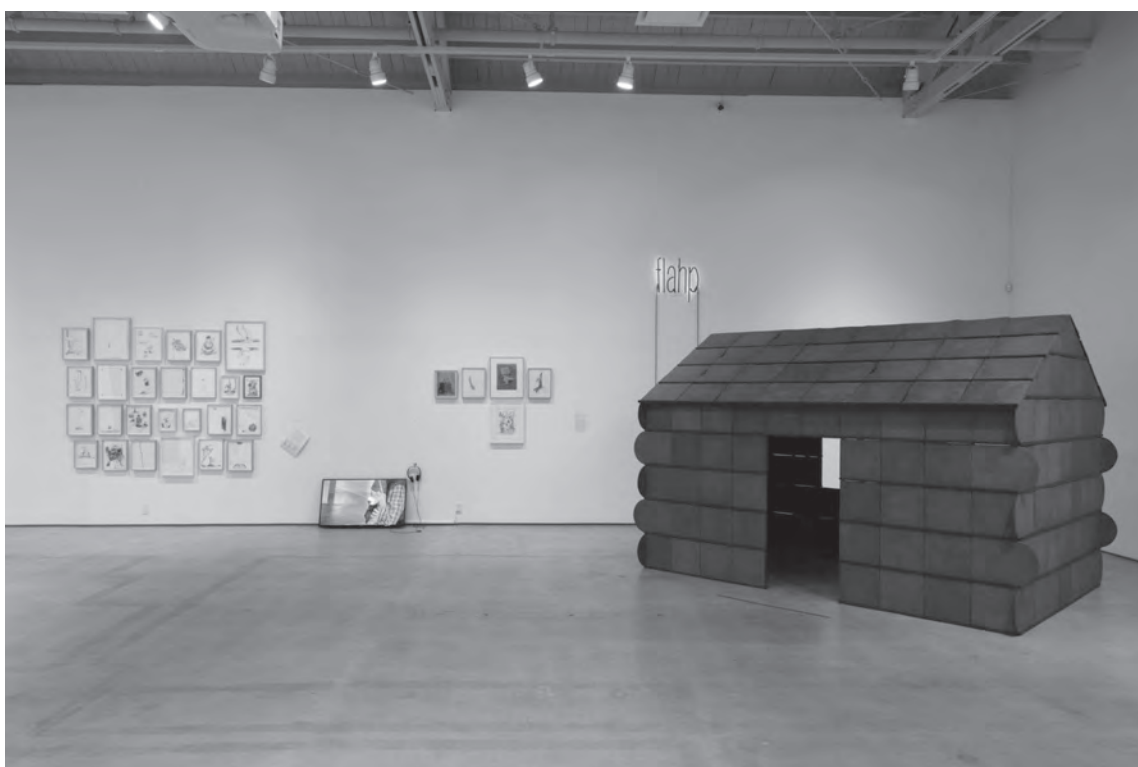
Nayland Blake, *Vanity 1* (2019).
 Wood, steel, tin, plastic, Plexiglas, enamel paint,
 acrylic, and clay, 85.75 x 39 x 10 inches.
 © Nayland Blake. Image courtesy of the artist
 and Matthew Marks Gallery.



Nayland Blake, *Bottom Bunny* (1994).
© Nayland Blake. Courtesy of Matthew Marks
Gallery. Gift to LACMA of Linda and Jerry Janger.
Photo: © Museum Associates/LACMA.



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Above: Nayland Blake, *Starting Over* (video still)
(2000). DVD video projection, 23 minutes.
Image courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks
Gallery, New York.

Below: *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years
of Nayland Blake* (installation view) (2019).
Image courtesy of the artist and ICA LA.
Photo: Jeff McLane.

the road, says “Howdy-do!,” the tar baby won’t reply. Br’er gets hopping mad, punches it, and gets stuck.

Blake’s work falls somewhere between the tar baby and the briar patch. The artist approaches the structures of contemporary art with a gleeful, unbound quality, playful, and trickster-ish—and they are equally willing to confront moral stickiness, at the risk of throwing the wrong punch. *Restraint Shoes* (1992) consists of five shiny, black, leather shoes chained to the wall at a single point: enough for permutations of two to five individuals. The shoes prompt images of how these figures, anchored together with only a little slack, would negotiate their footwear and, by extension, one another. Legs cross, bodies recline. It’s a little funny; a little sexy, and sinister; a little whatever the viewer brings. Like the rabbit in the bear’s clutches, Blake plays to survive. Installed beside the lynched, stuffed brown rabbit is a video, *Gorge* (1998), that depicts the white-passing artist being force-fed donuts and watermelon by a black-presenting lover/friend, while the bunny hop plays in the background.

Who is the rabbit, to Blake? They seem to have been working that out in a suite of six dozen drawings circa 2000, hung at the ICA in a handful of grids. In one, a thumbnail-sized rabbit is on fire. In another, a cottontail ass is below a sign that reads, “I have betrayed my race.” Race is a big reason for that bunny: Blake points to the stereotype—pinned to Bugs and Br’er alike—that black men are flighty, anal, and sexually obsessed. This stereotype gets a macabre, punny mascot in the video *Negative Bunny* (1994), in which a stuffed brown bunny tries to convince the viewer to sleep with them. Negative, because the bunny is HIV negative; negative, because the answer seems to be no. “Do I remind you of your father? Is that it? Well I’m *not* him,” the bunny prods. Having explored the rabbit as image, as lover, and as legacy, Blake himself puts on the skin. A number of hoods and full costumes at the ICA resemble bear-sized bunnies, like the raver gold *Heavenly Bunny Suit* (1994). In *Costume #4 (Two Act Comedy)* (1992) a pair of

square nylon masks—one in white, one black—are linked together by an arc of chain weighted with a testicular pair of medieval clubs. The eye and mouth holes are the barest slits, stitched with thread, a hint of burning cross.

In their video *Starting Over* (2000), Blake takes on the rabbit image in a feat of endurance. The video begins with the artist on their back being tied into a pillowy white bunny suit. It is weighted with dry beans to equal the 146 pounds of Blake’s partner of many years. Once dressed and standing, the artist begins a rough, heavy clogging routine. A soundtrack of weary footsteps booms in the gallery. The suit’s weight becomes apparent as the performance drags on, and Blake grows visibly exhausted. Wrestling the rabbit, in more ways than one, Blake takes on pain for our pleasure. The rabbit suit, and the idea of *rabbit*, like the distinctly racialized subject, are treated like a debilitating armature daring to be performed.

Blake does one better: they outperform. A concurrent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery compliments Blake’s retrospective with three recent bodies of work. A 2019 series of tall, thin assemblages combine cans, paint, new and old wood, and chains, in arrangements reminiscent of the restraints of the 1990s. Like melted Gary Indiana plop art, drippy candles shaped like the letters L-O-V-E cover three low aluminum racks. But another, untitled series from the 2000s best sums up Blake’s attitude towards the restraints of the white wall, the buttoned-up kunsthalle-style contexts where his work appears: a row of small rectangles of acrylic, roughly and expressively drilled through with holes, laminated on top of mirrored acrylic and panel. Each piece hangs cheekily on a foot-long piece of wire, wrapped around a single screw. For such an expansive, dynamic artist, not afraid to show us tar babies, they’re sure comfortable in the briar patch.

Travis Diehl lives in Los Angeles. He is a recipient of the Creative Capital / Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant (2013) and the Rabkin Prize in Visual Art Journalism (2018).



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Nayland Blake, *Untitled* (2007).
Plexiglas with mirror coated Plexiglas paper,
mounted on panel and wire, 14 x 11 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Matthew Marks Gallery.

Flash Art

3 NAYLAND BLAKE
*No Wrong Holes: Thirty
Years of Nayland Blake*

Institute of Contemporary
Art, Los Angeles
by Andrew Greene

Since the mid-1980s, Nayland Blake has engaged the politics and aesthetics of identity in America. Biracial, queer, and gender nonconforming, Blake (preferred pronoun: they/ them) draws from these positions to confront their anxiety both with how popular culture represents identity and, in turn, how they represent identity in their own work.

One hundred and two of Blake's works are restaged at the ICA LA in "No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake." Throughout Blake's career, sculpture, performance, video, and drawing have functioned as tools for interrogating traditional strategies of representation and categorization. Blake merges conceptual art motifs with a hands-on, materialist approach producing works that could be mistakenly seen as post-Minimalist, but instead operate with a decidedly more playful and personal sensibility.

Sleek metal structures become tableau for BDSM and kink scenes, sculptural assemblages reflect the

frailty of materiality and their subject matter, and intimate videos and drawings directly introduce Blake's subjectivity to the viewer.

The survey relies heavily on works produced from the late 1980s through the 1990s, and in this period Blake deftly navigated the fraught landscape of the culture wars, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the rising tide of conservative politics in America. As we confront a renewed assault from similar political and social forces, Blake's work generously offers examples of how modes of protest can be located in an aesthetic and material practice.

Meticulous in presentation, tastefully arranged, and aesthetically restrained,

the exhibition might initially pass for something more conservative.

However, Blake's work suggests a subtle yet radical alternative to the traditional reconciliation between meaning and form while refusing to provide us with a comforting didactic resolution. Rather, it opens a space where we too are asked to reevaluate the complicated politics surrounding the representation of identity in contemporary popular culture, and to recognize the contradictions of living in a time when representation often takes precedence over reality.



3 "No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake,"
Exhibition view at Institute of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles, 2019.

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HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

Nayland Blake Welcomes You Into Their Messy, Funny, and Tragic World

“My work is always about people being able to sort of mentally try it on, mentally get inside the suit, or to see the effort of me trying to learn this dance, or to think about eating food,” Blake told Hyperallergic.

Matt Stromberg October 22, 2019



Nayland Blake with “Ruins of Sensibility” (1972–2002), DJ equipment, records, plywood, cardboard boxes, painting (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

LOS ANGELES — “What does it mean to try to make work that has space for other people in it?” Nayland Blake asked recently during the installation of the current retrospective *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), Los Angeles. Blake has eschewed easy categorization throughout their career (Blake uses gender neutral pronouns), incorporating motifs from the BDSM scene, medical equipment, pop music,

Stromberg, Matt. “Nayland Blake Welcomes You Into Their Mess, Funny, and Tragic World.” *Hyperallergic*, October 22, 2019.

food, and stuffed animals to investigate race, sexuality, and gender. One through-line across their sculptures, videos, and performances is the invitation to participate, either literally or figuratively. In some works, this takes a playful tone, but sometimes, often in the same work, there is a more foreboding quality.

Take, for instance, “Feeder 2” (1998), a life-size gingerbread house whose appetizing aroma fills the ICA’s galleries. It recalls warm childhood rituals of baking with family, but has a darker connotation as the cottage of the carnivorous witch in the Hansel and Gretel fairytale. According to the story, the children came upon the gingerbread house in the woods and started eating its roof, only to be enslaved by the witch. When “Feeder 2” was shown at the Tang Teaching Museum in upstate New York, audience members were so enticed by the work that they surreptitiously nibbled bits of the walls. (Blake says it is edible, but probably not very tasty due to the structural material.)



Nayland Blake, “Feeder 2” (1998), steel and gingerbread

Stromberg, Matt. “Nayland Blake Welcomes You Into Their Mess, Funny, and Tragic World.” *Hyperallergic*, October 22, 2019.

“My work is always about people being able to sort of mentally try it on, mentally get inside the suit, or to see the effort of me trying to learn this dance, or to think about eating food,” they said.

One work that the audience is actually supposed to touch is “Ruins of Sensibility” (1972–2002), a DJ setup with hundreds of records from Blake’s personal collection. Interested parties can sign up for DJ slots each day that the exhibition is open, selecting from Blake’s eclectic archive



Nayland Blake, “Ruins of Sensibility” (1972–2002), DJ equipment, records, plywood, cardboard boxes, painting

featuring avant-jazz legend Anthony Braxton, all-female rock group the Shaggs, punk pioneer Iggy Pop, and much more. A painting in the style of Jackson Pollock that Blake says they painted at the age of four with their father hangs above the record stacks, a stand-in for the artist watching over the proceedings.

“To create a kind of play space for somebody else is to me the best way for that project to live,” they said. “I think that there’s something powerful when it’s running and you realize that you’re providing the soundtrack for other people’s experience in a museum.”

Blake was born in 1960 and raised on Manhattan’s upper West Side, the son of an African American father and white mother. They attended Bard College (where they are now the chair of the

ICP-Bard MFA program) before heading West to get their MFA at CalArts just outside of Los Angeles. The move would knock Blake out of their comfort zone. “I had figured out a way to be charming and successful at Bard, and CalArts made me realize that there’s larger stakes than that,” they recalled.

After graduating in 1984, Blake chose to move to San Francisco rather than follow most of their



Nayland Blake and ICA LA curator Jamillah James

classmates to the artistic center of New York or then-emergent Los Angeles. (“I don’t drive so staying in LA wasn’t really viable,” they joked.) “San Francisco was at that time not really looked at by the mainstream art world and it was also the queer capital,” they said. “I was fortunate enough to be part of an influx of people into the Bay Area who basically didn’t know what the rules were for how you were supposed to conduct yourself, and so we were able to make up a whole bunch of stuff and entertain ourselves.

“I always want artists to know that there are other possibilities, and that you can really make your own path. It’s important to have time where you can screw around and people are not paying attention to it.”

Blake landed in San Francisco during the height of the AIDS crisis and their work reflected the reality of a community under siege. One of the first works in the ICA LA show is a flag bearing the word “DUST,” using the same font as the logo of the popular San Francisco gay bar, the Stud. Blake rearranged the letters, turning a term of sexual bravado into a reminder of mortality.

Blake's other works from the 1980s resemble medical devices, or instruments of confinement, torture, or BDSM play. The body is absent but implied, the viewer meant to imagine themselves in various physical situations.



No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake, installation view

Stromberg, Matt. "Nayland Blake Welcomes You Into Their Mess, Funny, and Tragic World." *Hyperallergic*, October 22, 2019.



“Starting Over” (2000) (left), DVD Projection, and “Gnomen” (2017–18) (right)

In one work, a stainless steel table holds cartons of tar, mops, and a basin, as a chain with restraints hangs from above, a pristine kit for the brutal punishment of tarring and feathering. “Which one are you?” the work seems to ask us, “the one in shackles, or the one committing torture?”

Around the time that Blake moved back to New York in 1996, they began to focus more intently on race and on the notion of “passing” that they experience as a light-skinned, biracial person. A turning point was their inclusion in the *Black Male* exhibition at the Whitney in 1994, curated by Thelma Golden. “That was one of the most important moments of my career, because I had not been visible to the art world,” they recall, “like people didn’t get that I was Black until Thelma put me in that show.”

No Wrong Holes is filled with costumes, avatars, and disguises that serve both as symbols of individual expression, but also socially constructed identities. “There are toys and costumes that are about the relationship between one’s appearance or presentation and then one’s lived experience or how one experiences systems like racism or homophobia or misogyny.”

A prominent alter-ego for Blake is the rabbit, a playful trickster that has roots in African folk tales as well as racist connotations from American popular culture. In the video “Starting Over” (2000), Blake wears a ridiculously oversized bunny suit weighing 146 pounds — the weight of their partner at the time, Philip Horvitz. As they perform simple dance moves dictated by Horvitz offscreen, they become increasingly exhausted, finally collapsing. The video is a humorous yet disturbing meditation on the challenges of relationships.

