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Nayland Blake: Behavior at Location One

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Location One

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Nayland Blake, *Magic*, 1991

The poignant insights adolescents have into works of art never cease to amaze me. During my visit to Location One for its current survey of works by Nayland Blake, titled *Nayland Blake: Behavior*, the Gallery Assistant told me that a group of high school students recently offered some intriguing readings of Blake's *Bunnyhole II*, 1997. The piece includes a white stuffed bunny rabbit trapped in a black nylon stocking that hangs from the wall. According to the Gallery Assistant, one student read the black stocking as symbolic of a used condom filled with sperm, an apt reading considering Blake's often-playful and sometimes-dark exploration of sexuality. Another student suggested that the sculpture might signify Blake's parents' conceiving Blake, with the stocking representing the artist's father's black penis and the white bunny representing the mother (Blake is half black and half white), and the piece consequently being loaded with the racial and societal tensions that might arise from such a partnering. Seriously, what creative, insightful interpretations.

As far as I know, Blake has never fully explained the significance of his use of the bunny rabbit, which appears in so many different manifestations throughout his oeuvre. Perhaps this is because it seems to signify something new in each piece, or because it would ruin the fun and sense of mystery, or a bit of both. In *Arena #1*, 1993, for example, the black hoods adorned with rabbit ears that hang on top of steel poles could represent executioners or, conversely, prisoners. The stitched white crosses that serve as eyes recall the x-mark eyes that traditionally indicate death in cartoon drawings. In *Headlight*, 1991, on the other hand, the same hood appears in white and serves as a lampshade. Here it has a kitsch quality and engages with Blake's interest in pop culture, mass produced items, and found objects. The Gallery Assistant thoughtfully pointed out to me that he thinks the bunny is a marketing tool. It certainly functions as such; the bunny has become a sort of icon for the artist, something that people readily associate with Blake's name and work. An object that has such a significant resonance with our childhood experiences, from Walt Disney to Looney Toons to longing for a pet, the bunny weaves a subtle narrative thread throughout the artist's work and serves as a vehicle through which he addresses issues of race, sexuality, consumerism, and relationships.

The survey relates the adventures of an artist who has experimented with many different methods and media, all the while retaining a steady appetite for the dark, the disturbing, the provocative, and the kitsch. The press release describes the show as an alternative consideration of a prolific artist that highlights his sculpture, painting, multiples, and small-scale works while excluding the work for which he is most famous. Blake has a tremendous ability to respond to issues of persecution and prejudice by juxtaposing familiar imagery and objects in unexpected ways. In *Ibedji (Quick)*, 1996-97, for example, Nestle Quick chocolate syrup bottles are paired with white and black top hats and KKK hoods, among other things, posing questions about pop culture's role in the proliferation of racial prejudices, about the experiences of being mixed-race, and about the hypocrisy inherent in racial prejudices. A survey of Blake's work seems especially appropriate at this point in time, with the election of a mixed-race President as well as the recent release of *Milk* and the subsequent passage of Proposition 8 in California. Much of his work also addresses queer culture, and the show inspires (or should inspire) a reconsideration of queer art history. *Nayland Blake: Behavior* is one of those rare, precious occurrences that offer a glimpse into the cavernous and absurdly complicated imagination residing in an amazing mind.

www.naylandblake.net