

## **Exhibition Reviews**

***Nayland Blake: Behavior*, Curated by Maura Reilly, Location One, New York, New York, December 2008 – February 2009.**

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# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

February 2009

## NAYLAND BLAKE: LOCATION ONE

Faye Hirsch

THE WORKS SELECTED for "Behavior," a large exhibition by Nayland Blake at this alternative space in SoHo, are relatively modest--found objects strung together in loose clusters, items of altered furniture, toys, Fluxus-like multiples--but they pack a punch. Take a tidy lamp, called Headlight (1991): its white shade is printed with two tiny Red Cross symbols that instantly convert the blank expanse into a face. Two paper flaps could be hair, or limp bunny ears, or some form of nurse's cap--none of the associations can be pinned down, exactly, yet they gather into something a little ominous, a little humorous. The mechanism of such transformations can be wonderfully simple: merely a plastic fastener, for example, inexplicably yoking together a half-dozen bottles of Brer Rabbit Molasses (Molasses Six Pack, 1999). Or it can be more elaborate, as in the addition of restraints and other sadomasochistic appurtenances to a classic 1927 Marcel Breuer leather-and-aluminum chair (Restraint Chair, 1989). The reappointed chair looks as though it could admirably serve its retrofitted purpose, down to the mirror strategically placed at fellatio level, all the while delivering a lesson about the libidinal undercurrents of modernist design.

Curator Maura Reilly has assembled 50 objects from 30 years in this first such career-long survey of the prolific artist. Blake has worked in a broad range of materials and formats; all the objects here can stand alone, though some refer to projects elsewhere. Blake constantly relays imagery from one work to another, and from one period to the next. Molasses, for example, alludes to a human-scale gingerbread house that the artist has re-created several times (though not at Location One) and, in turn, to another work on view, Jim (1991), a creepy rabbit marionette suspended over the roof of a miniature log cabin, referring to a bizarre racist toy the artist once saw. In fact, Blake's work begs for a full-dress retrospective integrating objects, performances and film; the more you see, the more you are able to form a cohesive picture of bits and pieces glimpsed over years. Blake blurs categories and mixes metaphors; though his work can look somewhat constrained when limited to doses, it is almost wildly generous in its totality.

The artist has long addressed issues of race and sexuality; he himself is biracial but light-skinned and a bearded, burly, pipe-smoking "bear," a subcategory of queer. Such identities have informed his deliberately multivalent project as much as have antecedents as disparate as Joseph Cornell and the Marquis de Sade. Thus the frequent appearance of the hermeneutically nimble rabbit, a favorite trope. The gold nylon Heavenly Bunny Suit (1994) emanates a weird mixture of fun and discomfort, while the stuffed bunnies are downright

sinister: a poufy yellow one shedding yellow pompons, as if from some disease (One Down, 1994); another stashed in a suspended nylon stocking, as if a relic of some murder scene (Bunnyhole 1, 1997). Similarly polymorphous is Homunculus (1991), a dwarf-sized rubber and latex man, all black, touched up decorously with ribbon, with a face molded from Blake's own. Propped up on a post, he sports flaccid pouches where a Renaissance prince might wear a robust codpiece. What a strange, laughable mix is this little man, at once endearing and creepy!

Blake has been an AIDS activist, and the subject of illness often surfaces in his art--most weirdly, here, in Magic (1990-91), a shrinelike, gothic assemblage that has as its main element a bizarre puppet created in the 1960s by Wayland Flowers, a flamboyant puppeteer and TV personality. Flowers died of AIDS in 1988; Blake acquired one of his "Madame" puppets at an auction and placed her in Magic, with its tumbling mass of dried flowers. On the other end of affect, Blake can fashion cool, highly formal works, as in a recent series of brightly colored Ptexiglas and mirror panels with surfaces brushed here and there to create scratchy patches. As much as Magic, they refuse to behave, imperfect as monochromes and as objects of design. "Behavior" includes three evenings of readings and performances by Blake and literary friends, the final one to take place Feb. 9.



January 5, 2009

**GOTHAM ART & THEATER**  
by Elisabeth Kley

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A more tragic small figure appears in **Nayland Blake's** retrospective, "Behavior," another exploration of black and white (among many other things) at **Location One** on Greene Street in SoHo until Feb. 14. *Homunculus* (1992), a black leather costume for a very small person, hangs on a stand -- deflated, empty and alone. Body sections are incongruously joined together with little white bows, and the head is complete with a hairy beard and eyebrows.