Next to the video stands the “Gnomen,” a bear-bison hybrid costume that Blake calls their



Gnomen

“fursona,” a reference to furry culture which Blake is involved in. (“It’s one thing to talk about your stuffed animal, but what does it mean to be somebody else’s stuffed animal?” they asked.) During the recent New Museum group show *Trigger*, they wore the outfit in the museum’s lobby, soliciting secrets from visitors.

Blake had early success with their inclusion in the 1991 Whitney Biennial and the *Black Male* show in 1994, but *No Wrong Holes* is significantly Blake’s most comprehensive survey, and their first institutional show in Los Angeles. Blake is the first to admit that their refusal to stick to one aesthetic path has made it harder to gain mass appeal with curators and collectors. “Why not try to make every sort of thing in every sort of way if I had the chance?” they asked. “I knew

in some ways from the beginning that that was going to narrow the audience for what I do.”

Despite the challenges that Blake’s work may present in the art market, they just had a show of recent work at Matthew Marks Gallery in West Hollywood cheekily titled *Nayland Blake’s Opening*, featuring recent assemblages, bondage-inspired sculptures, and candles that spell out LOVE — a timeless affirmation expressed through a cheap novelty item intended to fade into smoke. Although Matthew Marks may have a high-powered gallery today, when Blake began



No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake, installation view

showing with him in 1992, he didn't even have a space yet. "It's kind of funny to see what it has grown into, right?" they laugh.

As playful as *No Wrong Holes* is, there is a darkness, a sense of danger, of loss, of history, both personal and political. The power of Blake's work is in welcoming visitors into that messy, complicated, funny, tragic world. As in "Feeder 2," there is a sweetness coupled with menace. Blake's work is not simply provocative, but an honest reflection of their lived experience. As they put it, "to me the process of making work is about me trying to externalize my internal stuff as it is."

Stromberg, Matt. "Nayland Blake Welcomes You Into Their Mess, Funny, and Tragic World." *Hyperallergic*, October 22, 2019.

No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake continues at the Institute for Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1717 E 7th St, Downtown, Los Angeles) through January 26, 2020.



No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake installation view, with *Sadie Barnette: The New Eagle Creek Saloon* in the background

Stromberg, Matt. "Nayland Blake Welcomes You Into Their Mess, Funny, and Tragic World." *Hyperallergic*, October 22, 2019.

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An Artist's Personal Museum in Brooklyn

Nayland Blake's one-bedroom apartment is filled from floor to ceiling with personal treasures and works by their community of queer artists.

By Coco Romack

Oct. 14, 2019

When Nayland Blake's ever-expanding vinyl collection threatened to take over their railroad-style one-bedroom apartment in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, the artist and educator, who uses "they" and "them" pronouns, transformed the 2,500 or so records into an immersive installation. Blake, whose work explores the fluidity of race and gender, has long been an accumulator as much as a creator. The resulting multimedia assemblage, "Ruins of a Sensibility 1972-2002," is currently installed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles within the exhibition "No Wrong Holes," the largest survey of the artist's three-decade career to date, where it functions as an interactive self-portrait of sorts. There is a D.J. booth where visitors can sign up to play records from the collection, including rare albums from the likes of the Afrofuturist Sun Ra Arkestra.

Blake, 59, is a self-professed "borderline hoarder," whose penchant for holding onto things (tobacco pipes, a dog-chewed postcard from John Waters) has become a curatorial exercise unto itself. "There's a particular way that culture is articulated in museums and galleries," Blake says, "but then there's another way that we all experience it through the stuff that we put in our houses." It's no surprise, then, that Blake's 1,100-square-foot home, where they have lived for the past 17 years, is crammed floor-to-ceiling with kitschy novelties and personal totems. The native New Yorker has been represented by Matthew Marks Gallery since 1993, and their career is marked by sexually charged sculptures featuring stuffed animals; life-size edible gingerbread

house assemblages; and visceral, durational performances that draw upon the visual language of kink, which Blake uses as a tool to meditate on the complex nature of queer and racial identities. “I look at the things that I do in a kink context with other people as being as much my art as the thing that gets shown in a gallery,” Blake says. “The aim, for me, is the same in both — to be able to come to some sort of self-understanding.”

Throughout the apartment, bunny figurines of varying materials, some made by Blake and others gifts, echo the animal’s recurring appearance in the artist’s work. (In the video piece “Starting Over,” for example, Blake tap dances inside a 146-pound bean-filled rabbit suit until they collapse from exhaustion.) Atop their bed, which sits just inches from the drafting table, rests a crocheted re-creation of Gnomen, the gender-transcendent bear-bison “fursona” (as human-animal avatars are known in the furry fandom subculture) that Blake once dressed as to greet visitors at the New Museum in New York. Throughout their work, Blake evokes a sense of fantasy and play through transformative costuming, and among the treasures in their makeshift walk-in closet — an entire curtained-off room in the center of the apartment — are a candy-hued stack of trucker hats, a knot of studded belts, ball-gags and leather floggers and a PVC raincoat with a hood shaped like a pig’s head from the Belgian designer Walter Van Beirendonck’s fall 2018 collection.



The artist in their archive room at their home in Brooklyn. Scott J. Ross

Just off Blake's living room, through a doorway festooned with a garland of multicolor pipe cleaners made at one of their craft parties, is their archive, a library jammed with old journals and art books. "A lot of what I have in my house is work that friends of mine have made that we've sort of traded for," Blake says, noting that collecting, for them, particularly as a queer person who lived through the AIDS crisis, is "an act of love" — and of preservation. "How is this stuff going to perpetuate itself? How are we going to bring these things forward? It doesn't function online. You have to hold things." Highlights of their art collection include a portrait in nail polish by Jerome Caja, a painter and performer known for using materials such as eyeliner and human ashes, and a photogram from the graphic artist Rex Ray, which juxtaposes an ivory bust with a butt plug. Navigating Blake's apartment feels, at times, akin to interacting with one of their immersive sculptures: When viewed as a whole, the home becomes a monument. "The only way that queer or marginalized cultures survive is through somebody loving them and somebody acting as the curator of their own museum," Blake says. "That kind of intimate culture is just as valid as the high cultures that museums often traffic."

"Nayland Blake's Opening" is on view through Oct. 19 at Matthew Marks, Los Angeles, 1062 North Orange Grove, matthewmarks.com. "No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake" is on view through Jan. 26, 2020, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1717 East 7th Street, theicala.org.

[Video can be viewed here.](#)

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Los Angeles Times



Artist Nayland Blake's "Feeder 2" (1998), a sculpture made out of gingerbread, is on exhibit at the ICA LA. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA
STAFF WRITER

SEP. 30, 2019
11:40 AM

Playful works imbued with darkness, kink and sugary baking scents are part of Nayland Blake's 30-year retrospective "No Wrong Holes" at ICA LA.

You smell it before you see it.

A waft of butter. The sharp snap of ginger. Soon you realize you're inhaling the earthy sweetness of gingerbread. But you are not in a bakery. You are in the middle of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles — standing before a massive gingerbread house by artist Nayland Blake.

The piece, from 1988, is titled "Feeder 2" and was inspired by "Hansel and Gretel," the Brothers

Miranda, Carolina A. "L.A. Artist Nayland Blake Toys with Race and Queerness, Plus a Bunny Suit." *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2019.

Grimm fairytale about a pair of siblings who are lured into a tasty gingerbread cottage only to find that it's a trap set by a cannibalistic witch. Like the story, this adult-sized gingerbread house, which checks in at a height of 7 feet, seduces with its scent and its proportions. But linger too long in its vicinity and the sweetness can begin to overwhelm.

"It's about what happens when you get exactly what you want," says Blake, who on this warm Thursday afternoon is accessorized with a doughnut headband and a T-shirt that reads "Daddy Against Patriarchy." The New York-based artist (who uses nonbinary gender pronouns) navigates around half-opened crates at the ICA LA as they prep for their most comprehensive career



Artist Nayland Blake stands before the 2017 sculpture "Crossing Object (Inside Gnomes)" at the ICA LA. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

Miranda, Carolina A. "L.A. Artist Nayland Blake Toys with Race and Queerness, Plus a Bunny Suit." *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2019.

retrospective to date, “No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake.”

“You can’t spend a lot of time inside of it really,” says Blake of the gingerbread installation. “It’s really intense, the butteriness.”

They originally made the sculpture on a lark, a one-off to be shown at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York in the late 1990s, the commercial gallery that has represented them since 1992.

“It was never going to sell,” Blake thought. Yet it ended up becoming a signature piece. (In fact, it was shown at the Hammer Museum in 2014.)



“Ibedji (Quick),” 1996-97, by Nayland Blake. (Nayland Blake / Matthew Marks Gallery)

Blake does not regularly make architectural installations out of baked goods, but with its overtones of temptation, surrender and foreboding, it touches on themes regularly explored in the artist’s multifarious work.

Over a career that dates to the 1980s, including formative years in San Francisco and Los Angeles, the influential artist, curator and teacher (Blake chairs a joint master’s program run by Bard College and the International Center of Photography in New York) has become known for visceral works. These include performance, but also sculpture and assemblage that take everyday objects — shoes,

toys, record albums, bondage gear — and uses them to pick apart social categories such as gender, race, queer sexuality and the fraught points at which they can meet.

A sculpture in the retrospective titled “Ibedji (Quick),” from 1996-97, for example, synthesizes a number of the artist’s concerns in a single glass case. The assemblage references the ibeji of Yoruban culture (carved effigies of twins) — in this case expressed as a pair of matching Nesquik bunny bottles. Buttons reading “Master” and “Boss” are also included, objects acquired through the artist’s involvement in fetish and BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission and sadomasochism) scenes, and words that echo the argot of slavery.

“Ibedji (Quick)” conjures the complexities of Blake’s hybrid status: queer and mixed-race, the fair-skinned child of a white mother and black father who is frequently confused for white. Of the piece, Blake says, “I was thinking about being the inheritor of two traditions.”

Like the artist’s larger body of work, the piece tackles difficult ideas with mordant humor and the detritus of everyday life. The modestly scaled piece is a portable altar of sorts, with cork, cigars and beads — a ritual ceremony-to-go. At its heart are the Nesquik bunny bottles: one chocolate brown, the other strawberry red.

Jamillah James, curator of the exhibition, says that Blake, throughout their career, has taken difficult topics such as “racial relations and the history of racial terror” and found ways “to undercut that with an incredible sense of humor and playfulness.”

In conceiving the retrospective, this was something James sought to highlight.

“The way we thought about it is the idea of play and the way that play can be articulated in different ways,” she says. “Play with dolls, but also intimate play, things that are suggested to the viewer, imagining oneself in one of those contraptions that Nayland has made.”

The artist has made frequent use of bondage play in their work, including latex masks, cuffs and restraints. These are objects that address sexuality, but also connect with larger issues of literal human bondage.

“What does it mean,” Blake says, “for a descendant of slaves to be interested in imagery of chains and shackles?”

When installed in pristine, white-box spaces, the works also read as biting critiques of Modern and Minimalist cool — Dan Flavin or Donald Judd through the lens of spanking.

There are cuddlier elements, too: dolls and plush toys, particularly rabbits, an animal that embodies elements of cunning, heightened sexuality, and gender play. Bugs Bunny, after all, was famous for cross dressing.

Perhaps most poignant is the video piece “Starting Over,” from 2000, which shows the artist in a massive bunny costume that has been stuffed with 140 pounds of dried beans — the weight of Blake’s partner, Phillip Horvitz at the time. (Horvitz, a performance artist, died in 2005.)



"Kit No.7 (Flush)," 1990, a sculpture by Nayland Blake that draws from fetish culture.
(Collection of Doug McLemont and Eric Bryant)

In this cumbersome ensemble, Blake proceeds to execute a series of dance moves at Horvitz's command. It is as a reflection on coupledom, dominance and struggle — all in a dancing bunny.

"I like the idea of it being kind of pathetic," they say. "I like the idea of it being disarming."

Blake was born in New York in 1960, partly through the vagaries of fate. Their parents were from New Bedford, Mass., but moved to New York City.

"When a twenty-something black man got an 18-year-old white high school student pregnant, their families kicked them out," says Blake, noting that this was an era in which interracial marriage was still illegal in numerous states. "They basically ran away to New York."

New York ultimately supplied some of the artist's most formative experiences: gazing at the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, going to the 1964 World's Fair and standing over the Panorama of the City of New York, a sprawling 3D model of the city that renders all five boroughs at 1:1200 scale. (It's now on long-term view at the Queens Museum.)



A video still from "Starting Over," 2000, by Nayland Blake. (Nayland Blake / Matthew Marks Gallery)

The artist loved the idea of these invented worlds.

"The idea that I could project myself into those spaces," they say, "that same kind of space as a Joseph Cornell diorama, that I could escape into there."

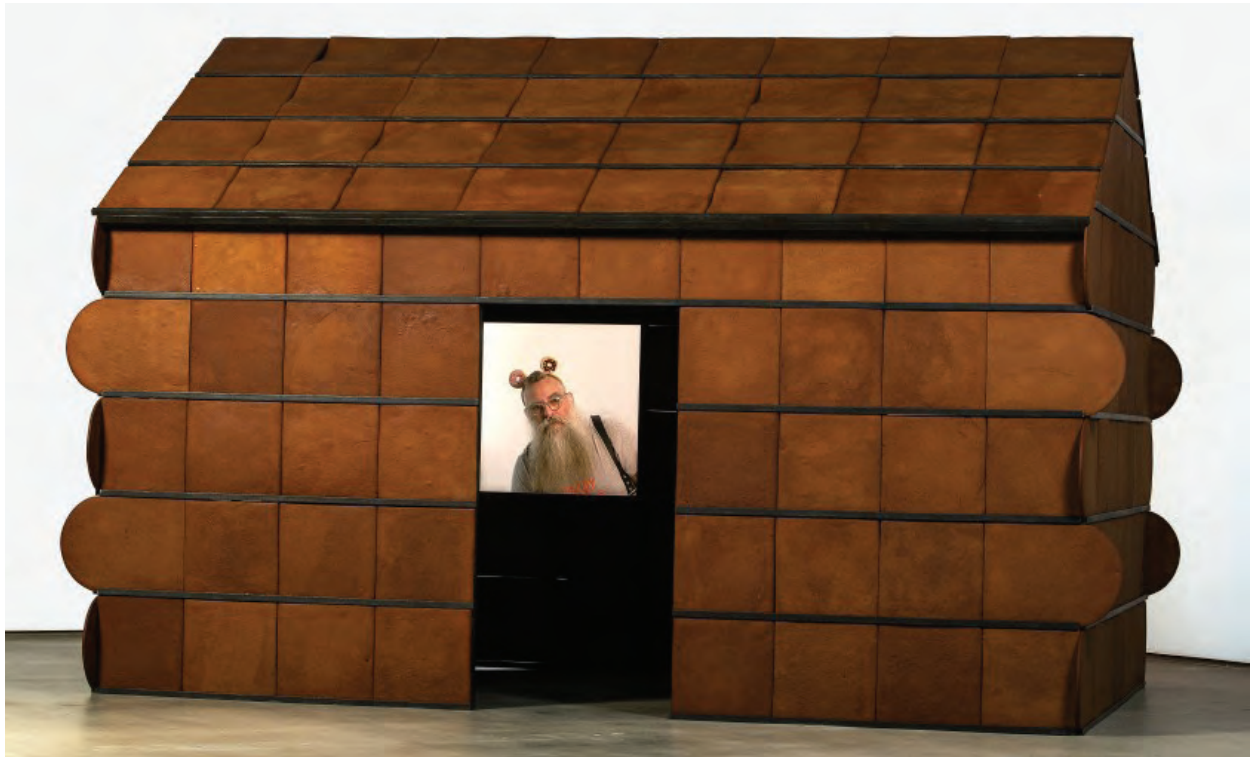
Blake came of age in Manhattan in the 1970s. This was a time when swaths of the city were going up in flames and President Ford was refusing a federal bailout of the nearly bankrupt city, generating headlines such as the infamous "Ford to City: Drop Dead."

