



THE PRETTY PINK AND BLUE SURFACES OF JEREMY BLAKE'S WORK >> BELIE A ROUGHER EDGE LURKING DOWN BELOW. THROUGH HIS DVD INSTALLATIONS, EXHIBITIONS OF STILLS FROM THESE DVDS OR GLOSSY REALIST PAINTINGS, BLAKE'S SEEMINGLY SHINY, HAPPY ARTWORK IS ACTUALLY VERY MUCH THE OPPOSITE: A CRITIQUE OF THE HIGH-LIVING LIFESTYLE WE'VE ALL BEEN SOLD BUT CAN'T MAKE THE DOWN PAYMENT ON. AND AS THE ARTIST HIMSELF DISCOVERED, COMING TOO CLOSE TO HOLLYWOOD HAS ITS OWN HIGH PRICE.

IN TERMS OF MASS MEDIA RECOGNITION MOST PEOPLE KNOW YOUR STUFF BECAUSE OF *PUNCH DRUNK LOVE*. I'M WONDERING HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT PEOPLE FIRST APPROACHING YOUR WORK THROUGH FILM RATHER THAN THROUGH A GALLERY OR A MUSEUM.

JEREMY BLAKE: I was well known in the art world already, so on that level it wasn't a problem. If it had happened earlier and I was less understood within that sort of cloistered milieu, then I would have had a problem with it.

DO YOU THINK THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN A PROBLEM IN TERMS OF THERE BEING A BACKLASH?

JB: There's a backlash *now* from the art world. Once I did (*Punch Drunk Love*), there was a lot of envy and it came out in strange ways. I was also in two Whitney Biennials consecutively, so it was just the slam-dunk. If you ever want your friends to hate you, get in two Whitney Biennials and then be in a P.T. Anderson movie, and you will see bizarre behavior from other artists. There are people doing other things that I would have thought would be a lot more envy creating, like Matthew Barney dating Björk or whatever, but I think this ranks pretty high. Higher than I ever thought.

MAYBE YOU NEED TO GET BJÖRK TO BREAK UP WITH MATTHEW BARNEY...

JB: That's the thing: I really did have rumors like that. Basically, I had the celebrity-style problems without the money. So there are dangers to mixing two worlds, definitely. There's also some cool stuff, too, that comes out of it.

WELL, TELL ME WHAT THE COOL STUFF IS.

JB: The cool stuff is knowing all about how different things are done. Like, I know how a film editor thinks, versus somebody who's used to cutting their own things for the purposes of art gallery exhibition. And I know how a sound editor thinks and how a director works with other people to some extent. I've always also feared groups and really hated group dynamics. It taught me that if you build the right group, you can get a lot done.

DO YOU GO THROUGH PHASES WHERE YOU'RE DOING ALL 'TIME-BASED PAINTING', AND THEN ANOTHER PHASE WHERE YOU'RE DOING ALL FILM WORK?

JB: Yeah, I try to break it up. You know, painting is like a blue-collar job. You go in and you change clothes and you listen to the rock station or whatever. I don't ever smoke a cigarette when I'm in front of the computer. When I'm in the painting studio, I'm forced to revert to it. You can drink a beer and continue to paint, but somehow you don't drink in the editing room. Maybe other people do, but I don't. Something's sort of loose and weird and masturbatory about painting. I sort of feel like I'm a nut when I do it, like it's sort of blue-collar on one hand and then sort of pre-lingual. But that doesn't mean that the paintings I'm making aren't thought out. They are.

I'm cynical about painting. I think the potential of other people's paintings are huge, but for me, I didn't see a way to innovate with abstraction on canvas, and when I was studying painting I thought abstraction was the most important 20th century form. But I also thought it was dying. Then I would see things like *2001*, Stan Brakhage or (the scene in) *Fahrenheit 451* where they're pumping moving color into Julie Christie's apartment in lieu of letting the citizens read books, and I just thought, 'That's fucking great, man.' So I was looking for the way for abstraction to migrate and grow without mining it.

WHAT MAKES YOU SAY THAT ABSTRACTION WAS DYING?

