

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART SAN DIEGO

CERCA SERIES

JEREMY BLAKE OCTOBER 3 / NOVEMBER 24, 2002

After six years in New York Jeremy Blake returned last year to Los Angeles. *Winchester*, a suite of seven paintings and a projection (from what will be a series of three), is the first art Blake has produced in California since his graduation from CalArts in 1995. This most recent work divulges the decisive role California, as a physical and psychic place, plays in the technical and theoretical development of his art. *Winchester*, a project steeped in the history and mythology of the state, epitomizes Blake's artistic achievement to date yet also signals his work's new direction and maturation.

Winchester was inspired by the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. Guided by the nineteenth-century practice of Spiritualism, heiress Sara Winchester obsessively added onto her home in an attempt to ward off the angry spirits of those killed by Winchester rifles. A Spiritualist advisor suggested that expansion of her home would make room for friendly spirits, while the sounds of never ending construction warded off evil spirits. Over the course of 38 years, Sara built a sprawling mansion, well outfitted for the undead with staircases going nowhere, doorways leading out into open air, and miles of darkened hallways to roam. Blake explains that his projection "goes insane with Sara." As is typical of Blake's approach, he does not document what Winchester built, instead he embarks upon a psychological tour of the violence that haunted her.

Fluid transitions from 16mm footage of the Winchester house to lurid fields of color reveal Blake's mastery of his digital technique. Like his previous projections, he created *Winchester* by digitally amalgamating architectural photography, ink drawings, historical advertisements, and Rorschach inkblots with intricate vector-graphics. In *Winchester*, however, Blake demonstrates his extensive experience with the digital medium that he pioneered as an art form. For example, he no longer relies on architectural apparatus as segues, but instead, expertly rendered dissolves serve as the transition between figurative and abstract imagery.

Blake's "moving-pictures" relate to film morphologically. Perhaps it is because Blake moved back to Los Angeles to work on a film with director P.T. Anderson that *Winchester* more emphatically looks, feels, and sounds like traditional narrative film. *Winchester* opens with footage of the house taken with a 16mm camera accompanied by the steady whirring of film moving through the sprockets of a projector. It is easy to be fooled into thinking you are watching a film; but, as the image starts to transform the sprocket sound becomes percussive acting as an audio prelude to the remix of imagery in the projection. Sound announces *Winchester's* status as a new combinatory form- neither film nor any pure form of media.

Architecture, like film, has also been a primary influence on Blake's work. He has consistently manipulated architectural references and architectonic forms. *Bungalow B*, (1999) one of his earliest projections, constructed a narrative by quoting architectural details- reflective walls, windows framing hilltop views of Los Angeles, and continuously sliding glass doors-of the eponymous pool-side cabana at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Inspired by photographer Jeff Wall's investigation of Philip Johnson's glass houses, Blake was intrigued by the exchange of flatness and depth in two-dimensional representations of modernist decor and Hollywood architectural ersatz.

Blake focuses on architecture again in *Winchester*, although in a different way than in *Bungalow 8*, *Angel Dust*, (2000), or *Guccinam*, (2001). Even though he incorporates a photograph of an architectural façade into the projection for the first time, the house does not reference explicit architectural space as much as it provides a connection to a sensibility and a particular history. The image of the mansion, and the gunslinger who inspired it, melts into an explosive cascade of color. The segue is an explicit reference to 1960s Color Field painting. It calls attention to how Color Field painting was haunted by definitions of modernism first established in the late nineteenth century. *Winchester*, like the house that inspired it, is

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haunted - by the action and legacy of modernist painting.

Blake has always been a covert painter. At CalArts, he studied under David Reed, a painter interested in how other media, specifically film, influence and inform his art. In a reversal of Reed's project, Blake abandoned painting to demonstrate how it informed other media like film. "I couldn't find a new route for abstraction," Blake explains. "I got frustrated with people coming in and saying my work looked like someone else's. The more frustrated I was, the more promising film looked. Then in 1995 the computer suddenly offered a new avenue for my interest in abstraction."

References to painting and painterly technique have become increasingly overt in Blake's work. Blake is always careful to explain that he does not manipulate state-of-the-art digital equipment. "I think of technology," he explains, "the way a musician thinks about an electric instrument. If it's right for the work I want to make, I'll use it, and if not, I'll use an older technique."