"The thing that was amazing about New York in the '70s is that no one wanted it," they say. "So there was this possibility of making stuff out of it."

In high school, Blake fell in with a group of "art nerds," attending Fluxus events and happenings staged by the likes of Charlotte Moorman, the avant-garde cellist who was once arrested for playing topless.

"The art world I grew up seeing was not one where anyone was making money or even necessarily having careers," says Blake. "That was super important."

A devotee of film (they were a regular at the Anthology Film Archives, which specializes in experimental work), Blake decided to study cinema when they were accepted to Bard College. But they ultimately shifted to sculpture under the influence of artists such as Jonathan Borofsky (of the famous "Ballerina Clown" sculpture in Venice and "Molecule Man" in downtown L.A.) and exhibitions such as "Times Square Show," the immersive contemporary art show staged by the



Nayland Blake peers through the window of their gingerbread sculpture "Feeder 2," 1998.(Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

group Colab in 1980.

"That diorama I'm fascinated being inside? I could do that," Blake says. "The only name I could give to that was sculpture."

After Bard, they moved to Los Angeles to complete their master's in fine arts at CalArts. (They received their degree in 1984.) But the school, segments of which could be doctrinaire, wasn't a great fit.

"A visiting artist would come and it would be blood sport to see who could be the first person to ask the first question that stumped the person," Blake recalls. "It was a critical pile-on that was theory-based, and it was very pessimistic about the act of art making."

The school, however, "did knock me off of presuppositions ... that's a really valuable experience," they add. It also put Blake in a cohort that included artists who were also toying with themes of gender and identity, such as L.A. painter Judie Bamber and performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña.

It was Blake's move to San Francisco in 1984, however, that changed everything.

"It was the gay capital," they say. "And also this place that was off the radar of the serious art world at the time."

A place that, like the New York of the 1970s, was rife with possibility: "A whole generation of people arrived there and we didn't have an understanding of why we couldn't do what we were doing, so we just did it."

Blake found their voice in San Francisco and became known not only as an artist but a curator. Along with Lawrence Rinder, Blake organized the ground-breaking show “In a Different Light,” which explored LGBTQ experience in 20th century art.

Blake’s own work was inspired by important Bay Area conceptualists such as David Ireland and William T. Wiley, whose “hippie funkiness” bore none of the austerity of East Coast minimalism and conceptualism.

“It was messy and inelegant for people to look at,” says Blake. “That seemed interesting to me.”



“Ruins of a Sensibility,” 1972-2002, by Nayland Blake, is an interactive DJ station.(Nayland Blake / Matthew Marks Gallery)

In that period, the artist became known for pushing art in San Francisco in new directions. They incorporated gay porn and fetish objects into assemblages and installations, which referenced queer identity, BDSM and San Francisco’s leather daddy scene.

One work from the early ‘90s assembles musical album covers that show the ways in which popular singers have toyed with gender, such as Lou Reed’s 1972 album “Transformer,” which showed a man in both macho and feminine poses and dress.

“I was thinking about that kind of gender performance,” says Blake. “This catalog of sexuality.”

Miranda, Carolina A. “L.A. Artist Nayland Blake Toys with Race and Queerness, Plus a Bunny Suit.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2019.



"Untitled," 1997, a drawing by Nayland Blake. (Nayland Blake / Matthew Marks Gallery)

These explorations invariably bumped into the issue of race.

"When I was first around gay men in New York, they would use terms like 'coal digger,'" the artist recalls. "If you were a white guy into a black guy, you were a 'coal digger.' ... This casual racism around, particularly black men, was matched by misogyny."

Blake's fair skin has made the artist privy to the things people say when they think a black person isn't in the room — and how to confront those moments. "For me to be like, well, you're in the room with a black man," they say. "The incredulity that I would get from people."

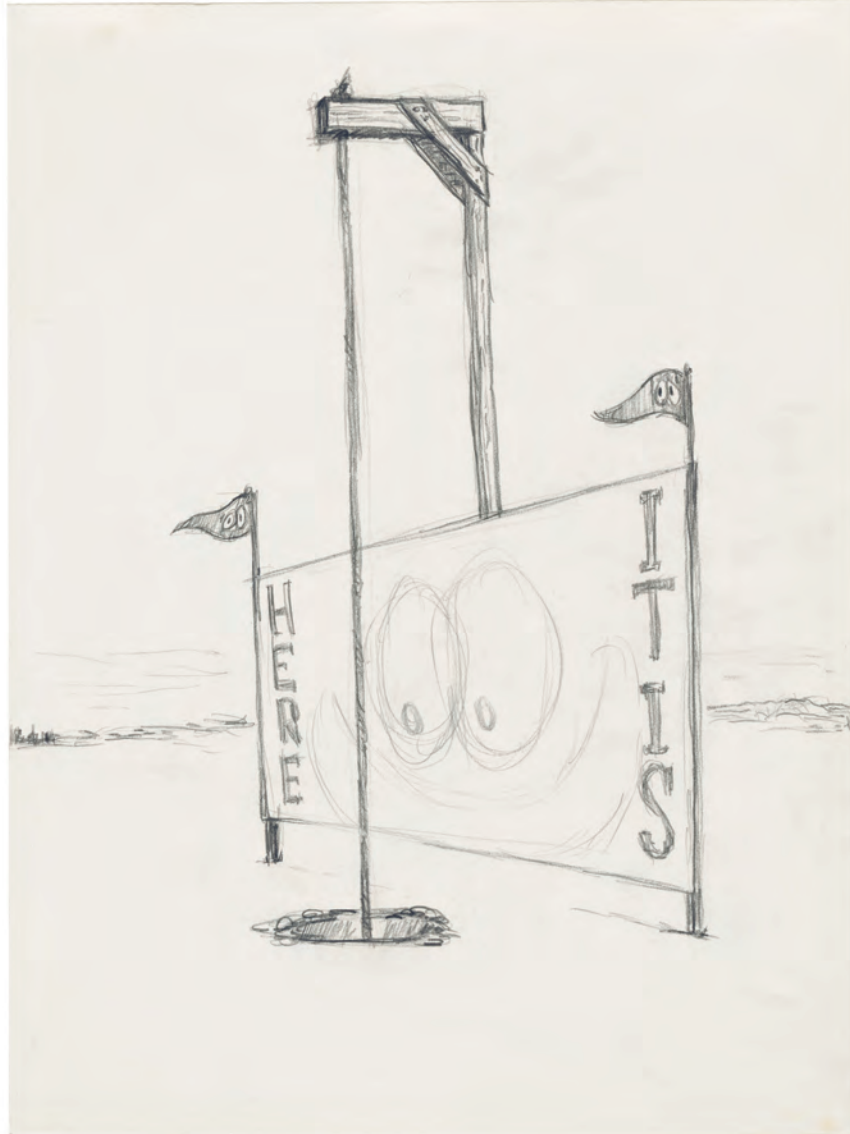
Themes of race and racism are perhaps most potently sardonic in Blake's drawings, which they began to produce in greater volumes after moving back to New York City in 1996.

Their imagery includes charged symbols such as chains and nooses, but also cartoonish figures evocative of Brer Rabbit (a folk tale inspired by African folklore) and Krazy Kat, the early 20th

century comic created by George Herriman, a cartoonist of mixed race who passed for white.

The range of subjects that Blake has addressed in their work, and the range of materials they have occupied, has made it difficult for them to occupy a tidy niche in the art world.

“The art world has very little patience or ability to deal with hybridity, to deal with these things



“Untitled,” 2005, a graphite drawing by Nayland Blake. (Nayland Blake / Matthew Marks Gallery)

across bandwidth,” Blake says. “It likes to file people in one location.”

But the retrospective at the ICA LA has gathered all of the artist’s concerns under a single roof.

James says they have produced work “in such an elegant way, and in a darkly comic way.”

To see their life’s work in a single space, “it’s really moving,” Blake says. “It was all this stuff that I made relatively quickly. It’s interesting to see it turned into history.”

ARTFORUM

PREVIEWS

"NO WRONG HOLES: THIRTY YEARS OF NAYLAND BLAKE"

Institute of Contemporary Art
September 29, 2019–January 26, 2020
Curated by Jamillah James

In Nayland Blake's heroic, humble work, opposites not only attract but converse, empathize, coalesce, and grow. Largely arising from the artist's identity and experience as a biracial and queer American, Blake's work is critically steeped in complex representations of social prejudice while remaining deeply personal, vulnerable, and compassionate. "No Wrong Holes," which presents nearly one hundred videos, sculptures, and drawings, represents decades of healthy artistic exploration: We find cultural symbols of innocence as erotic metaphors, BDSM equipment doubling as tender sculpture, and a bunny suit that expresses the literal weight of love. A *Looney Tunes* portable pothole yawns open as an abyss of death, and elegant assemblages of found trash refer to the likes of Jasper Johns and Richard Tuttle. Blake is a revered educator and artist's artist who leads by example, making for a motivating show with the radical message that, although *everything* is not okay, *everyone* is okay.

—Sam Falls

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ARTNEWS

THE NAME OF THIS ISSUE IS NOT
QUEER ART NOW



Nayland Blake photographed in their Brooklyn apartment on January 7, 2019.

Serious Play

Nayland Blake's gifts from the
Department of Transformation

BY ANDREW RUSSETH
PORTRAIT BY HUNTER ABRAMS

This past weekend, I was at a queer BDSM sex party,” artist Nayland Blake was saying one cold morning in early January. Blake, who is 59 and began using they/them pronouns a few years ago, after many decades flouting rigid identities in their art, was sitting on a couch in their Brooklyn apartment and contrasting behavior in the art world with the rules of such subcultural gatherings.

“With these things, it’s like the spirit of potluck,” Blake said of the event they had recently attended. “Nobody eats unless everybody brings something. In the art world, everybody eats and nobody brings anything!” They burst into one of their hearty laughs, which are all the more jovial coming from beneath their enormous beard, a web of white hair that outdoes Karl Marx’s.

Blake explained how the party worked: “You have to have a buddy, and you and your buddy are responsible for each other’s behavior.” That format, Blake continued, helps put participants at ease. “How do you get a lot of people together who may not necessarily know each other and allow them to feel safe—people whose gender expressions may be complicated?” they said. “How do you get them to both feel safe *and* have a good time?”

Blake, for the record, has always been the type to bring something to

the party, making sure that others, no matter how they define themselves, feel like they belong there. They have spent a prolific career not only making inventive sculptures and staging harrowing performances, but also presenting free-thinking curatorial projects; cartooning; writing; and teaching classes at universities and in the kink community.

At home in Brooklyn, the artist was sporting one of their typically exuberant outfits: a bright-orange flannel shirt, patterned leggings in an even richer shade of orange, a long brown skirt, a thick septum ring, and a camouflage vest. Simple glasses framed their piercing blue eyes. Blake wears their silver hair closely cropped—all business but for the beard—and has fairly pale skin. “Generally, I pass,” Blake, who identifies as multiracial, said in a 2016 interview with the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, “so I hear a lot of the shit that white people say when they don’t think that black people are around.”

The writer Lynne Tillman, who has taught alongside Blake at Bard College, is one of many peers to admire the artist’s polyvalent sense of self. Mentioning Blake’s shift in pronouns, she practically smiled through



the phone, remarking that Blake “has multiple selves dancing all over the place and has for a long, long time.” Describing the artist’s identity as “queer, African-American, and a self-identified feminist, which is phenomenal,” curator Maura Reilly, who organized a 2009 survey of Blake’s work, proposed that “those three things coming together . . . make for an extraordinary artist and thinker and writer and curator.”

In September, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles will offer a chance to revel in Blake’s multifariousness, hosting the artist’s most comprehensive retrospective to date. Titled “No Wrong Holes,” it will highlight Blake’s enduring explorations of how diverse communities are created, how marginal histories are preserved, and, perhaps most fundamentally, how people connect. ICA chief curator Jamillah James, who’s organizing the show, said one aspect she is focusing on in Blake’s work is “the idea of the transactional and the interrelationships that people have with one another, and the power dynamics that emerge from that.”

Questions of permission—how it is obtained, negotiated, and defined—have been at the core of Blake’s most important, and most discomfiting, works. *Restraint Chair* (1989) outfits a Marcel Breuer design with leather cuffs and metal shackles ready to hold a body for torture, examination, or display. In the video *Gorge* (1998), the artist is sitting in a chair, topless, while a black man, also sans shirt, feeds Blake an appalling amount of food, the scene pulsing with unspoken racial and sexual elements. And in *Negative Bunny* (1994), a fluffy toy begs the viewer to have sex, emphasizing that it’s been tested and is HIV free, its insistence going from cute to pathetic to menacing over the course of the 30-minute piece.

Bunny figurines, as it happens, were scattered around Blake’s apartment, tucked in among a wild array of objects: piles of books and comics; art by Margaret Kilgallen, Tom of Finland, and others; a Nintendo Switch gaming system. The animal has been a motif and, sometimes, a kind of mascot for Blake, and it has appeared in many of their key works—often cooking up mischief or encountering danger. In the video *Starting Over* (2000), the artist wears a white bunny costume weighing some 146 pounds (the weight of their partner at the time) and tap dances until they collapse from exhaustion. In other pieces by Blake, a rabbit is strung up by chains or diving down a hole next to a sign that reads “I BETRAYED MY RACE.”

Speaking of their interest in rabbits, Blake drew an intriguing parallel in the Smithsonian interview, explaining that the animals are known for “shitting a lot and they’re known for fucking a lot” and that “gay men are . . . associated with, like, having a lot of sex, with being promiscuous, fucking like bunnies.” Blake has also connected them to Brer Rabbit, the trickster figure of Southern lore with roots in African folk stories. In the artist’s hands, that wily animal has been reconceived in countless ways. More than a caricature or a cartoon, it’s a source of power, pain, freedom—a quicksilver signifier.

Of course, Blake isn’t the first contemporary artist to give such cuddly creatures starring roles. While preparing for the ICA

LEFT *Restraint Chair*, 1989. OPPOSITE Stills from *Starting Over*, 2000, in which Blake wears a 146-pound bunny suit.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE ©JANUARD BLAKE/COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY



Blake also remembers being taken to Mets games—where the future artist ignored the action in favor of reading comic books—and museums, where their parents taught them the Western canon. Early enthusiasms included Joseph Cornell's bewitching cabinets and José de Creeft's *Alice in Wonderland* (1959) sculpture in Central Park: "It was characters from a world that I was aware of, that I identified with, that I could actually climb on or be inside of," Blake said.

Blake encountered other such characters in the flesh, as a teenager immersed in the experimental art culture of 1970s New York. "My friends in high school were art nerds, avant-garde art nerds," they said, flipping through a yearbook from the Bentley School and pointing out shots from the

retrospective, Blake was invited by the Dia Art Foundation in New York to give a lecture on Joseph Beuys, the gnomic German artist who cradled a dead hare in his arms in his 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. "How the fuck do you talk about Beuys these days?" Blake exclaimed gleefully at Dia, clearly relishing the challenge of finding something new to say. They'd come to the conclusion that "I'd rather be the dead hare. I'd rather be the fluffy animal getting the pictures explained to them . . . than the person doing the explaining."

Blake was born in New York in 1960 and spent all of their formative years there, with parents who had essentially fled their native New Bedford, Massachusetts. Blake's mother, who is white, was not quite 20 when she got pregnant with her future husband, a black man a few years older. "The person who objected the most to my parents' marriage and my mom being pregnant . . . was her dad," Blake said, and so the two settled on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, returning to Massachusetts with Blake for holidays.

One of Blake's early memories is making a Jackson Pollock-style drip painting with their father, who had attended art school but worked as a building superintendent and later a computer programmer. Blake's mother, after working as a secretary, ran a children's resale clothing store and made custom Raggedy Ann dolls to bring in extra money. (Decades later, the artist developed a self-portrait in doll form—*Cuddle Buddy* [2015], a jolly bearded figure with outstretched arms—with the fashion duo Costello Tagliapietra, to raise funds for an LGBTQ+ artist-residency program on Fire Island.)

11th Annual Avant Garde Festival that the artist and performer Charlotte Moorman staged at Shea Stadium in 1974. Blake's circle screened a comedy show on public-access television, and Blake was thrilled to learn about Franklin Furnace, the downtown alternative space that accepted all artist-book submissions. The young artist also frequented the porn theaters around Times Square (spaces that later figured in a 2013 series of performances in which Blake gave tours of the nowDisney-fied area, dressed as a drag queen by the name of Victorya Spectre). From all this, Blake absorbed the lessons of "art that didn't need the structure of an art world."

That sense of renegade spirit should be palpable in the ICA retrospective. For the show, Blake has been thinking a lot about "games and game design and play," finding more exciting developments in these fields beyond the confines of the art industry. Queer game designers in particular, Blake said, are "thinking about issues of social presentation, about how you get people to interact in a way that is meaningful." A theme likely to emerge at the ICA is "a history of toys and puppets and surrogate beings," Blake said. "I think there's something in there about being played with, or putting myself at the disposal of other people."

One such surrogate is the irresistible Gnomen, a furry character embodied by Blake during the New Museum's 2017–18 "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon" exhibition. A debonair, bipedal bear-bison cross who smokes a pipe, Gnomen is, the artist has written, "a character who has adventures that Nayland can't. They undergo transformations and troubles and at the same time they embody my own sense of hybridity and mutability." At the New Museum, Gnomen gave out buttons that visitors could tell secrets to and then pin to their fur. There was also hugging and picture-taking.

Other surrogate beings include *Heavenly Bunny Suit* (1994),

a shimmering gold bodysuit that floats like a supernatural being on a metal armature, and *Homunculus* (1992), a four-foot-tall suit of black leather and rubber held together by ribbon. Blake's work proposes that identities can be slipped on and off—constructed from within even as forces attempt to impose them from outside—a formulation at once exhilarating and frightening.

The earliest of Blake's full-body costumes date to the early 1990s, when they were living in San Francisco. They moved there in 1984, after attending college at Bard in Upstate New York and graduate school at CalArts in Valencia, California. The Bay Area, Blake felt, allowed for a less careerist, more relaxed approach to artistic development. "I say this to my students all the time," Blake said. "Be in a place where you don't have to worry about what it is you're making so that you can figure out what you want to make." They became deeply involved in the close-knit arts community there, which had long been welcoming to independent spirits and was largely beyond the commercial sway of New York.

Blake worked as a curator at the pioneering alternative space New Langton Arts and showed work at the closely watched Kiki gallery, where many queer-identified artists were exhibiting. They relished connecting people. The artist "was a kind of wunderkind," said Lawrence Rinder, who was then a curator at what is now the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, where he is director. "To be so young and still have that respect and stature in the community is kind of unusual," he said, adding that Blake

was "energetic and charismatic and made people excited to be involved in the arts."

In 1990, the artist connected with performer Philip Horvitz, who would become their partner until 2002. (It's Horvitz's weight in the *Starting Over* costume.) Blake also started to develop a following outside the Bay Area, and appeared in the 1991 Whitney Biennial. "At the time, Nayland was *the* contemporary artist in San Francisco," said sculptor Vincent Fecteau, Blake's studio assistant for the first half of the decade, remembering how, early in his career, "Nayland was incredibly supportive—incredibly supportive—in sending people to my studio."

One of Blake's works from this period is a white clock titled *Every 12 Minutes* (1991) whose face is segmented into 12-minute intervals by five printed lines that say "ONE AIDS DEATH." At the clock's center in large red capitals is the phrase "STOP IT." Contemporaneous pieces include *Water/Wine/Vinegar/Piss* (1987), which presents these disparate substances in clear bottles, and *March* (1987), in which apple cores sit like abject human specimens in canisters of vodka. At the time, Blake has said, their work was a response to how they felt in their body: "sometimes vulnerable, sometimes permeable . . . visible and invisible."

In the mid-'90s Rinder proposed that he and Blake curate a show together that would feature artists from Kiki, "who were creating work that had a kind of caustic ebullience," he said, but Blake demurred, not wanting simply to transplant that rich scene into a museum context. Instead, Blake proposed they do something else together: a multigenerational exegesis on queer aesthetics at the museum, which became "In a Different Light," a 1995 show that remains foundational to that field.

That same year, Bay Area artist Jerome Caja, a polymath known for wry paintings and gripping performances, died of AIDS. Recalling that loss and the mood of that time generally, Blake said, "A lot of the work is jokes that are pitched at a very small community, and one of the losses of AIDS . . . is, yes, you lose the people who are telling the jokes, but you also lose the community that the jokes are being told to." With the disappearance of that audience, Blake continued, "there are certain valences to that work that really are not going to be picked up."

Around the time of "In a Different Light," Blake had decided that they had effectively done what they had wanted to do in San Francisco—there had been a show at the city's Museum of Modern Art and a major commission for the public library. They were curating regularly outside the Bay Area, and they were eager for change. It was time to take on New York.

"In New York, if you put the same show up two times in a row, people are going to call you on your shit," Blake told me. In contrast, San Francisco had a more laid-back, accepting vibe. "Whatever you wanted to do, that's great," the artist recalled. "The flip side of that is that whatever you did, didn't really matter much." In 1996 Blake and Horvitz decamped for New York, where, a few years before, Blake had begun showing with



LEFT *Cuddle Buddy*, 2015, produced with the fashion duo Costello Tagliapietra. OPPOSITE Untitled drawings (2016, left; 2015, right), by Blake.

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: ©NAYLAND BLAKE/COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

an upstart named Matthew Marks, one of the first art dealers to settle in the garages of far West Chelsea.

By the point Blake arrived in New York, the heat that had attached to them had cooled. "I think in a weird way I benefited from people not paying attention to me for a long time," Blake said. "I got a lot of attention early on and then it really fell off, and that was actually helpful." They began teaching at Bard in 1997, and five years later started an M.F.A. program in partnership with the International Center of Photography.

"Something Anything," a show that Blake organized at Marks in 2002, included comic-strip artists, folk artists, and a variety of others, as well as their piece *Ruins of a Sensibility* (2002), which grew out of the artist's activities at Bard, where in addition to teaching, they DJed the annual graduation party. Blake's fellow teacher Tillman recalled, "Nayland had an extraordinary record collection. I don't know how many records." Blake felt that they were running out of room to store it, so Tillman suggested turning it into art. The records became *Ruins of a Sensibility*, a highly personal installation with bins of Blake's vinyl and, hanging on a wall above, the father-son Jackson Pollockesque drip painting from the artist's youth. Visitors could pick out records and play them on a stereo set up in the gallery—a generous, melancholy gesture in the spirit of the potlatch. When the piece appeared in a 2003 retrospective at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, its curator, Ian Berry, told me, "It taught us so much, as a museum, about how a sculpture can be welcoming to a huge group of strangers. How many of us would say, Here is my life, remake it, reorder it?" (In July, works by Blake will be on view in a show at the Tang called "Beauty and Bite.")

In 2005 Horvitz died of heart failure, at 44. Blake, grieving, began a new project, making a drawing every day for a month. On New Year's Day in 2015, he took up that initiative again, and has continued ever since. "I started drawing every day because it was really hard for me to get into the studio," they said, explaining that they'd begun to feel like they worked only when they had a deadline for a show. "I didn't even feel like an artist anymore!" Blake went on. "I started to do stuff in a daily way to be like, OK, at least during this amount of time I know that I'm an artist," adding a caveat: "The trick with that is that I didn't say they had to be good drawings."

Nonetheless, a show of recent drawings at Marks, in 2017, was revelatory, the pieces ranging from the absurd to the laugh-out-loud funny: Gnomes sleeping on the floor with a leash attached to their collar; two cartoon hearts roasting over an open fire; a self-portrait of the artist in a dress with a giant bow, crouching slyly behind a kind of giant fecal tower. They evince a uniquely freewheeling artistic



mind, one that had been churning vigorously.

The 2017 show also featured a lone sculpture—a tall construction of wood pieces, plastic netting, and pink and red ribbon. It's a scrappy, precarious thing, but its cast-off materials ooze pathos in the hands of Blake, who sees such work as "intimate and conversational." In a related endeavor, Blake picked up items from the street and drew on them before returning them to the spot where they were found, with the printed message "A GIFT FOR YOU FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSFORMATION." The idea, the artist said, was to make "a piece for the next person who came along."

The streets and the people who selflessly enliven them have been on Blake's mind lately, and they mentioned people like the '80s pop icon Angelyne in Los Angeles, who plastered her blonde visage on billboards all around her city, and Ms. Colombia, the radiantly attired LGBTQ+ legend who delighted New Yorkers until passing away last year. "The idea of somebody who is just there as a presence, it's so comforting to me," Blake said. In their own Brooklyn neighborhood, and at art events and kink events around town, Blake has become one of those presences himself—an unmissable figure with their luscious beard and sartorial flair.

When not out and about last year, Blake devoted many hours to the videogame *Stardew Valley*, a farming simulation set in a rural village. "The thing I like about it is, you can be aggressive about maximizing your productivity, but if you didn't, it wouldn't be like you were doing it wrong," Blake said, while also expressing appreciation for "any game that lets you be femme or female and still have a beard."

It sounded like the ICA exhibition would be similarly permissive and energizing. Blake said they wanted it to be the kind of place "where someone can come in and look at it and think, 'I can do this. I can be on these walls. I can occupy this space.'" They added, with characteristic impishness, "It would also be really helpful if it was a super-hot party where people got to have fun." ■

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Art in America



SUBCULTURAL TREASURES

Nayland Blake participates in fandoms and kink communities, and makes work that borrows their imagery and their fluid rapport between artist and audience.

by Brian Droitcour

Nayland Blake:
Heavenly Bunny Suit, 1994, nylon
with metallic
armature, 75 by
35 by 19 inches.
Courtesy Matthew
Marks Gallery, New
York.

IN 1995 Nayland Blake co-organized “In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice” at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive at the invitation of then curator (now director) Lawrence Rinder. The catalogue essays reveal that the two principals had divergent agendas: Rinder wrote of “the dynamism and innovation evident in the work of the contemporary generation of young gay and lesbian artists,” whereas Blake was more interested in talking about Duchamp and punk. Rinder discussed the importance of institutional recognition for gay and lesbian artists; Blake, who had already organized exhibitions of queer artists at New Langton Arts in San Francisco, was openly skeptical about the premise of an identity-based show.¹

With “In a Different Light,” Blake avoided essentializing identities by assembling artists and groups from various generations, not all of whom were queer, from Marsden Hartley to the Sex Pistols to Nan Goldin. What’s more, he devised an alternative taxonomy that organized the 117 participants (as well as related posters, zines, record sleeves, and other ephemera) not by age, geography, or movement but by the various dispositions that characterized their work. The nine categories included “Void,” the art of grief and withdrawal, and “Utopia,” the art of infinite possibility and beautifully fragile ideals; in the catalogue, several artists were listed under multiple categories. The curatorial rubric of queerness, in this case, did not designate an identity but rather a range of modes of expression.

Twenty-three years later, Blake has organized “Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward” at the Institute

of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, as part of the institution’s series of artist-curated exhibitions.² If “In a Different Light” featured canonized artists, some of them dead, the ones in “Tag” are mostly unknown and young. It’s a refreshingly rough and ragged show, with lots of things that exist at the art world’s fringes: Dusty Shoulders’s installations assembled from props for nightlife performances, Saeberg’s massive tableau of inflatable latex piglets suckling at a sow, Robert Yang’s lurid video games about flirting and cruising, a card game by Nica Ross that invites visitors to engage in collaborative storytelling. K8 Hardy, whose video *Express Views (of Outfitmentary)* plays in the first gallery, appears as something of a senior stateswoman here. The work is a sixteen-minute edit of *Outfitmentary* (2016), a feature-length record of thrift-store outfits worn over eleven years. Hardy’s project presages newer works that also approach dressing as an opportunity to play with the social demands of self-presentation. Buzz Slutzky burns portraits and self-portraits into wooden boards, a rugged presentation that contrasts with a tender sound piece, in which the artist reflects on wearing different garments to traverse the scale from butch to femme. In the early 1990s, Blake spotted the ascent of identity art—the institutional enticement for artists to package and present their selfhood in the census-taker’s vocabulary—and began to seek out ways to work around it. “Tag” once again swaps out identity politics for identity play, presenting code-switching as both a queer art of survival and a lot of fun.

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
“Tag: Proposals
on Queer Play
and the Ways
Forward,” curated
by Nayland Blake,
at the Institute
of Contemporary
Art, Philadelphia,
through Aug. 12.



Droitcour, Brian. "Subcultural Treasures." *Art in America* 106, no. 5, May 2018, cover, pp. 68–73.

View of the exhibition "Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward," 2018, showing work by Dusty Shoulders. Courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Photo Constance Mensh.

Below, view of the exhibition "In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice," 1995, at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.



FOR THE LAST few years, Blake has opted to use "they/them" pronouns instead of the masculine "he/him." The decision was made partly in solidarity with those whose gender expression does not fit a binary, as a nod toward a possible future of universal pronouns that aren't loaded with social expectations. But it also came from Blake's lifelong understanding of their own identity as hybrid. "Legally black," in their words, but passing as white, Blake has never felt at ease with racial categories, and that experience, in tandem with queerness, gave rise to a skeptical attitude toward binary gender.³ This position is the foundation of their art. "I believe there are two types of people," Blake said in an interview with the *Brooklyn Rail*: "people who fuck to confirm an idea they already have about their identity and people who fuck to explore all the possibilities of their identity."⁴

Born in New York in 1960, Blake moved to San Francisco in the early 1980s after studying at Bard College and CalArts, and got involved in the city's art and kink scenes. What might have been parallel paths became intertwined in the artist's work. The first sculptures to gain serious attention were pieces of furniture with restraints: metal tables and leather chairs that invite viewers to imagine themselves bound in them. When commissioned to make work for the lobby of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, then in its old building in Civic Center Plaza, Blake responded to the plaques that encircle the rotunda. Since the originals bear the names of Old Masters, the artist decided to display leather flails on plinths with name tags corresponding to those on the wall.

Blake, who had friends in the San Francisco leather scene, thrilled to the sight of leathermen attending the opera in full fetish regalia—a spectacle of high culture and subculture colliding—but



never felt comfortable with the community's quasi-military polish and regimented attention to detail. Instead, the artist gravitated toward a nascent scene of guys who were too sloppy for leather and called themselves "bears." The group developed nationally not only through the San Francisco-based *Bear* magazine but also via a daily email digest called the Bear Mailing List, serving one of the first queer subcultures to take shape online.

Blake's practice of fashioning connections between art and kink has continued in videos like *Coat* (2001), a collaboration with A.A. Bronson in which the two cover their faces with chocolate and vanilla frosting (rendering them both alternately black and white) and proceed to kiss passionately. "FREE! LOVE! TOOL! BOX!" Blake's

In the early 1990s, Blake spotted the ascent of identity art and began seeking out ways to work around it.

2012 exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, memorialized a gay bar that had once stood a few blocks away. Among the show's features were a reproduction of a Tom of Finland-like mural and stations where visitors could write down memories or leave objects related to the bar and the recent history of the rapidly gentrifying SoMa neighborhood. Blake also follows the paths of art and kink in parallel. They teach foundation courses at the International Center of Photography's school in New York, and lead courses in scene design at kink conventions, showing participants how to set up rules for play, similar to the principles Blake uses to create videos and performances.

Given the importance of kink to Blake's work, it can be jarring to read critical assessments that overlook it entirely. When David Deitcher wrote about *Gorge* (1998), an hour-long video in which Blake is fed continually by their partner, Philip Horvitz, the critic relates it to "self-punishing, endurance spectacles" in the tradition of Chris Burden. In other words, Deitcher wanted to position the work solely in a history of performance art. He identified its dynamic of dominance and submission, but analyzed it as an allegory of slavery without making the connection to BDSM play.⁵ There's no acknowledgment of feeding as a fetish—the process of making your lover bigger by inducing them to overeat, enjoying their fat and reveling in the release from the social control of bodies that makes fat shameful.⁶ But Blake doesn't see accounts like Deitcher's as misreadings. Rather, the artist relishes the fact that viewers coming to kink from art or from art to kink can appreciate *Gorge* on their own terms. (These perspectives aren't equally treated, however; someone who comes to art from kink is unlikely to be published in a museum catalogue.)

But perhaps more important, Blake likes to point out the contemporaneous emergence of BDSM communities and performance art in the 1960s and '70s. Both were under the sway of post-Freudian thinkers like Wilhelm Reich who



View of Blake's installation *FREE! LOVE! TOOL! BOX!*, 2012, at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photo JW White/Phocasso.

theorized essential connections between social constraints on sex and bodies, and repressive political regimes. There's no public record of Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, or other artists who choreographed personal debasement and physical defilement being involved in kink communities. And it doesn't really matter whether they were or not. What matters is that, as Blake put it, "artists were doing things in public that others were doing in private."⁷

IN RECENT YEARS Blake has become involved with furies, a community of people who take cartoon animals as alter egos, or fursonas. Most furies don't have the drawing skills to illustrate their fursonas, so they hire artists to do it for them. Devotees who have the financial means commission fursuits—plush costumes like those worn by sports mascots or Disneyland entertainers—to give their fursonas a physical presence. Most furry activity consists of participation in online message boards, commissioning and sharing fursona drawings, and meeting at conventions and other social events where fursuits are worn.

Some furry art is erotic or pornographic, so furies are sometimes thought of as a sexual subculture, but fornication isn't really at the center of it. The furry community is better understood as a form of fandom, like the networks of "Star Trek" or Harry Potter enthusiasts. Within those communities, some fans write and illustrate sexual fantasies about their favorite fictional characters, though that's not the full extent of fan activity. But while the genesis of furry culture is often connected to Disney's *Robin Hood* (1973), animated series like "Thundercats," and other cartoons that sexualize anthropomorphic animals or present them as romantic interests, those characters don't appear in the art or play of furies, who prefer to concentrate on their own fursonas. Furies have been

Gorge, 1998, video, 60 minutes. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.





Starting Over, 2000
video, 23 minutes.
Courtesy Matthew
Marks Gallery.

around a while—Blake first befriended a furry while blogging on LiveJournal in the early 2000s—but they have entered the mainstream imagination only in recent years, through news coverage and increased visibility on social media.⁸

Gnomen, Blake's fursona, made a public debut at the New Museum in New York this fall, in "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon." Blake commissioned a fursuit and displayed it in a corner of the third-floor gallery. (Notably, the curators' objectives for "Trigger" were similar to Blake's for "In a Different Light": to make a show about queerness that didn't label artists' identities or diagnose a particular way of making art as queer.) Reviews of "Trigger" in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* misidentified Gnomen as a bear, but the creature is half-bear, half-bison, a hybrid identity indicated by the tufted chin of a bison on the bear-shaped head, as well as horns and a snout with a bull-like septum ring.⁹ While such crossbreeds are uncommon in the furry community, Blake hasn't encountered any objections to it. The bigger issue, Blake said wryly, is that the fursuit produced for "Trigger" would not be considered authentic, as it was adapted from a pre-existing bear fursuit rather than built from scratch as Gnomen.¹⁰ In *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomen)*, 2017–18, an occasional performance scheduled for a few days during the run of "Trigger," Blake donned the fursuit and rode the elevator. Visitors were invited to write secrets on buttons and pin them to the suit's synthetic pelt.

Gnomen is not the first animal suit to appear in Blake's work. *The Little One* (1994) is a doll-size black porcelain mannequin enclosed in a white bunny suit, and *Heavenly Bunny Suit* (1994) is a gold nylon bunny suit big enough for Blake to wear. In the same year, the artist made *Negative Bunny*, a video in which Blake ventriloquizes a stuffed bunny repeatedly declaring their HIV-negative status for thirty minutes. For the performance video *Starting Over* (2002), Blake danced in a 140-pound bunny suit until collapsing from exhaustion. But none of these bunnies were named, as Gnomen is; the bunny was an image, not a character. Blake was attracted to cartoon rabbits like Bugs Bunny and Br'er Rabbit as trickster figures whose creators exploited the Aesopian freedom of animation to play with taboos. The humor of Bugs Bunny draws on

Tommy Bruce:
*Meerkat and Spruce
Outside Warsaw*,
2013, inkjet print,
12 by 18 inches.

vaudeville traditions; his appearance and speech code references to minstrel makeup and other forms of racial caricature. And he often gets dolled up in drag to pacify Elmer Fudd by seducing him. All these associations lurk in Blake's bunny works. If there's any similarity between them and the Gnomen project, it's in the use of costume play to externalize inner life. The bunnies, among other things, are a shamanic materialization of Blake's unresolved anxieties regarding race and sex; furry play transposes a fantasy other self into an image, and then from the image to a fleshly, furry social masquerade.

Media theorist Dick Hebdige views subcultures as a form of underclass rebellion that gets absorbed into the mainstream; members are "alternately dismissed, denounced, and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons."¹¹ Fandoms aren't quite the same. They begin with consumption habits. They cluster around relatively anodyne totems of mass culture, so there's never quite the aura of danger that accompanied rockers or punks. But they're still relegated to a margin—just a goofy, geeky one. Perhaps fandom of this type is less a rebellion than a means of adapting to a media landscape. Blake sees furies—as well as the upsurge of interest in BDSM among young people in both art and kink worlds—as a reaction to the socioeconomic realities of the present. These exaggerated embodiments help people cope with their acute alienation from what Blake calls "the white tube."¹² The definitive experience of contemporary urban life, the white tube entails frictionless movement and well-designed sterility: the reclaimed wood of cash-free coffee shops, the Airbnbs that let tourists slide into the residential fabric of a locale without actually living there, the ride-share apps that enable them to move around a city without spending time outdoors. Connections recede from attention; there's only the conduit, styled with sanitized signs of creativity and innovation.

Blake's coinage is an obvious wordplay evoking the white cube, the gallery environment extensively analyzed and critiqued as the removal of social context from art. The tube/cube rhyme suggests that the condition of the work of modern art has enveloped the contemporary subject. Blake has always worked to expand the purview of art institutions through other





Valentine's Day party at the ICA, Philadelphia, Feb. 14, 2018. Photo Derek Rigby.

codes and engagement with other communities, where play and embodiment matter more than they do in the museum. "Tag" includes a selection of portraits by Tommy Bruce, who photographs furries in their costumes or in the process of putting them on, in their homes, in their cars, at conventions. In an exhibition where most of the work has the lo-fi look of experimental video (like Hardy's self-portraits), Bruce's lush, beautifully lit images, glossy as a fashion editorial, take on an ethereal grandeur. On Valentine's Day, Blake and Bruce hosted a party at the ICA, inviting furries, cosplayers, and others to the museum for a queer mixer with music by DJ Knox the Disco Dog.

Blake credits Bruce with the insight that furries are a fandom without a canon. Other fan communities take shape in relation to extant media. But furries make their fursonas through an ongoing process of socialization and collaboration with other furries and artists.¹³ For this reason, one could say that furry culture blurs the distinction between fandom and kink; kink doesn't have a canon either, just a set of protocols for play. What excites Blake about those communities, and furries in particular, is the element of participatory creativity. A furry convention is like the opposite of a museum: you go there not to look at art that's already made, but to meet artists and make commissions. The museum tends to cordon off social relations (and, often, identities) for aloof contemplation from without. Blake's project is to undermine that distance, and open up the possibility for communal connections again. ○

1. "Situation: Perspectives on Work by Lesbian and Gay Artists," co-organized with Pam Gregg, was on view at New Langton Arts from June 18 to July 13, 1991. Blake also made efforts to include queer artists in other group shows at the venue.

2. The inaugural exhibition in the ICA's guest curator program was "Ensemble," a show of sound works organized by Christian Marclay in 2007. Other artists who have taken part in the series are Virgil Marti and Kara Walker.

3. Interview with the author in New York, Feb. 20, 2018.

4. "Nayland Blake with Jarrett Earnest," *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2013, p. 25.

5. David Deitcher, "Nayland Blake's *Feeder 2* and *Corollary*," in *Nayland Blake: Some Kind of Love: Performance Video 1989-2002*, edited by Ian Berry, exhibition catalogue, the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y., 2003, pp. 48-51. In making the slavery analysis, Deitcher notes Horvitz's darker skin tone and reads the work as an allegory for white guilt, "or in Blake's case, to the potentially even greater guilt of the light-skinned bi-racial man who can 'pass' as white (p. 51)."

6. Blake used the jargon of fat fetish in several earlier works. Notably, the term for someone who encourages a lover to get bigger serves as the title for *Feeder* (1990), a metal cage with a mouthlike opening, and *Feeder 2* (1998), a giant gingerbread house. The latter piece was inspired by Kathy Acker's essay on *Feeder*, which relates the cage sculpture to the story of Hansel and Gretel.

7. Interview with the author, Feb. 20, 2018.

8. In 2012, Katie Notopoulos, a BuzzFeed reporter specializing in online subcultures, attended Anthrocon, the second-largest furry convention, held annually in Pittsburgh since 2005. After drawing criticism for a preview piece that presented furries as freaks, she wrote a gentler account of the conference itself, saying how much she liked the people she met there. Katie Notopoulos, "What Is a Furry?," June 14, 2012, and "Are Furries Really So Bad?," June 19, 2012, buzzfeed.com.

9. Holland Cotter, "Let (Gender) Confusion Reign," *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 2017, pp. C13 and C16; Peter Schjeldahl, "The Art World as Safe Space," *New Yorker*, Oct. 9, 2017, newyorker.com.

10. Interview with the author in New York, Feb. 19, 2018.

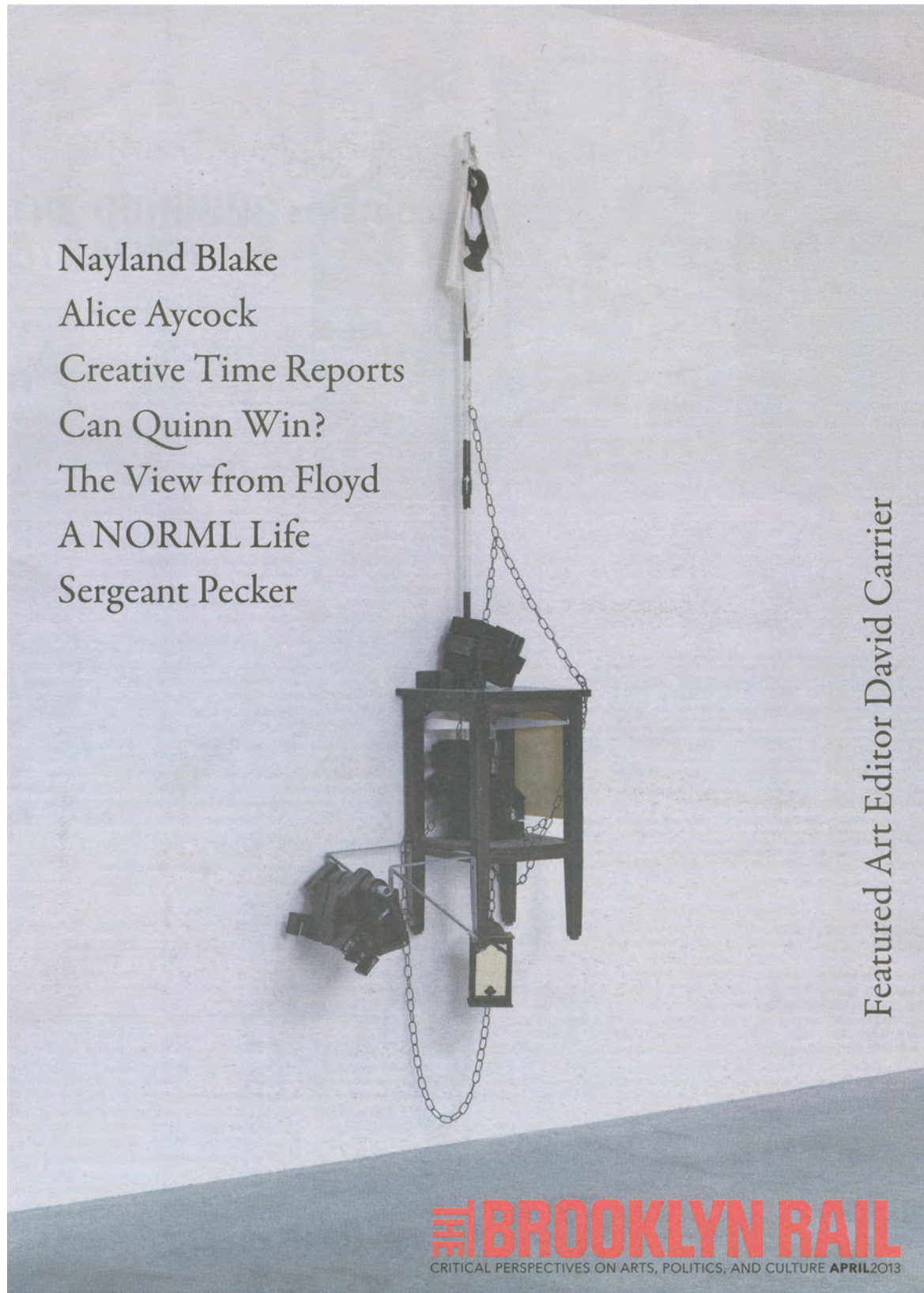
11. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 2.

