

JAN 05 **Gorge-Us: Nayland Blake retrospective will include the artist being force fed by the audience**

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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).



Heavenly Bunny Suit (1994)

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?"

*Nayland Blake "Behavior" Through February 14. Location One, 26 Greene St., 212-334-3347.*