Blake has concentrated on a lo-fi look as the technological optimism of the 1990s and the utopian promise of the web have waned. He is now interested in maximizing the potential of his current tools by focusing on "how a painter would use them," in other words, investigating how digital modes of picture making are steeped in the ideology of painterly practice. His work currently quotes painting in the same way it appropriates film clips and references architectural details. For example, *Mod Lang*, the last projection Blake made before *Winchester*, recalls Morris Louis's unfurled paintings and Kenneth Noland's targets. *Mod Lang* is like a Louis painting that has been plugged-in-thin veils of color pour down the wall overlapping and creating new color combinations.



Jeremy Blake, *Winchester*, storyboard #2, 2002

More than merely quoting the imagery of Color Field painting, Blake's projections engage the historical imperatives that supported this movement. Artists such as Louis and Noland maintained a modernist belief in pictorial opticality as they focused on color as a mode of abstraction in the wake of abstract expressionism. Jules Olitski, who used spray guns as his paint brush, epitomized the color field painters' desire to create a painterly presence by "spraying color on the air." Towards that end, Dan Flavin liberated the ideas of Color Field painting from the easel by sculpting with neon tubes that infused space with color. Blake's focus on color, as well as the digital projections' emphasis on luminescence, makes it seem as if his work revives the practice of Color Field painting. But, Blake's project accomplishes far more than acting as a homage.

In *Winchester*, Blake not only engages the pictorial values of modernism, for the first time he comments on its historical meaning. In previous projections, Blake ironically commented on the stylish pictorial qualities of modernist design, architecture, and painting. He used modernist details to advance his narrative more than as a means to engage modernist history *per se*. In *Winchester*, Blake articulates a strategic relationship to the history of modernism—one that allows him to critique the practice and expand it by offering a new type of object and a new mode of working. Changes in the composition of the projection, such as the differently shaped color forms and the abandonment of architectural segues, suggest this crucial change

in Blake's work. It is the accompanying paintings, however, that indicate for the first time the extent of his critical project.

The *Spiritualized* paintings Blake created in response to the *Winchester* projection (unlike his previous practice of creating drawings that served as "storyboards" for future projections) are the ghosts that haunt *Winchester*. They are the undead history of modernist painting, the specters that once constrained Blake's ability to paint. Blake describes the seven paintings as photo-realistic "portraits" of the film stills. He named each painting with a trait of the ghosts he imagined inhabiting the Mystery House. *flies through the Door to Nowhere...*, for example, refers to an architectural feature of the house and describes the activity of the ghost. *expands nightly...features a complex accumulation of color recalling the shape of a gunshot wound that references both the violence of the Winchester heritage as well as the Victorian propensity to use ornate flowers to repress signs of violence and sexuality.*

Blake's paintings have an uncanny presence, like ghosts they are both in the room and yet not altogether present. This effect is due in part to their strange ontological status. A photo-realistic "portrait" of film still is a perverse idea. The combination of photography and paint is an oxymoron, just as architecture opposes the two-dimensionality of projections and the movement of film contradicts the static nature of painting. These paintings predicated on the miscegenation of media stand in direct opposition to the modernist mantra of medium specificity. Purposefully unfinished, Blake's paintings point out how painting alone cannot achieve a critical function - painting is now a mere ghost of what it once was. At the same time, the paintings' delicate layering and caustic color combinations proclaim their status as objects in a way that the projection's spectral play of

light can never achieve.

As both painting and projection, as a new combinatory art form, Blake's work has the revolutionary potential to change the way the object of art is defined today. In this way his art is what Gilles Deleuze defined as the *objectile*. *Objectile* is the term for a new type of object that intrinsically expresses the variability and multiplicity endemic to the computer age. Deleuze coined the term in response to outmoded modernist standards, particularly the idea of painting as a window on the world. In Deleuze's model the painting-window is replaced by tabulation, the grid on which lines, numbers, and changing characters are mathematically inscribed. Neither painting nor film, Blake's projections are *objectiles*: a digitized art form that mathematically encodes a sinuous flow of transforming modes of information. As such Blake's work is redolent with the portent and promise of art that defines our time.

Rachel Teagle, Assistant Curator

Cerca Series: Jeremy Blake is made possible by a gift from Robin and Bill Comer. Additional funding for the Cerca Series comes from the City of San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture.