



NAYLAND BLAKE'S FEEDER 2 AND COROLLARY

by David Deitcher

The smell of gingerbread, at once spicy and sweet, conjures similarly pungent childhood memories: of gingerbread cookies and gingerbread houses, and also of one of the more gruesome tales by the Brothers Grimm in which such a house famously appears. These thoughts are occasioned after having visited Nayland Blake's installation *Feeder 2* and *Corollary*, the first impression of which was not visual but olfactory.

Since the late '80s, Blake's sculptural installations and performances have revealed a wide range of interests, from popular culture to vanguard subversion; from Camp to the queer body in the age of AIDS; from Sadean and psychoanalytic texts to the toxic legacy of American racism. In 1995, he co-curated the landmark exhibition, *In a Different Light*, which simultaneously explored, expanded upon, and problematized fundamental assumptions regarding the relationship between queer identity and vanguard culture. Like so many American artists whose work has emerged during the past decade, Blake's projects have often dealt with identity, which they envision as a compound process rather than a *fait accompli*. In his most recent multi-media installation, Blake gave poetic form to such concerns, which is to say that *Feeder 2* and *Corollary* also managed to facilitate identification across lines of difference.

One aspect of the installation that encouraged such identification was the first to strike the viewer upon entering the gallery. The smell of gingerbread pervaded the space of the gallery that housed Blake's exhibition, and it was only after following the scent that the startling source of the aroma became visible: *Feeder 2*, a lifesize (7 by 10 by 7-foot) cabin made entirely of gingerbread tiles over an armature of steel. Visitors circled the gingerbread house and ducked into its open doorway or windows to see what it was like inside. Some, their hunger awakened by the rich, tangy smell, took to nibbling on it.

Cold Cabin, 1998
Iris print on canvas
15 x 19"
Courtesy of the artist and
Matthew Marks Gallery

This process of at first sensing and then discovering *Feeder 2* effected a kind of bewitchment—precisely the kind of sensual enchantment that lured Hansel and Gretel into the lair of the wicked and hungry witch. It therefore made narrative sense—of a kind that Antonin Artaud as much as the Brothers Grimm would have appreciated—that the smaller adjoining gallery contained objects (the “corollary” noted in the installation’s title) that functioned as astringent correctives to the sentimental sense memories aroused by the first gallery’s gingerbread house. To be sure, it included a pair of distinctly innocuous white paintings (actually Iris prints on canvas) depicting a snowbound cozy cabin on opposing walls of the gallery, while a third wall (opposite the entrance to this modest space) contained a wall-mounted six-pack of “Brer Rabbit”-brand molasses—this last a reference to a key ingredient in recipes for gingerbread, to a key character in the racially tainted “Uncle Remus” tales of the “Old Plantation” by American author Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908), and to the many representations of bunnies that have so often and sometimes so cryptically dominated Blake’s art of the past several years. Notwithstanding these supplemental links to the first gallery’s gingerbread house, it was the hour-long video, *Gorge*, playing continuously on a monitor near the entrance to the second gallery, that decisively cut the sweetness to add a different kind of bite to the installation.

Stills from *Gorge*, 1998
Video transferred to DVD
with sound, monitor
60 minutes
Courtesy of the artist and
Matthew Marks Gallery



Gorge is in the tradition of the self-punishing, endurance spectacles that established the young Chris Burden as a significant American artist during the early 1970s. Blake's video builds upon this tradition in such a way as to accommodate such issues as the social construction of identity and the latter's personal and political consequences. Throughout *Gorge*, the artist—a decidedly large man—sits naked to the waist, facing the camera in a shallow, brightly lit studio space. Standing nearby is a similarly large and shirtless African-American man. For the better part of the hour, this man feeds Blake: first doughnuts, then pizza, then an enormous "hero" sandwich (which he holds, suggestively, at crotch level like a giant phallus); then watermelon, more pizza, then chocolates. Every so often, the attendant switches from solids to liquids: a half-litre of Perrier water, a quart of milk—all accompanied by the relentlessly upbeat sounds of the "Bunny Hop," a recording of which echoes somewhere in the background.

