H-h-h-his generation
Jeremy Blake remakes mod at the turn of the millennium  By Tim Griffin

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 precisely 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
elegant 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 possibly 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-
techn 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.