

January 2009, Nayland Blake @ Location One



Nayland Blake, *Gorge*, 1998, Single Channel video installation with sound.
Dimensions variable, Duration: 60 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, NY.

Nayland Blake's BEHAVIOR at Location One

On Thursday, January 9, Location One, a premiere NYC non-profit exhibition space, hosted a series of performances in conjunction with *Nayland Blake's BEHAVIOR*. The exhibition is a survey incorporating works produced by the artist over the past 25 years. Upon being greeted by the always gracious curator of the exhibition, Maura Reilly, one experiences a palpable sense of warmth and welcoming, akin to the feeling of walking into a room filled with old friends—albeit friends dressed in head to toe leather, chain wallets and chaps.

This warmth is not merely a romantic and nostalgic glow, however. Considerable heat emanates from the works on view. Dating from 1980 to the present, they are just as powerful now as when they premiered. While some of the “oohs and aahs” that previously gave the works a harder edge are missing, their absence allows the observer to appreciate the subtleties and quiet gestures that have been as much a constant in Blake's poetic body of work as his icons of sadomasochism: whips, feathers, stockings, chains, shackles, hoods, gags and cages.

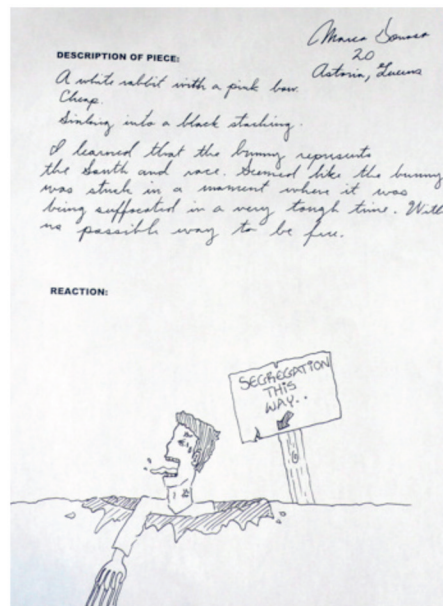


Performance view of Nayland Blake's *Gorge* at Location One (2009).
Photograph courtesy of Dominic Vine.

BEHAVIOR offers an opportunity to experience Blake's work as one cohesive and organic unit, rather than as spectacle. While the public baths and leather clubs of old suffered a heavy toll under the stifling regimes of various New York administrations (they're still there, you just have to look harder!), the leather aesthetic has survived in our collective consciousness, most notably in Mapplethorpe and Araki, and continues to flourish in the works of Catherine Opie and Lovett/Codagnone. What separates Blake's work from those of the above is that he skillfully shows us a humanistic side to these masochistic modes of pleasure, complete with a robust sense of humor, allowing us to bear witness to his own intimate, and sometimes quite painful, self-reflections.

The main performance of the evening is a restaging of Blake's *Gorge* (1989), a 60 minute video installation. In this original video, Blake sits stripped to the waist, belly extended, as a large black male, also shirtless, comes in and out of frame force feeding the artist an olio of gooey foods, from watermelon and donuts to pizza and whipped cream. The sensuality is beyond palpable as fingers stuff mounds of goodies into the submissive artist's mouth to the accompaniment of tantalizingly faint whimpering and groaning. The piece climaxes with the artist exiting the screen to relieve himself.

The restaging of *Gorge* at Location One, while lacking some of the intrinsic drama of the more intimately framed 1989 video, nevertheless is thought-provoking and great fun. Placed on a folding table are such tasty goodies as fruits, vegetables, donuts, pickles, nuts and chocolate milk. Entering the space from behind a white curtain, Blake sets a kitchen timer to the one-hour mark, then proceeds to place a small "Feed me" sign on the table. Removing his shirt, he takes his place on the chair. After a brief but awkward silence, which elicits some friendly heckling from the crowd, members of the audience pluck foods from the table and, tentatively at first, but later enthusiastically, insert them into the artist's mouth. As time passes and the audience becomes more daring, a steady flow of visitors daringly probes the possibilities of this sensual buffet. After a brave soul bares her chest to insert a pickle between her breasts (from which the artist good naturedly takes lusty chomps) the audience (this reviewer included) realizes that it has been given a rare gift: the opportunity to dominate an artist in the center of his very own survey of work.



Still detail from Brina Thurston's *Reactions to Nayland Blake's BEHAVIOR*.
Photograph courtesy of the artist and Marco Donoso.

Following a brief intermission, the audience is ushered into to a connecting theatre space to witness *Misbehavior, A Series of Performance Reactions to Nayland Blake's "BEHAVIOR"*, the second of three events commissioned by Blake to comment on the works included in *BEYOND*. A standout among good-natured and humorous pieces by Eileen Myles, Chris Cochrane and Lauren Silberman was Brina Thurston's *Reactions to Nayland Blake's "BEHAVIOR,"* by art students from *Voyages Preparatory High School in Elmhurst, Queens*, which takes as its form a [PowerPoint presentation](#). The piece documents the students' field trip to Location One. Their interpretations evidence a highly nuanced and complex ability to process artwork and information heavily rooted in issues of gender, race and sexuality, offering a sense of hope in the reading of a genre of work so often associated with loss.

Such exhibitions and performances offer a warm preview amidst an icy winter beset by a faltering economy, the passage of California's Proposition 8, and the pessimistic state of the art world.