12. Interview with the author, Feb. 20, 2018.

13. Interview with the author in New York, Mar. 12, 2018.

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Blake, Nayland, and Jarrett Earnest. "Nayland Blake with Jarrett Earnest." *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2013, cover, pp. 23–25.

in conversation

Nayland Blake

WITH JARRETT EARNEST

Nayland Blake is one of the most intellectually and aesthetically agile contemporary artists, producing work of incisive clarity as a curator, artist, writer, and teacher since the 1980s. He just completed the large exhibition *FREE! LOVE! TOOL! BOX!* at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and currently has an exhibition of new sculpture at Matthew Marks's gallery (*What Went Wrong*, February 2 – April 20). He is also included in the New Museum's 1993: *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (February 13 – May 26). Blake sat down with Jarrett Earnest in his studio to discuss the art and politics of the early '90s and their implications today.

JARRETT EARNEST (RAIL): Let's start by talking about *In A Different Light*, a show you curated with Lawrence Rinder at the Berkeley Art Museum in 1994, which attempted to create intergenerational linkages based on "queerness" as a strategy or sensibility, and was the product of earlier shows around queer identity that you put together and participated in. I want to begin here because I think the ways you approached many of the issues at stake in the work of the early 1990s sheds light on some decisions (or evasions) of the show currently at the New Museum.

NAYLAND BLAKE: Larry Rinder, who was the curator of the experimental exhibition program at the Berkeley Art Museum called MATRIX, noticed that there was a lot of activity within a group of young queer artists in the Bay Area, mostly centered around a gallery called Kiki that Rick Jacobson had started. I knew a lot of these younger artists so Larry asked if I'd be interested in working on a show about them at the Berkeley Art Museum. My immediate response was that it doesn't take much sense to just take these artists and stick them in the museum. We decided to make the show not only a grouping of these artists but an attempt to put these impulses in an historic context, and to provide an index of the shows that had gone before that deal with "queerness." That was a very conscious decision because we didn't know when a show like that would be organized again, and we didn't want it to appear that this had dropped out of the sky and we were taking credit for it—we wanted to acknowledge that it was part of a trajectory. The way that you perpetuate the scholarship on this stuff is by documenting it. Larry and I built constellations of works and asked what the implications of those constellations were. That is what led us to the idea that whether or not this person is self-identified as gay or lesbian or queer doesn't mean that there can't be an idea about queer thematics or a queer approach within their practice. It was an attempt to avoid the kind of identity politics trap.



Installation view of *In a Different Light* at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) January 11 – April 9, 1995, co-curated by Nayland Blake and Lawrence Rinder. Courtesy of BAM/PFA. Photo: Ben Blackwell.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: Avoiding the traps of "identity politics" seems to be the real issue of the 1993 show. They ultimately do what they have tended to do, which is a kind of faux-sociology without making a conceptual/aesthetic argument. Your essay from the *In a Different Light* catalog is so important because of how you navigated these issues: by discussing formal strategies (using "queer" as a verb, rather than noun or adjective) and creating intergenerational groupings that open up, rather than close down ideas around art, identity, and their interconnection.

BLAKE: I do think that one of the problems coming out of the early '90s is that "identity work" somehow got tagged as a style. This is the problem of trying to transform a society through a market. The various communities that came out of the postmodern explosion of the late '70s and early '80s overturned a lot of binaries of symbolic order, which met a market embrace. What happened going forward was that the market suddenly became the index of intellectual currency so that the dominant critical ideas also happened to be the most successful in the market. Once that happened, the forces of novelty and style that dictate luxury markets usurped a kind of intellectual discourse. What is happening right now is that a lot of people are waking up to that fact.

RAIL: In the early '90s you described the late '80s as being characterized by "exquisitely refined art theory and art of exceedingly bad faith." It seems that the early '90s are a pretty distinct aesthetic and conceptual window before the later part of that decade/early 2000s, which weren't marked by exquisitely refined but rather overly produced art theory and overly bad art. How does this market embrace relate to the interconnections of institutions like universities and museums?

BLAKE: I think it's about balkanization. The university became even more removed from the marketplace in that galleries were scouting art students, so there was a bizarre bifurcation where in the classroom they were supposed to be paying homage to Benjamin Buchloh and yet you were supposed to get yourself together for your studio visit with a gallery owner. I really see the trajectory from the '60s and '70s artist-built institutions, which were structured to support each other's work and provide critical responses. Through public grants, among other things, these marginalized communities actually had platforms to address a larger public and the intellectual discourse of art widened and became richer. Reagan and his intellectual heirs were about privatizing public discourse as a way of returning those voices to the margin. During the culture wars what replaced that richer and more complex cultural



Nayland Blake, "Eleventh," 2013. Particle board, fabric, metal, vinyl, paper, Plexiglas, glass, Crisco and inkjet on vinyl. 77 x 36 1/2 x 18 1/2. © Nayland Blake, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

discourse was the market. Non-profit art spaces go out of business so everything happens in for-profit art spaces and what ends up there are things that necessarily must make money.

RAIL: One thing that was very canny about the thematic categories for *In A Different Light*—like "Orgy," "Family," "Void"—was that there was "Drag" but no "Camp" which seems especially smart. In your essay you discuss "drag as method" in the work of younger artists like Robert Gober, where very fine materials are parading as mass-produced "low" materials, or seeing appropriations like Sherri Levine's as a form of drag, continue to be useful. However, "drag" has a more public presence than ever, so can we talk about how Drag and/or Camp function now?

BLAKE: The way that I describe Camp is meticulous scholarship engaged with an inappropriate subject. Jack Smith's whole apparatus functions to meticulously research everything that has ever happened around Maria Montez. So it's about researching and knowing things, but the object of that research being something that would be derided as trivial in straight scholarly circles. That to me is the essence of Camp as a strategy which has broken down because it relies on the rigors of scholarship, and we live in a time where those values aren't really being promulgated.

RAIL: Jack Smith is precisely the example I want to talk about because, okay, we all love Jack Smith, but I've had so many conversations recently with "academics" or "anarchists" who are on their knees for him as the paradigm of a "critical art practice" for today. To the point where Jack Smith is now institutional "good taste"—it's the safest thing you could write a dissertation on right now. I now question Camp as a non-category, or at least as a deeply historical one.

BLAKE: As someone who was alive in the 1970s I remember the work you had to do to find things out—that is where the value of Camp came from.

RAIL: As a form of investment? Do you feel there is a general dis-investment in culture?

BLAKE: No, I feel that we have to re-learn that culture is separate from information. There is an abundance of information but it doesn't matter. I can find images of "white supremacists" and "bestiality" and "Austrian Gothic Lolitas" and all of it requires the same thing which is just some typing and none of it puts me at any sort of risk or reveals me. And that is the thing that is different.

Talk about the *Times Square Show*: it was sketchy to get there. The block just off the train was a block you easily could get robbed on. That was revealing in a very different way than googling is revealing; we relate to those experiences differently, we hold onto them in a different way. So the struggle we have right now is to regain that.

RAIL: From your other interviews I take it you object to people, especially of my generation, who see performance practice as an extension of photographic practice.

BLAKE: I think there is a real problem in learning a performance through photographic documentation, both the still and the video. People who do that spend a lot of time constructing the performance as an image. What gets left out is that all temporally-based things change, and so people tend to conceive of these pieces as unified tableaux: the curtain goes up its one way, it's that way for a while, and then it goes down. It's similar to how people now think the only way that video can exist is as an endless loop on a monitor or projection: it doesn't matter where it begins or ends, you walk in or out; it's not a structured experience. That is where I'm suspicious of photography and video as a learning tool.

RAIL: How do you understand the relationship between "art" and "life" or the problem with a lot of "identity" work—"autobiography"?

BLAKE: If you look at that work as a way of mapping a simplistic relationship to identity it's not useful. I think what we need now is incoherence. The drive to narrative closure is one of the things that is incredibly debilitating at this moment.

To go to your point about "art" and "life": I am interested in honoring the value of a response wherever it comes from, without acting as the translator of those experiences for an art public. One of the nicest things anyone said to me at the Matthew Marks opening was "wow, this is like the hottest lesbian cruising area I've ever been in." What more could you want for your show! I think that there's a really irritating model where you are supposed to gather up the material of your life and massage it into shape and present it to the art world where supposedly its going to be your calling card to value. To me that is a kind of impoverished and time wasting approach because you already have people in your life that are providing that kind of tribal response and the art world's version of that is no better or worse.

RAIL: Because you are someone who has written a lot in your life, and very cogently, how do you see the relationship of your curating, artwork, and writing?

BLAKE: I think of them as all the same practice. There are things that you can do through curating a show that you can't do by making stuff. Similarly, if I can get it done in writing why bother curating a show? To me that's a proper use of formalism.

RAIL: You've said you see a lot of interesting stuff in people's studios and not a lot of interesting stuff in galleries. What is the disconnect?

BLAKE: I think people need to divorce the vehicle of the gallery from the showing experience. A big part of doing *Free!Love!Too!Box!* was trying to be present in the space as much as possible. I'd love to see a move to a workshop-archive-exhibition model, to have places where you could go and see works, engage with people who are making new things, and also display those new things. A cultural institution that allows all those things to co-exist is very exciting to me as a model.

Social media offers the opportunity to de-authorize gatekeepers; I think institutions that are able to understand themselves as peers and partners fare much better in that arena. For example, why did I find the Abramovic show so problematic? Because it was really clear that MoMA in no way was willing to be changed by the presence of that work, which to my mind, was all about not requiring the authority of a place like MoMA to provide it with validity and about changing the relationship to

institutions. The show demonstrated that MoMA had to change nothing to host that work, that in fact it became yet another stamp of approval, which meant very little in the larger picture.

RAIL: Many historic performances, like Gina Pane's, had maybe ten people in a room, but they still seem to matter to me. So I want to understand your wariness around knowing performances through images and writing; or, how can performances be communicated to people who weren't there so that we could feel betrayed by how they were staged in the Museum of Modern Art?

BLAKE: Here this perfectly ties back into the kink thing because the way you experience those performances in the kink world is by doing them. I've been spending a lot of time in the kink community because I've found a lot of people engage their creativity and construct performances where the audience is the performer. Both of the participants have an equal level of commitment, which is very different than the way things are in the contemporary art world. It's not like you look at pictures of piercing and decide what your relationship to it is, you have something pierced. To me the proper way to understand those performances is to enact them, treat them as a musical score.

RAIL: Then what is the best way to accept the utter loss of the live performance and still create a history and communicate it to others?

BLAKE: I think you have to abandon the idea of trying to broadcast it. So yeah, maybe those pieces in the 1970s only had 10 people in the room and maybe that is all you needed. I think that one of our biggest problems is imagining that you have to scale everything up, that if 10 people know about it, then if 100 people know about it then it is 10 times better. Let's abandon this weirdly capitalist notion that anything has to be infinitely accessible to anyone at any time, and so everything has to be reproducible. That thinking buys into certain myths about market places that I don't think serve us. You can have this experience of sitting there and Abramovic will stare at you, and you stare at her, and because there are cameras on you, you know there will be some other people looking at a video monitor of her looking at you. To me the power that show gave to television was so undermining, deadening, and anti-immediate. That was where it felt like the institutional stamp was the heaviest—reproducibility, catalogability. Is she a remarkable artist who should be honored at the highest level? Yes. But if that institution honors you, it will do it in a particular way that says more about it than about you.

RAIL: Doesn't this imply a level of atomization? If pieces exist in small pockets and don't move out into a broader awareness, doesn't it impoverish our ability to have conversation around what culture is? Doesn't work have to move outside its small circle in order to be legible?

BLAKE: No, I don't agree with that. I think that that buys into the broadcast myth and if you look at the history of human culture the overwhelming majority takes place within very small groups of people and it's only the curse of our time that we imagine another possibility.

RAIL: So if I make something that uses the *Aeneid* as a reference, and you've never heard of the *Aeneid*, how then do we have a conversation about this thing that the *Aeneid* becomes a triangulation for? Aren't common references vital to communication?

BLAKE: I think that what ends up happening is that we have a discussion about a lot of different things and if the *Aeneid* is the solution of your piece then we have a problem. The thing I'm more interested in is the other stuff that comes out of the pieces that I'm not consciously putting in. Again at the opening of the Matthew Marks show there were a lot of my friends who were not necessarily "art people," and so they always have a lot of anxiety looking at the work. I always tell them there are two rules: one, you can't get it wrong, there is nothing for you to "get" that you're



Nayland Blake, "Equipment for a Shameful Epic," 1993. Mixed mediums, 84 x 63 x 32". Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York/Los Angeles.

not getting; and two, just ask yourself what it looks like and what it reminds you of and you'll have a productive relationship with it. I'm so much more interested in hearing responses to those questions than I am listening to people produce indexes to show me how conversant they are with a set of art world references; the former is where I learn something. That is how I see something outside of my own blind spots. We've so internalized these positivistic notions of how a culture functions that we forget that we actually use culture as a receiver.

RAIL: I had a conversation with one of my best friends last night and we decided that if you look at someone's art and then you don't want to fuck them, or at least not fuck them more than before, that indicates a "problem" with the art. So much of your work uses sexuality, sometimes as a fact but more like an armature, so how do you see the relationship between art and sex?

BLAKE: I really believe that the way you do one thing is the way you do everything. So for me those things are continuous. I literally teach a class at kink events called "the artist's way of designing scenes." It's a class where I've put together a methodology for how to have some sort of a play scene with someone that is exactly the way that I make my work. One of my current hobby horses is that this performance work of the '60s and '70s that we talked about evolved simultaneously with the rise



Nayland Blake, "Spirit of 69," 2013. Painted wood, metal, vinyl, fabric and plastic, 116 x 32 x 15". © Nayland Blake, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

of certain sexual practices in the kink and S-and-M worlds: people were doing exactly the same things but for different audiences. Both impulses were the result of certain ideologies about bodily presence and social change. People were trying to alter their relationships to other people by altering their bodies. In the past I've called myself a sadist because I think the lesson of de Sade is that ideologies issue from bodies, that they come from physical beings, and that you cannot divorce one from the other in the same way. I still believe in that possibility of social transformation of what used to be called Sexual Liberation; I'm not so sure I'd use that term now, but certainly through an embodied consciousness. So I agree with you: the best pieces make me want to fuck. One of the things that is never really discussed about Richard Serra's work is how cruisy it is. It's all hanging out at the docks, people looking at each other, and that is a very different read. The surprise and allure of those spaces is something that is never really talked about but is palpable in the experience of his sculpture.

RAIL: How do you feel about the general move toward looking at these works from the early 1990s in contexts like that of the New Museum show? What are pitfalls or opportunities of doing that?



Nayland Blake, "Untitled," 2013. Vinyl and metal, dimensions variable. © Nayland Blake, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

BLAKE: I think the benefit of any of those things is not immediately apparent. You hope that someone will look at that stuff and then go off and do something really weird with it. In the '90s there seemed to be a lot of ways to think about making a piece. If that impulse gets codified into a look then it's useless, but if it's about looking around at what you're doing right now and energizing that sense of possibility, then that is a positive reason for doing these shows. This leads back around to sex because I believe there are two types of people: people who fuck to confirm an idea they already have about their identity and people who fuck to explore all the possibilities of their identity, and part of what was going on in the work of that time was people exploring all of the possibilities. They weren't confirming identities, which is the fallacy of calling this "identity politics" work. People have taken an exploration as a confirmation or a closing down. From the outside that is more comforting because if someone else is confirming their identity that means you do not have to question yours. If you acknowledge that there is the possibility of exploring your identity, whatever that might be, through the process of making things and thinking about them, then the burden of why you are choosing not to do that is on you. So the very conservative aim of boxing up this work is all about foreclosing people's own personal exploration. ☹

ARTNEWS

UP NOW

Nayland Blake

Matthew Marks

Through April 19

Brooklyn artist Nayland Blake, who collects his materials during his daily “wanderings” and integrates them into harmonious installations, has been described as a modern-day flaneur. His mixed-media works are rooted in and derived from his personal history, and although they often make provocative references to his pan-sexuality, his propensity for masochism, and his biracial heritage, they are always imbued with a tenderly nostalgic light. The six sculptures in this show, titled “What

Wont Wreng” [sic], all from 2013, are no exception. Taken together, they offer a seemingly narrative, even chronological, progression, through which the artist explores the evolution of his own identity.

The story begins with *Heritage*, a large, vintage ink-jet print repeated across a long piece of particleboard. The hazy, yellowed image is banal, depicting an elderly couple on a suburban golf course, and suggesting that Blake’s ancestral legacy is perfectly unexceptional. But in the sculptural assemblage *Oh*, which appears to leap backward into the artist’s youth, normalcy yields to turmoil. A child-size stool supports a red wooden construction recalling a flag—that universal symbol of discovery and belonging. In the place of Old Glory’s iconic

stars and stripes, however, the chipped wood has gaping star-shaped holes: an American dream disfigured. *Buddy*. *Buddy Buddy*, a tall glass box that evokes seamy peep shows, conjures Blake’s teenage angst. Hanging against a mirrored wall inside the box, hundreds of toy figurines and stuffed animals—the superheroes of his adolescence—are reflected in a self-conscious landscape of unattainable plastic perfection and uneasy sexuality.

The remaining works take us quickly through the artist’s coming of age, playfully pulling motifs from the culture of gay communities and culminating in the sculpture *Eleventh*, another Plexiglas booth. Plastered to its side, an oversize image of Blake stares out boldly from an advertisement for a leather bar. Arms crossed, lips curled in a grin, chest fitted with studded straps, he is unrepentant, finally, in asserting himself.

—Emily Nathan



ABOVE Nayland Blake, *Oh*, 2013, wood, felt, Plexiglas, wire, glass beads, and paint, 69½" x 24" x 22".
LEFT *Eleventh*, 2013, particleboard, fabric, metal, vinyl, paper, Plexiglas, glass, Crisco, and ink-jet on vinyl, 77" x 36½" x 18½".

NEW YORK OBSERVER

NAYLAND BLAKE

'What Wont Wreng'

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

You can't erase what they call you, but you can always turn it over. Starting with the letters of his own name on the wall, deliberately transposed as "Nakand Blayle" and then corrected with two arrows drawn in black Sharpie, Nayland Blake's "What Wont Wreng" uses prefab cabinetry, glass, plastic figurines, rephotographed found photography, an imaginary leather bar, broomsticks, miscellaneous studio furniture and the space around the stars in the American flag to transform Matthew Marks Gallery's small 22nd Street space into a portrait of the artist as a portrait of the neighborhood as an inquiry into the constantly mutating opacity of identity.

Eleventh, a freestanding, man-sized, double-sided cabinet, meets the viewer as he enters. On top sit two glass jars of Crisco, scooped out in white handfuls, and hanging over both front and back is a vinyl reproduction of a black-and-white photo of the artist, in leather cap and harness, black sunglasses and beard, under the name "The Spectre." Inside the cabinet hangs a soft pink curtain. In the back corner, that ongoing Chelsea phenomenon, the repurposed toilet—repurposed in this case into storage for office supplies and bottles of San Pellegrino—is repurposed again into an installation with a pink vinyl curtain and hanging chain. *Oh* reverses the flag, attaching a wooden stencil of stars to an upright red broomstick rising from a stool.

Buddy, Buddy, Buddy, Mr. Blake's second man-size magician's cabinet, is divided vertically into two mirror-backed compartments. In one hangs a beard of plastic figurines—gnomes, cartoon bears, Vikings, an Ewok chieftain, Groundskeeper Willie—each hanged by a wire around its neck. Two round holes—the kind that Ikea might drill into a desk for electrical cords, but which Ikea wouldn't put at pelvis height—connect the beard's compartment to the other side, where a furry doll with a bag over its head sits on a low table underneath a third hole, this one doubled again in the mirror, and leading out, as if for air. Or maybe it's leading in? Everything is exposed and nothing revealed. (Through April 20) —W.H.

ARTFORUM

SAN FRANCISCO

Nayland Blake

YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS/
GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM

Get together, reuse, remember, give something away: These are feel-good values, even if rubber bondage masks may be among the souvenirs. Nayland Blake's recent pair of shows played ebulliently with innuendo. But "FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!", a group of interlocking installations at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, really did mean to proffer a tool kit for sustaining communal pleasures. Running concurrently at Gallery Paule Anglim, a miniretrospective—comprising just four works—was titled "Not Drowning, Waving." Twenty-six years into his career and counting, Blake inverts Stevie Smith's darkly comic 1957 poem on isolation and death ("Not Waving but Drowning") to express a comically dark affirmation of survival and saying hi.

"FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!" was organized as five "stations," though the exhibition checklist identified fourteen named parts, and it felt like even more. The first station featured, *Tool Box Again*, 2012, a history-painting-size reproduction of Chuck Arnett's mural for the legendary San Francisco leather bar the Tool Box. (An image of the mural appeared in a 1964 *Life* magazine article on "Homosexuality in America," and Blake included a copy of the issue, displaying it in a reliquary of Styrofoam, Plexiglas, steel chains, and nylon straps.) The guys in Arnett's image cluster close, as if to form one body, a sense of solidarity Blake emphasizes by connecting the figures with leashlike ribbons sutured to and draping off the banner. Nearby, a station titled "Maypole Way" was similarly ghostly yet festive: a plywood catwalk, carpeted with black rubber and decorated with a Felix Gonzalez-Torres-style lightbulb string installed beside a maypole-shaped assemblage festooned with banners reading DUST—an anagram for Stud, another famous SF bar. So perhaps the waving surfer whom Blake celebrates died after all. The show comprises, in a way, scenes from his afterlife. But ashes to ashes, funk to funky, his memories seem happy.

Nearby, a station titled "Video Studio," was a side room appointed with gold Mylar panels, more dressing-room lights, and a tutu. No one, on the days I visited, went in. No one pranced on the catwalk, either, and this emptiness, combined with the convention center-esque YBCA space, sucked energy from the peppy installation. Visitors did contribute to a hall of graffiti, as well as to "Rest Area" (station five), a wall of shelves on which Blake invited people to leave items symbolizing "freedom, liberation, safety, beauty, creativity, excitement." (Among the offerings: an empty half-pint of Wild Turkey, a faded Giants T-shirt, a studded collar, sets of keys, clay figurines, and a business card for the Kiwanis Club of Greater Napa. Blake himself supplied the single clown shoe and the s/m headgear.) Meanwhile, lone DJs also

Nayland Blake,
Tool Box Again, 2012,
nylon banner, ribbon,
LOVE candle, faux
candle with electric
bulb, 15' x 24' x 4' 6".



enjoyed station three's *Ruins of a Sensibility*, 2002, which offered up the artist's collection of some two thousand LPs—acquired between 1977 and 2002 and presented here arranged on shelves beside a turntable deck—for anyone to browse and spin a set. Bowie, Yma Sumac, Devo, Nina Simone, the Butthole Surfers, the Partridge Family, *Score Yourself Sexual I.Q. Test*, and so on. All that was missing was a dancing crowd, a vital lack.

At Paule Anglim, two recent small sculptures reiterated the trope of chains as ties that bind, while an older suite of drawings, *Bunny Group*, 1997, brought Blake's longtime mascot back into the mix. Br'er, Bugs, Peter, Harvey, the Energizer, Playboy; magician's assistant; prolific copulator and shitter: The rabbit, for Blake, is perfectly polymorphously perverse. Nevertheless, in his new video *Stab*, 2012, the totem-animal becomes a sock monkey. Blake and a former boyfriend bought it. Then they split up, and Blake's dog mauled the doll. Distraught, he brought it to Liz Collins, whose artist's project *Mend*, 2012, offered "knitting interventions." In *Stab*, Blake's camera holds on Collins's hands as she stitches up the mangled body in her lap; we hear Blake explain the monkey-boyfriend-dog backstory; he and Collins and two other women chat about cult films. The lesbian sewing circle saves the gay man's treasured, injured past, and the community is present, finally, in real time. It's sweet and simple. For us as viewers, though, it's a DVD on a monitor—quite different from being at a party.

—Frances Richard

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ARTFORUM

Nayland Blake

01.13.13



Left: Spread from *LIFE Magazine* Vol 56, no. 26 (June 1964). Paul Welch, "Homosexuality in America." Photo: Bill Eptridge. Right: Nayland Blake installing "FREE! LOVE! TOOL! BOX!," 2012–13.

Nayland Blake is an artist, teacher, activist, writer, and kink enthusiast who explores the ways in which artmaking and community construction can mutually inform each other. His latest show, "FREE! LOVE! TOOL! BOX!," is on view at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco through January 27, 2013. Blake will also have a solo exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York from February 2 to April 19, 2013.

I HAD BEEN READING the historian Gayle Rubin and I ran across these descriptions of the Tool Box, which was a San Francisco leather bar that opened in 1962. The Tool Box was not only San Francisco's first gay-owned leather bar, but was also featured in a June 1964 article in *LIFE* titled "Homosexuality in America." This was the first major magazine article to talk about homosexuals and depict leathermen in three cities: New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The story that the article tells about San Francisco concerns the Tool Box and the Mattachine Society—a homophile group that began in 1950 and worked for the acceptance of homosexuals within American society. That story in many ways was the start of a gay migration to San Francisco. It became a contributing factor to the queer culture in San Francisco becoming even more concentrated. The Tool Box was torn down in the late 1960s as part of San Francisco's SoMa redevelopment plan. The Yerba Buena Center is part of the final portion of that redevelopment plan.

For my show at Yerba Buena, I wanted to look at the city in the early '60s as well as a period in the early '90s, a time when I lived in San Francisco, as eras in which there was an invention of a new kind of gay or queer identity based around spaces, bars, and clubs. The 1990s were a time of liberation—post-Queer Nation, but before there was investment in the gay marriage and the gay military model. That's something that gained force in the late '90s through the 2000s and, to my mind, hijacked the activist moment that was interesting and inventive about rethinking ideas around gender and sexuality. The idea was to take that space in Yerba Buena and reactivate it—to make it less of a showcase for my work and more of a platform for people to come together to think about these ideas of liberation by hosting workshops, lectures, and informal classes.

As an artist, I am most excited not by those moments of definition but by those moments that lack definition. To me the best thing about a movement like Occupy is the refusal of a narrative and a goal. That's what these two previous moments felt like. I wanted to construct a space that is a great party celebrating creativity and also one that offers an examination of these previous eras, suggesting therein that institutions can learn from leather bars. Recently I have been spending a lot more time in the kink and BDSM worlds than I have been spending in the art world. This is in part because I feel there is a kind of creativity going on in those spheres that is coupled with the knowledge that there is never going to be a "valid" career in them. Furthermore, the audiences are also participants.

One of my pet theories is that there was a situation in the mid-'60s into the mid-'70s where there was a rise of bodily based performance art and at the same time there was an increase in consciousness raising, discussion, and organization among sexual minorities. These are two groups of people who were doing the same thing, often literally. And what happened was that an idea became popular, one stemming from people like Norman O. Brown who said that transformations in the consciousness of bodily expression could result in transformations in societal structures. The civil rights model that mainstream gay activism has been engaged with in recent years doesn't buy into this notion, however. It doesn't want to transform society. It just wants to ensure equal access to all of the benefits to the current society. To me, the amazing potential of art—and this is where I see my relationship to Beuys—is that transforming society and art consciousness can provide us with different sorts of models for social organization.

We continually need to ask ourselves what we mean by "success." I feel like part of the interest that people have in this activist moment from the 1960s is tied to this index of success. If your index of success is finding romance, finding someone to be with, or just having someone excited about doing something, then you are fortunate. Throughout history, making art has been about visualizing and creating community. I suggest that if we are going to talk about activating spaces, let's actually talk about it instead of these twee notions of interactivity.

— As told to John Arthur Peetz

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MODERN PAINTERS

NEW YORK

Reviews



NAYLAND BLAKE

LOCATION ONE

One would be justified in expecting the worst from a speech given under the cover of a cardboard box—especially if it constitutes a performance intended to honor an artist. [Un]luckily the performance was not as fraught as it initially appeared to be, consisting instead of a humorous recitation of stories about dead pets by Carmelita Tropicana, whose motifs of secrecy and cute animals, paired with mundane materials like beat-up cardboard, were par for the course for Nayland Blake, who organized the event in conjunction with his mini-retrospective at Location One. Blake's well-regarded and influential career spans 25 years, and he has sorely lacked for a museum-scale reconsideration of his work. His sculptures mix tchotchkes (witch figurines, fuzzy bunnies, plastic flowers) and delicate kitsch elements like Mardi Gras beads and rhinestones with dingy, carnal elements such as fetish gear and the kind of scratched mirrors you might find in filthy public restrooms or the back of a dive bar. In one seemingly innocuous piece, for example, a stuffed Easter rabbit sits near a desultory pile of kibble-size fur rounds, similar to its pink nose and yellow pelt, that have pilled off around it in a pile that seems about to form a new animal. It is a striking portrait of a subject in a state of psychic and physical splitting. Blake's production, like that of another pioneer of gay camp from the 1960s and '70s, the painter-writer Joe Brainard, turns objects of everyday trash or tackiness into emblems of social and sexual disturbance. —EVA DÍAZ

ARTNEWS

reviews

Nayland Blake

Location One



Nayland Blake, *Magic*, 1990-91, mixed media with puppet and armature, 36" x 6½" x 9".

Nayland Blake is daring: he tackles sensitive issues; he shows his love of painting; he is unabashedly sentimental, unafraid of beauty, and willing to explore subjects that make people squirm. He is never boring.

In celebration of its tenth anniversary, this gallery, which is devoted to technologically advanced art, presents a concise 25-year retrospective of Blake's work, containing very little of the artist's new-media projects. It offered, instead, 50 or so works that represent every period of his career—from painting to sculpture, graphic design, and performance—and considered themes ranging from sex to slavery and racial discrimination to every other current and historical inequity.

The art can be funny, though always in a poignant way, as in the big-man-size *Heavenly Bunny Suit* (1994) hanging on a wall, or backhandedly beautiful, as in the three-dimensional still lifes mounted throughout the gallery. Composed of sticks, artificial leaves and flowers, bits of fabric, and other imitations of nature, they are much

like a bird's nest—providing a more-dead-than-dead take on the memento mori. Religion appears in works like his famous altarlike construction *Magic* (1990-91). Lots of dried flowers spill out of a box that holds a doll, alluding to the 1970s dummy Madame, wielded by the flamboyant entertainer Wayland Flowers. It's a cross between Mexican ex-voto and a Joseph Cornell. Among the graphic pieces were the witty provocative *Spirit of '69* poster (1994), featuring a couple of bunnies doing what they do so well, and *Love Happened Here . . .* (2007), stickers available to the public to apply where appropriate.

The show, entitled "Behavior," was largely about ways of acting. Ultimately, Blake's work is life itself, with performances like *Gorge*, where he urges his audience to feed him continuously, thereby drawing their attention to his obsessions and weaknesses and helping them uncover their own.

His materials are ordinary, often discarded, but informed by his refined sense of art history and culture. His constructed bouquets evoke the history of still life, from the Dutch through the Surrealists and Cubists. And his abstract paintings are simply very fine paintings. Embodying his ability to blend art, design, history, politics, and good and bad taste is Blake's *Restraint Chair* (1989), uniting a high-Modernist, leather Breuer seat with chains and stirrups designed for humiliation. (Is art also constrained by good taste?)

Blake's work is conceptual but never pretentious. It aims to engage, not intimi-

date his audience, and succeeds by not being aggressively didactic. In fact, his work misbehaves in the way it doesn't adhere to any prescribed program. It rambles, interpreting the world in its own manner. Blake is neither the one nor the other nor anything else. He's neither black nor white, he's both; and he doesn't work in any single medium or style, though he does have signature elements, like the bunny in many manifestations. It's an allusion to homosexual male promiscuity, an evocation of Uncle Remus's Br'er Rabbit, a symbol, in some cultures, of wealth, luck, and prosperity, and in others of drunkenness and cowardice, and best of all, it stands for the trickster, which Blake certainly is.

—Barbara A. MacAdam

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Nayland Blake

LOCATION ONE

The OED tells us that the word *behave* derives from the Middle English “*be + haven*”—“to have” or, slightly differently, “to hold”—and that *behavior*, then, designates the manner in which one holds *oneself*. But though the dictionary doesn’t ascribe any inherent judgment to the term (one could behave very badly or with utter propriety or in any manner in between) there is built into its everyday use an assumption of the worst. One rarely brings up behavior if it’s *good* (unless as a way to reduce jail time!); and though ostensibly describing an individual’s actions, the word always serves to point out the proximity or distance of those actions to normalcy.

Marking the gap between the normative and his own comportment, Nayland Blake’s show at Location One—his first survey, curated by Maura Reilly—was titled “Behavior,” and offered a no-holds-barred look at the artist’s last three decades of work dedicated to quite particular perversions. Blake’s exhibition was strangely intimate in unexpected ways, offering so many glimpses into the ways in which one person *holds himself*, in more than one sense of the phrase. Blake’s

Nayland Blake,
Heavenly Bunny Suit,
1994, nylon, metal,
72 x 35 x 19”.



practice, which is conceptually based but ranges vastly through materials and modes of production, is often associated with video and large-scale installation, but the scene at Location One was given over to more personal effects and the affects, or feelings, with which we invest them, incorporating as it did so much intimate *stuff* seemingly culled from bedside reading table or sex drawer.

Though much of Blake’s work is certainly tongue-in-cheek (*Companion*, 2006, is a T-shirt stained with what one assumes to be bodily fluids and printed with the words GNOME FONDLER; *Heavenly Bunny Suit*, 1994, a gold costume for the high-class “furry”; *Homunculus*, 1992, a strangely pathetic piece suggestive of s/m garb), there is, too, a kind of delicate campiness—if such a category can be argued—that hints at the seriousness of Blake’s endeavors. Indeed, one feels that how-

ever much these are objects bound to elicit a chuckle from their viewers, they also are meant to serve as memento mori of sorts, talismans that act as evidence of pleasures had, activities partaken in. It is notable that much of the work assembled in “Behavior” bends toward conventions of craft or kitsch, allowing for a kind of (tough) sweetness to surface—a sweetness at once crude and ruefully calculated. What Blake shores up in his work on queer sexuality and desire—that testing the limits of pleasure, pain, and the body itself requires an immense amount of trust between participants—hits an unexpectedly resonant pitch in works that don’t picture the body at all. Pieces like *Restraint Shoes*, 1988, in which five black shoes are strung from chains and bracketed to the wall, are at once literal and perplexing. In aiming to signify the body, they also complicate it—in what scenario, one must ask, would *five* shoes operate?

Some artworks in “Behavior” do not address sexuality head-on, though they, too, seem to constellate around its terms; a number of them are delicately abstract, such as a recent untitled cluster of seven variously colored Plexiglas rectangles that hover together, not quite paintings but nearly so. A piece from 1991, *Bouquet #1*, is a small, sad affair, cobbled together from wood, artificial leaves, and flowers. In these cases, objects that are generically elegiac are also mysteriously affective, and the viewer gets the sense that Blake is as serious about his mourning as he is about his sex. Indeed, in “Behavior,” there is a strange lightness to what is otherwise heavy and a heaviness to the otherwise light.

—Johanna Burton

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THE NEW YORKER

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

NAYLAND BLAKE

Nestled amid the dried vegetal arrangements, glass boxes, and dangling panty hose (which conjure relics, votives, and shrines) in this terrific twenty-five-year survey is an abundance of rabbits. There are stuffed bunnies, plastic bottles in cartoon rabbit shapes, a cotton-tailed gold lamé suit, and black Inquisition hoods with floppy ears. Blake is no heavy-handed moralist—his art's too entertaining—but clues abound as to what the bunnies might signify: a celebration of unbridled homosexuality in a repressive political climate; the cycles of birth and death, hope and loss made even more poignant by the advent of AIDS. Through Feb. 14. (Location One, 26 Greene St. 212-334-3347.)

DANIEL GUZMÁN

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Nayland Blake

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

The Nayland Blake piece that almost always comes to mind first when I think of him is a video from 2000, *Starting Over*, in which he struggles to perform a kind of disco scenario while wearing a bulky, heavy white bunny suit. (Blake is a big man; the bunny suit is bigger.) That, and *Feeder 2*, a walk-in-scale cabin from 1998, made of steel and gingerbread. Both are works of unbalanced heft and mass, dealing with size, appetite, and desire. But there's another side to Blake's art, delicate and miniature, and this show of drawings and wall- and floor-based sculptures fell firmly into that second group.

The sculptures, dating from 2003 to 2008, were constructed of motley materials, a basically derelict miscellany apparently scavenged by Blake on walks through the city. Yet there was precision and care in their conception, beginning with the installation: on one wall, three small, skeletal works of hanging wire, string, jewelry-type chain, and beady bits and pieces; on the second, a more physically substantial group using plywood, plexi, and other scraps; and on the third, a single, larger piece made of battered plastic bottles. The drawings filled a fourth wall; two similarly designed freestanding pieces, of found furniture supporting erect, flagpolelike members, dotted the floor; and in the entryway hung a pair of editioned pieces, aluminum cutouts respectively showing Blake's signature bunny, here suspended peculiarly, as if lynched, and a handsome star that became worrying given its rhyme with the stars in a Confederate flag barely visible in the metal. (It is worth knowing here that Blake is partly of African-American descent.) Finally, a structural column in the center of the main room supported a group of paintinglike objects made of plywood and scratched and colored plexi.

My first thought was to see these works in mainly formal terms. It was as if Blake had read Richard Serra's well-known "Verb List" of 1967–68—a list of actions and qualities producing sculptural results—and set out to calculate some wry additions to that virile roster: to dangle, to squeeze, to droop, perhaps. For the sculpture enacted a kind

of catalogue of relations among mutually supporting objects, ranging from the pinching of tongues of white felt between wooden stays to the poking of wooden skewers into a block of ply to the resting of a drawer on a triangular shelf that Blake might have lifted from Haim Steinbach. The "paintings," too, read like responses to a century-old debate on the nature of the painting as object. These ontological issues, though, were embodied in vernacular, associative stuffs remote from formalist concerns: sequins, key labels, feathers, pipe cleaners, buttons, perhaps a plastic toothbrush-holder. Particularly in the wiry works, which distinctly evoked Richard Tuttle, Blake seemed to be both deploying a sculptural vocabulary and exploding it through worldly references unfamiliar to it.

Meanwhile, the hanging curves of the wire and string pieces followed just the same construction principle as the catenaries of Jasper Johns, Blake's companion at the Matthew Marks Gallery. And that drawer on that shelf, topped by a spool, a spindle, and another empty pop bottle, was the holder for two wooden balls, of the kind you might roll in your hands, like Captain Queeg—a possible reference to Johns's *Painting with Two Balls*, of 1960. These are speculations, I quickly add, but, even had Blake not had those works in mind, if Johns's catenaries and spheres are subject to sexual decoding, so are his. In fact these pieces, with their recuperation of the unvalued, their play of stiff and soft, rigid and limp, stuffed and empty, and their tinselly, glittery loveliness, virtually call out for it. And so we are back once again to appetite and desire.

—David Frankel



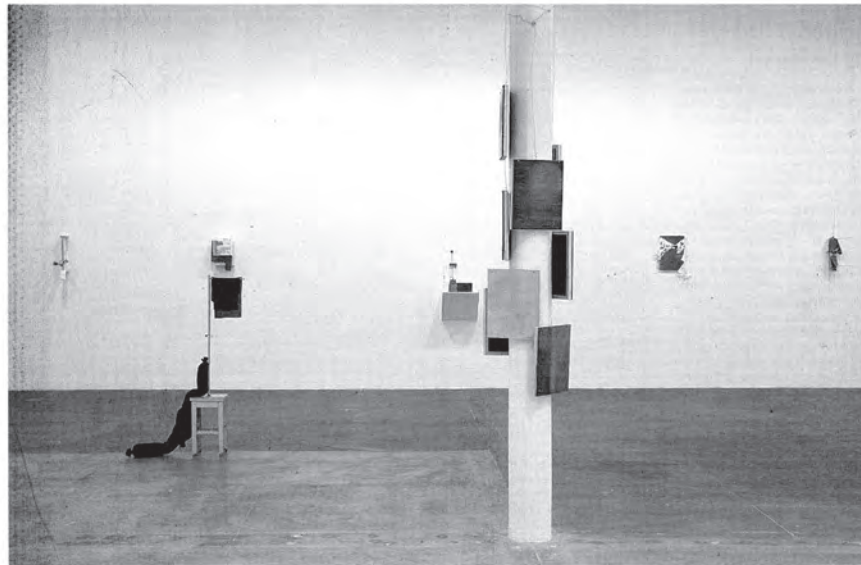
Nayland Blake, *Untitled*, 2007, painted wood, felt, wire, and glass beads, 18½ x 2½ x 6".

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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The New York Times

Art in Review



Nayland Blake's "What the Whiskey Said, What the Sun Is Saying," which includes sculpture from found materials.

Nayland Blake

What the Whiskey Said,
What the Sun Is Saying

Matthew Marks Gallery
523 West 24th Street
Through March 8

I love this show of Nayland Blake's recent work, which is quiet, spare and small scale, and different in those ways from some of his installations. He's the artist who, in a performance piece called "Starting Over" in 2000, had himself filmed dressed in a cumbersome bunny outfit and tap-dancing till he dropped.

The tap routine referred to his African-American heritage. (His father is black.) The rabbit suit — which weighed 146 pounds, the exact weight of his partner and collaborator, Philip Horvitz — alluded to his identity as a gay man. Wearing it while dancing was clearly an ordeal almost beyond endurance. It was as if, symbolically, the burden of acting out who he was brought him to a state of exhaustion and near immobility.

Mr. Horvitz died of a heart attack in 2005 at the age of 44. Soon

afterward Mr. Blake made a series of drawings in response to the shock. He produced a drawing a day for a month and the results hang, salon style, on one gallery wall.

The artist himself appears in many of them, as a self-caricature, bearded and heavy-set, like a clownish wilderness prophet. Individually the drawings are terse, diaristic, enigmatic. And although bound together by no obvious narrative, they clearly cohere as a group, adding up to a tragic-comical document, a kind of Mad magazine Kaddish, furiously sad.

Much of the more recent work in the show is sculpture assembled from found materials. Wall pieces made from pins, wires, beads and little swags of filigreed chains suggest antique jewelry, sexy punk accessories, carnival trinkets and rosaries. Modest-

size three-dimensional pieces stand in the center of the gallery. In one a stuffed fabric soft-sculpture leans, doll-like but abstract, against a wooden stand. In another, rows of tin cans have been nailed to a boxy structure to suggest a percussive instrument: Papageno's glockenspiel, or some Incredible String Band concoction; or the hurdy-gurdy from Schubert's "Wintereisse," ready to be strapped on the back for a walk down a chilly, evening-bound road.

What actually inspired this piece, I don't know, but I do know that it is inspired. Few American artists of the past two decades have gone to riskier lengths than Mr. Blake has to expose personal fears and obsessions through art. He is still doing so, even as obsessions change, and fears deepen, and his formal touch lightens up.

HOLLAND COTTER

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 schmaltzy, 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.



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THE NEW YORKER

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

"SOMETHING, ANYTHING?"

An enjoyable, very hip group show curated by the artist Nayland Blake that features raucous oddments in many mediums by dozens of contemporaries and a few honored dead. Some of the works are the kind of thing that artists make as jokes, for each other and for themselves; others evince the cracked sincerity of outsiders or the professional zaniness of comic-strip cartoonists (Ernie Bushmiller, George Herriman, Kaz). Serious works with wacky aspects (by Philip Guston, Ken Price, Cindy Sherman, and others) are dragooned into Blake's laughing academy to happily disorienting effect. The late Ray Johnson, the passive-aggressive "mail artist," seems to be the show's spectral guru, and Mike Kelley comes as no surprise. Reason? Taste? Never heard of them. But the installation, centered on a huge display console, is smart. In a back room, for the show's duration, a live d.j. spins vinyl from Blake's collection of more than three thousand LPs: that's a piece, too, titled "Ruins of a Sensibility, 1972-2002." Through Aug. 16. (Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 243-0200.)

Art in America

Nayland Blake at Matthew Marks

Sound has become a routine component of installation art. Clinking glasses, droning guitars and crashing waves add texture to an exhibition and can also ground wary viewers in something recognizable as they try to negotiate a confounding art work. But what about those amplified footsteps roaring from the back room at Matthew Marks, luring visitors past the relatively peaceful sculptures and drawings out front? Who could resist seeing if Godzilla or King Kong had been slowed down to a 24-hour loop per the currently favored manner of appropriation?

Happily, and hysterically, it was a video of a bloated Nayland Blake in a puffy, white bunny outfit trying to do a two-step. The highly reverberating noise came from his size-13 tap shoes, barely liftable from the floor thanks to the over 400 pounds descending on them. Besides Blake's own 270 pounds, his costume had been fitted with 146 pounds of navy beans, equal to the weight of his lover, who can be heard calling directions on the soundtrack: "Look over your right shoulder!" or "Raise your right arm over your head!" Each command is like a death sentence—Blake can barely stand up, much less do the bunny hop.

We've seen Blake's bunnies before, in his performances since the early '90s and in his last show at Marks, which featured drawings of them engaging in sexual play. They crop up throughout the current show: eight of them made from tar, dangling from a metal tree; another one in a charcoal drawing, dead, hanging from a chain; and, finally, a carved wood skeleton with furry ears is attached to a rod extending from

a wooden birdhouse. The artist has told us that they have to do with gay sexuality, racial murders, West African folktales and a host of other subjects.

To my mind there is no need to know all of these things. Blake is one of those rare inventors whose vivid renderings of social prejudice or familial relationships are immediately felt, even if one doesn't know the exact details. The exhibition, striking in its spareness, resounded with melancholy and joviality, earnestness and self-mockery. The large charcoals on paper reveal swift gestural movements that resolve into a solitary cabin in a white field or a length of heavy chain drifting to the bottom of the sea. Such images impart a universal longing whose meaning reaches well beyond the data of autobiography. With enduring art, the importance of self-referential aspects tends to diminish over time. Blake's work has a good shot at joining that rare company. —Michael Rush

Nayland Blake: *Startin Over Suit*, 2000, cloth, 146 pounds of beans, 83 by 46 by 22 inches; at Matthew Marks.



Flash Art

NEW YORK

R E V I E W S

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).