Blake was included in the 1991 Whitney Biennial and exhibits with **Matthew Marks Gallery**. Harrowing videos documenting performed ordeals, including *Gorge* (1998) (hand fed for an hour by a shirtless black man standing behind him) and *Starting Over* (2000) (tap dancing in a bunny suit of the same weight as his lover, Philip Hurvitz) are among Blake's most well-known works, but the Location One retrospective is confined to sculpture, paintings and objects chosen by the artist himself.

A small metal pen called *Arena #1* (1993) features a square black rabbit-eared fabric mask hanging on a T-bar rising from the center of each side, with medical white crosses for eyes. Like S&M scarecrows guarding an undersized boxing rink, the masks are tethered to the fence with the steel cables often used to keep fur coats from being stolen.

*Restraint Chair* (1989) is a metal Breuer chair with a black leather back and seat outfitted with black leather cuffs, more steel cable and a mirror hanging under the seat. Made at the height of the AIDS crisis, the work takes on a tragic resonance. References to leather fetishes and antiseptic metal hospitals conjure up hedonism, mourning and loss.

In 2002, Blake, who appears to be white but is actually bi-racial, exhibited a video installation called *Coat*. After covering each other's faces with black and white frosting, he and the artist A.A. Bronson are seen kissing, blending the colors and perhaps looking forward to a day when differences of race and sexuality become matters for celebration rather than forces that divide.



# THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

APRIL 20, 2009

## ART

### 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.)



January 5, 2009

## **Gorge-Us: Nayland Blake retrospective will include the artist being force fed by the audience**

**Joe Bendik**

This week, I ask the burning question: “Can anybody really explain Nayland Blake’s art?” Admittedly, conceptual artists are often of an elusive nature. There is a fine line between intent and execution. There must be both. That’s where I have a problem with Blake’s works. Judging from his blog and interviews, Blake would probably see that comment as a typical art-snob attitude.

As he stated in a recent interview: “It’s not about a kind of intellectual finesse or coolness...the ‘I’m above all of this’ attitude, which is often the way people mark their presence in the art world.” This is all well and good, but I have a problem with art that doesn’t exhibit anything more than intent—especially when this art depends on the viewer’s knowledge of the artist’s entire language of representation. Without a background check, there is little to grasp onto. This isn’t a grand indictment of the conceptual artist either. I can think of a lot of conceptual artists who elevate their premises by utilizing technique with freakiness.

In his current exhibition, a 25-year retrospective at Location One titled “Behavior,” Blake continues to confuse and confound. Much of his famous works are there: “Heavenly Bunny Suit” (pictured), “Restrain Chair,” “Gorge Lunchbox” and, notably, “Magic” (a Cornell’s box type of work utilizing the “Madame” puppet from the 1970s that Blake bought at an auction).

It’s about time he received another look due to his strong credentials: Born on the Upper West Side in 1960, his artistic parents encouraged him. During his high school years, he used to hang out in East Village & Soho galleries and lofts, checking out performances and films by Jack Smith, Richard Forman and others. He earned a B.F.A from Bard College, Annandale-On-Hudson in 1982 and a Masters of Fine Art from the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA in 1984. In 1995, he co-curated an influential show at the Berkeley Art Museum (“Different Light”) that put him on the map. Since 2003, Blake holds his position as founding chair of the International Center of Photography and Bard College’s Master of Fine Arts program in Advanced Photographic Studies.

With all of this credibility, one wonders why so much of the art itself seems so sloppy. I realize that what Blake is saying is more important than mere technique, but still, I have serious hangups when it comes to appreciating his work. This could be his point, but I think critics have been too kind. I actually read a review that virtually apologized for his drawings.

There is another side to Blake: the grotesque. On January 9, Blake re-enacts his infamous “Gorge” piece, where he sits shirtless and is force-fed (this time by the audience) for an hour. There are also Blake’s S&M pieces: chairs with handcuffs, leather, mirrors, etc. Not much more needs to be said, it’s pretty obvious.

Everyone at the opening seemed to be having a lot of fun; snapping pictures and chatting. I don’t begrudge anyone their fun, but I must again ask the question: “Can anybody really explain Nayland Blake’s art?”