JB: It was not dying, but it was getting more and more and more about the narcissism of small differences, like, 'I'm the guy that does the blue on top of the red' or 'I'm the woman that makes the things that look sort of like rugs from the '60s.' There was a certain point where it felt decorative. In the hands of a great abstract painter it's not like it's dead by any stretch. It's just that, for me, it wasn't there. I loved it, but I didn't want to make it. But I did want to make abstractions a part of what I did.

WHAT YOU JUST SAID ABOUT ABSTRACT PAINTING BEING DECORATIVE, IN SOME OF YOUR WORK IT SEEMS LIKE THERE'S AN INTEREST IN THINGS LIKE TEXTILES AND PATTERNS AND DECORATIVE MATERIALS...

JB: The interest in textiles emerged with *Ozzie Clark*, and it stayed with me because it's so cool, spatially. I would never care about fashion, never care about textiles, never care about any of that shit, but I was messing around with blowing up handwriting and trying to make paintings from handwriting. I was looking at my own handwriting—it was boring—and then my girlfriend bought a book about (1960s British fashion designer) Ozzie Clark, and he has this great handwriting. Then I started reading his diary, which is an extraordinary mix of namedropping and totally drug-addled depression. What I liked about it was that it was shallow in terms of it didn't provide a whole lot of interpretation, but at the same time he was visually poetic and he was honest, and it was raw material. I'm a straight guy from the suburbs of DC and this guy was a gay jet setter. I don't do drugs and he does a ton. There's a lot of differences there. But what I related to about him was similar to the ethics of the punk rock music that I grew up loving. He was kicking down every door to get out of the English middle class.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT YOU MENTION THAT, BECAUSE ONE OF THE THINGS I'VE NOTICED ABOUT YOUR PAINTINGS IS THAT THERE'S SORT OF THIS OBSESSION WITH 'LIFESTYLE.' ONE THING ABOUT THE JET SET LIFESTYLE IS THAT IT'S THIS FANTASY OF ESCAPE...

JB: It's funny because the more explicit I made that fantasy in my work, the more abuse I've gotten. In a way that's interesting, because it does actually show you that realism is powerful. Like the more specific you are, the more specific your opposition will be.

THE OTHER ELEMENT TO THAT JET SET FANTASY IS THAT IT'S ABOUT ACCEPTANCE—WALKING INTO A PARTY AND EVERYBODY KNOWING YOUR NAME—AND *INDIFFERENCE* TO ACCEPTANCE—WALKING INTO A PARTY, EVERYBODY KNOWING YOUR NAME AND YOU DON'T REALLY GIVE A SHIT.

JB: That's the fantasy. It's all sort of promised to you and then not delivered. The actual real world moves at a very different speed than fantasy. But the best way to say what I was trying to say is this: I want to approach American life and contemporary life as if I was an alien visiting the planet. I want to approach my own unconscious that way, too. I want to see it accurately, but with a cool eye.

YOUR PIECE *GUCCINAM* HAS THAT ELEMENT OF VIEWING THINGS FROM THE OUTSIDE, BECAUSE YOU'RE FLATTENING THESE TWO VERY DIFFERENT THINGS.

JB: You mean military culture and fashion? Violence and prettiness?

YEAH.

JB: What happened was that it was the first piece that I made that disturbed anybody, because of the title. One curator for the Whitney said, 'How come, if it's Vietnam, it has an Islamic arch?' Of course, a couple years later we both found out why. It's not Vietnam, per se, but sometimes things come to you intuitively. Sometimes you're getting a signal from the culture, and you pick up on it. That was funny, because that's something where (*Guccinam*) was supposedly decorative at the time, and now it holds a whole lot of content. It was just a kid getting a radio signal from other people in his braces or whatever.

THAT CAN BE GOOD, BUT THAT CAN ALSO BE FRUSTRATING IF PEOPLE AT THE TIME AREN'T REALLY PICKING UP ON IT.

JB: That's fine. That's what art is about. That's why I don't have George Clooney explaining what it's about to you. That's why I don't do it through the studio system and make sure that a large population understands it. At some point I might do that, and it would be fun, but for the gallery you don't have to do that.

