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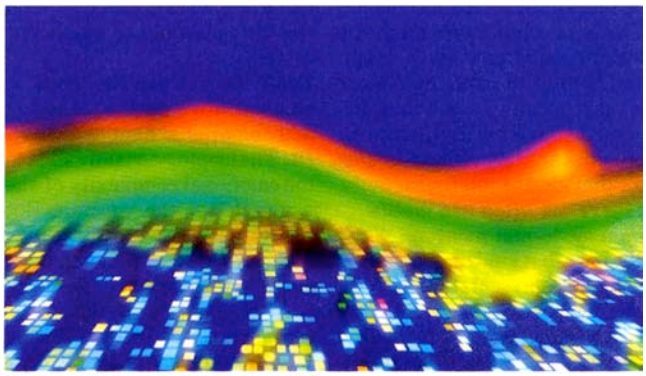
ART

Interview

H-h-h-his generation

Jeremy Blake remakes mod at the turn of the millennium

By Tim Griffin



Jeremy Blake, *Chemical Sundown*, 2001.

When I first met Jeremy Blake three years ago, his work seemed obviously new. Trained as a painter at CalArts, Blake had left the brushes behind for an iMac, transporting mid-century American abstraction to the monitor, and animating it as ultraslow video loops that folded cinema and architecture into painting. (In his works, rooms often dissolve into fields of color and vice versa.) Traces of noirish, Chandleresque narratives, impenetrable but infinitely evocative, also worked their way in: His first solo show in New York was titled "Bungalow 8," after the Beverly Hills Hotel lair where notorious junk-bond dealings occurred during the 1980s. In Blake's work, art, whatever the medium, is invariably tied to the myths and pathos of American pop culture. The results, thus far, have been both disarming and seductive.

His second solo show, "Mod Lang," lands at Feigen Contemporary after an impressive array of successes that include strong showings last year in P.S. 1's "Greater New York" exhibition and the Whitney Museum's "BitStreams" show. (Full disclosure: Blake also appeared in a show that I curated at Feigen.) More recently, he's been adding to the very pop cultural soil from which his work springs: "Bungalow 8" helped inspire a club by that name in Chelsea. *TONY* spoke by e-mail and over the phone with the artist, who-although he lives in New York-was at work on upcoming projects in Los Angeles.

Time Out New York: **Where does *Mod Lang* come from?**

Jeremy Blake: There are plenty of inspirations for the work: Morris Louis, Rothko, Archigram, Ruscha, Keith Moon's various nouveau riche residences. But I lifted the title from a song by Big Star. They were a seminal American band that combined a languid, Southern, very heavily drugged poesy with the kind of pop production of British records. The Mod movement was a British thing, obviously, a label for working-class kids who adapted elements of the International Style into a new aesthetic of libido and rebellion. So when I heard the title "Mod Lang," I thought it implied the emergence of a new formal language-one that offered the rewards of fantastic innovations, cheap thrills and emotional heat.

***TONY*:** That's a load of '60s references, even if many people say that your work expresses itself in a new formal language.

JB: The name *Mod Lang* suggests an ideal more than anything else. I can't make any claim to a new formal language; I'm really creating work that sets familiar ideas on shifting sands, which is why the work deals with the loss of one's preciously held assumptions – and the satisfaction, grim or pleasurable, that derives from being able to see what's been there all along.

TONY: What has been there all along?

JB: I'm describing a sensation more than any aesthetic constant. The best comparison might be waking up after a vivid dream and having the urge to explore what it meant. I hope that, beyond just looking cool, my work provides a strong visual stimulus for that kind of internal activity.

TONY: You often use motifs from modernist painting. Why?

JB: I use that kind of abstraction to haunt representational space. Mixing architectural and abstract imagery into a kind of time-based, painterly hallucination is the most satisfying way I've found to represent the uncanny. I got a push in this direction from the writings of Anthony Vidler, and Jeff Wall's take on Philip Johnson's houses, and also from reading Walter Benjamin, who said that modern painting should take note of the innovations of architecture and film. I was foolhardy enough to actually try it.

TONY: And how does such modernist imagery "haunt" your latest DVDs?

JB: In the DVD entitled *Mod Lang,* for example, hundreds of beautiful abstract-painting ideas flow down like syrup. A scene in Berkshire Fangs shows what appears to be a pristine Ellsworth Kelly composition that slowly changes tone and goes out of focus until it becomes unbearably infernal. It's important to me that the threat of a narrative intrusion transforms the work.

TONY: Do you ever worry that the seductiveness of your work could blind people to the ideas behind it?

JB: There are people who get nervous when an artwork doesn't explain everything up front, but they don't really interest me. They're like the rude and hasty types who assume, for example, that if a woman is beautiful, than she can't possible be intelligent as well.

TONY: Do you use the loops as a narrative device, or to add "emotional heat"?

JB: The looping certainly adds to the emotional complexity of the work, if not the warmth. But there's also a series of drawings that provides a skeletal back story and attributes the design of each of these locations to the same fictional architect.

TONY: And what is that story?

JB: A rebellious, pill-popping, mod teenager named Keith Rhoades earns the nickname "Slick" after wrecking his scooter on rainy London night in the mid '60s. After this formative accident, which is rumored to have damaged his brain, Rhoades begins to design and build his own visionary architecture. He is banished from England after torching an historic castle in order to construct Berkshire Fangs, a home for "stylish vampires," on the same site. Slick is then force into exile in Southern California, where he enjoys himself thoroughly.

TONY: How do you reconcile the high- and low-tech aspects of your work?

JB: The drawings are sort of like an episode of *Behind the Music* crossed with an illuminated manuscript. There is a deliberate high/low tension in this work. But it works well in concert.

TONY: Just like Behind the Music, you always seem to return to the subject of drugs in your visuals and titles. Why?

JB: Take two of my pieces together, and then call me in the morning. Chances are you'll be able to tell me why.

TONY: How does music – sound – function in your work?

JB: It's there as an ethic and as a formal device. I got a crash course in punk rock from some of the slightly older, much cooler kids I met growing up in Washington, D.C. Hanging around with people like Guy Picciotto from Fugazi and Mike Fellows of the Mighty Flashlight influenced me because they have always allowed themselves the freedom to passionately embrace or sardonically reject precedent. Sound in my work functions as mood control. I am interested in the fact that narrative cues, such as suspenseful noises, are extremely disorienting when used in a largely abstract, time-based artwork.

TONY: Film director P.T. Anderson (of *Magnolia*) asked you to contribute something to an upcoming movie. How did that come about, and what will your role be?

JB: Well, he called me after seeing some work, and when I heard the message, I really though it was one of the D.C. guys playing a prank on me. But as it turned out, it was the genuine P.T. Anderson calling. Unfortunately, that's all I can say right now. If I said more, I'd wake up tomorrow morning facedown in the middle of Magnolia Boulevard with roller-skate burns all over my ass.