Because Blake's skin is so much lighter than that of the man who attends to his apparently insatiable appetite, the relationship between the two initially suggests the master/slave dynamic in which—consistent with American history and tradition—it is the black man who serves the white man. But there are complications in what transpires between the video's protagonists that effectively undermine the assumption that power resides chiefly with Blake.



This is not, however, to say that *Gorge* is primarily concerned with the idea that the master's power cannot be absolute because of its dependence upon the existence of the slave. A different kind of dynamic unfolds in *Gorge*, one that generates other ideas and emotions. When, for example, the attendant moves—as he does on several occasions—from a position beside Blake to feeding him from behind, it becomes clear that he is doing something other than just serving him. At such times the attendant has the power not just to deprive Blake of the food he might want, but to administer it more rapidly than he might like.

In fact, *Gorge* reaches a climax of sorts as the attendant tears meat from a watermelon and feeds these dripping chunks to Blake with what to this observer seemed unusual force, ending the sequence by pouring the juice of the spent watermelon onto the artist's chest. That said, I find it difficult to decide how much of this aggression I imagined as a result of the volatile racial charge that is implicit in the spectacle of an African-American man feeding watermelon—whether forcefully or not—to a lighter-skinned man. Consider, in this regard, the use of watermelon as a racist prop by off-duty New York City firefighters and cops who wore blackface and donned Afro wigs to ride through the streets of Queens on a float in a Labor Day parade in September 1998. As if this were not sufficient proof of their racist gambit, they also hung an effigy of a black man off the back of their float in an unmistakable reference to the fate of James Byrd, Jr.—the 49 year old African-American whom white supremacists in Texas murdered on June 7, 1998 by slitting his throat and then by dragging him behind their pickup truck until Byrd's body broke apart.

Even at its most aggressive, however, *Gorge* is not about black rage. In fact, the attendant's actions are more clearly, and more frequently, marked by care than control or cruelty. This is evident as he calibrates the pace of feeding to coincide with Blake's rate of intake; or as he towels food off of the artist's beard and chest, or supportively cradles the back of his head, or rests a hand upon his shoulder. And when, late in the video, he massages Blake's chest and distended belly, it seems a compassionate (if not, finally,

a very helpful) thing to do, given the artist's palpable exhaustion and discomfort. In such ways the social relation in *Gorge* goes well beyond describing shifting balances of power to embody a kind of sympathetic ritual. In contrast with recent works by other contemporary artists that allude variously to eating disorders, the compulsive eating in *Gorge* is only one element in a two-part labor that sustains a troubled, empathetic, and sometimes deeply erotic relationship between its two actors. In this way *Gorge* ultimately gives allegorical shape to the unappeasable guilt of the white man—or in Blake's case, to the potentially even greater guilt of the light skinned bi-racial man who can "pass" as white.

In order to walk away from *Gorge* and the other objects comprising the installation's second space, it is necessary to retrace one's steps past the gingerbread house, whose once intoxicating aroma now induces something more like nausea. Such is the dis-illusion caused by experiencing *Gorge* that it effects a lasting ambivalence regarding the object initially perceived as wholly pleasurable—ambivalence being the inevitable result of subjecting even the most bewitching memories (and even the most beautiful works of art) to the rigors of personal and political reflection.

One of the strengths of *Feeder 2* and *Corollary* was the way its disparate elements ultimately came together with the depth and communicative force of a poetic condensation. As Blake's projects have ranged across the artist's extensive and sometimes recondite interests, his iconography has sometimes seemed shrouded in mystery—nowhere more so than in his longstanding use of the rabbit as protagonist, surrogate and alter ego. For when confronted by the spectacle of the artist in a bunny suit, or by the suit hanging by itself in space, or by a wall of pencil drawings featuring an array of rabbits, the viewer's mind races from the Easter Bunny to Bugs Bunny to Brer Rabbit to the rabbit as fertility symbol to Jimmy Stewart's Harvey to one of Joseph Beuys's or Dieter Roth's or Ray Johnson's, hares. In his recent installation, Blake effectively used theatrical, sensory, and narrative devices to narrow his frame of reference. In doing so he brought into greater focus his critical process of self-exploration and poetic experimentation.