HOW IS IT DIFFERENT TO CONVEY INFORMATION IN A MOTION-BASED PIECE VERSUS A STATIC PIECE?

JB: I try to put motion in the static stuff. That's the biggest reason why I'm not making monumental abstraction. I think I'm capable of it, but I really like to think in a sequence. I guess the difference between moving and not moving is, to me, locking down information in a way that feels very certain. It makes things easier for experts and critics, and when you start moving things around it's more like a shooting gallery or a piece of music or something—you just have some fluidity in it. It keeps things more interesting, rhetorically. But, I'm telling you, if everyone worked the way I work, I would turn around and work the other way. I'm a contrarian, really. I'm the kind of person that read *Mad Magazine* as a kid. It was deep (for me), because it meant that you didn't accept every order that you were given.

IT'S INTERESTING THAT YOU SAY THAT YOU'RE CONTRARIAN...

JB: You don't necessarily get that from the surface of the work.

YEAH, YOU'RE PROBABLY GOING TO CRINGE BUT ON THE SURFACE YOUR WORK OFTEN SEEMS REALLY PRETTY...

JB: I think pretty carries a value with it. To me, a Barnett Newman is pretty. Not if you get into art historical terminology, but if you asked me, 'Is that beautiful?' I'd say, 'Fuck yes, it's beautiful.' So it's going to be seductive. That's probably a better term—an idea that I like, ideologically, is seductive.

SINCE YOU WENT TO SCHOOL IN CALIFORNIA, AND YOU'VE MOVED BACK TO CALIFORNIA, DO YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR COLOR PALETTE BEING 'CALIFORNIAN'?

JB: Yeah, I do think of it as being influenced by the colors of Southern California. Not in an 'Ocean Pacific clothing' way, but just how white the light is here and how dark the night is after the backs of your eyeballs have been washed in sunlight all day long. There's definitely some real consciousness of how the light bounces off the back of your eye. My girlfriend Theresa had the best quote: 'LA looks like it was designed and built by eighth grade girls.' Buildings are pink and flowers are seven feet high. And then there are these moments of violence—like earthquakes and fires and things—that really contradict that. To me it's a landscape that, because of its instability and weirdness, starts to echo a landscape of a dream or unconscious. It's perfect that the fantasy industry is set here.

I'm reminded: I'm working with this guy David Bennan... Do you know the band Silver Jews?

YEAH, THEY HAVE A NEW RECORD COMING OUT.

JB: Well, he wrote me a poem because I called him and asked him to. I wanted to work with him because I was listening to Silver Jews all through making *Ozzie Clark* and the *Autumn Almanac* show. A friend of mine plays with him sometimes, this guy Mike Fellows, who's really great. So I called up Mike, and I was like, 'Can I get in touch with Dave?' And he was like, 'Yeah, but I don't think he's going to do it, man. He's a pretty moody guy.' So I call (Dave Berman) up, and of course he's like, 'No way.' So I said, 'Alright, well, what *do* you got?' So he sent me four pages of titles and scraps of lines and things he wasn't quite done with, and that was great. It was something where I could really riff off of it without feeling like I was just coming in and fucking up something. The result was this thing called *Sodium Fox*, and then he wrote a finished poem called *See You in Chains*. I think it's the best one I've ever done. He reads (his poem), and the imagery changes—it's sort of like this 21st century American landscape that has Wal-Mart Superstores and super churches and war and all those things firmly in mind, but it's all in the background, and then David Berman's love stories are in the foreground.

By the way, the other point is that Ozzie Clark is the previous generation. This is really about *my* generation. If there's one self-portrait by proxy, this is it. And the reason why I like it is because the jet set and Ozzie Clark and that whole paradigm ended in Dionysian wipeout. You died or you went straight and started doing coke and running an art gallery. In our generation, there's something that maybe it's angrier, maybe it's more disappointed, but at the end of the day David Berman walked away from it. One of the things I liked about him is he *did* live through his own drug abuse and shit, unlike Ozzie, and he really is articulate, and Ozzie's not. So there's this kind of paradigm of strength, not of fading out. Honestly, by far, it's the coolest thing I've done.