

NAYLAND BLAKE

Interviewed by BETTIE-SUE HERTZ



Nayland Blake photographed by Bettie-Sue Hertz.

“...What happened to the Sexual Revolution, and what happened to the artistic revolution that paralleled it in the ‘60s, and the ‘70s when there was a belief that people could - by transforming their bodily experience, by transforming the way they were with each other physically and sexually - transform their consciousness, and thus transform the society.”

We’re so excited about your show, FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX! we’re mounting at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and it’s been really amazing to hear people’s responses when I tell them that you’re going to presenting new work in the Bay Area. I’m learning that people remember you, and not only that they remember you, but they’re incredibly curious about what you’re up to. You really do have what they call, a long tail. You still have a presence here, even though you haven’t lived in San Francisco for over 15 years.

So looking back, how would you describe your years in San Francisco? I understand you were here from 1984 to 1996. How did the region affect your development as an artist, as well as your practices, concerns and the relationship between your art and what was going on in the community? Also, can you talk about the current research that you’re doing about earlier periods of gay and kink culture in the Bay Area?

I moved up to San Francisco in ‘84 right out of grad school. And I did that for a couple of reasons. When I finished up at Cal Arts everybody in my class was either staying in Los Angeles or moving to New York. And I felt like I already knew about New York, as that’s where I’m from. And I don’t drive so staying in Los Angeles was not an option! I had to find an American city that had a reasonable transportation system.

San Francisco was high on the list, but also it was and is the queer capital. Above and beyond that, there’s a very special spirit there, in that it’s an incredibly accepting place. I knew that getting out of grad school, the pressures of the New York art world were really going to be overwhelming for me and my work.

I felt like I needed some time to be able to understand what was really important to me and not be overwhelmed by other people’s issues. So those were the two things that went into the initial decision, but there were a lot of other reasons why I ended up staying. One of them was that San Francisco was one of the last cities in the U.S. to retain a really vital artist-run art scene, and when I moved to the city the scene was mostly centered around these nonprofit art spaces. Then quite quickly after that there was an upsurge of people starting little galleries in a kind of entrepreneurial way. So not everybody was necessarily going the nonprofit route.

There was easy communication back and forth between those worlds; they were not adversarial. So there were lots of opportunities to show, and people who were my roommates were starting galleries, and it was very easy to make friends and be around that.

One of the things that was interesting though was that there was a pretty sharp division between the gay community and the art world. One of the quirky things about San Francisco is that it has all of these subcultures, but they don’t necessarily communicate much with each other.

The same things that made the San Francisco Bay Area an important place for nonprofit art made it an important place for queer culture, which is that there was a lot of urban space that people weren’t necessarily caring about. When I moved there it was a very forgiving place economically. It was easy to live with roommates and live very cheaply. There was real mutual support, there was a kind of freedom for people to reinvent themselves and an economy that allowed them to have a really marginal life and yet still survive, those were things that were incredibly important.

So this new show is a kind of looking back at how that experience fit into the larger arc of San Francisco as an urban environment, and also the U.S. since—this is perhaps a tangent, but not—the show is asking: What happened to the Sexual Revolution, and what happened to the artistic revolution that paralleled it? In the ‘60s and the ‘70s when there was a belief that people could—by transforming their bodily experience, by transforming the way they were with each other physically and sexually—transform their consciousness, and thus transform the society.

The performance art scene was also exploring bodies and people’s physical activities in a parallel world to what was going on in the back rooms of leather bars and swinger parties.

There was an acceptance of the idea that this one attempt to change the way you were physically and sexually could have a positive impact on freedoms in society in general. I’ve always had a foot in each of those worlds. My work is about trying to get those worlds to talk to each other again. So that’s the free love part of FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!

Do you want to talk about the Tool Box part too?

Well the Tool Box part is two-fold. It’s the name of San Francisco’s first leather bar, which was located in very close proximity to YBCA, it was on 4th and Harrison. Also, the toolbox are the activities, the things that I’m making and the things I’ll be asking other people to do with me as ways—as tools—to think about this moment of free love. What can we learn from that moment of being in communion with each other, and what might that mean going forward; can we get back to that way of being together.

Can you talk a little bit more about these parallels, because I think that is central to the way we can best understand the motivation behind the project. What is an early example of this communion? I think of someone like Ron Athey as being somewhat later, but who are you thinking of from before the 1980s?

Earlier for me would be somebody like Jack Smith or the Cockettes, and the radical possibilities of playing dress-up and throwing a big party. When they think about drag a lot of people tend to think about it in terms of cross-dressing, but San Francisco was also the epicenter of genderfuck drag, in some ways the place where that was invented. My show is also about this aspect of queer cultural and behavioral history.

I think the moment we’re in now is this moment where gender is being investigated and excavated anew by a host of performers and thinkers. What are the radical possibilities of a bar? What are the radical possibilities of a pageant? What are the radical possibilities of “show-and-tell”? How do we share and exchange our experiences with other people?

I thought we could talk about another aspect of your work, which connects to what you’re saying, but on the artistic side. Your work has a spontaneous formal quality, and it also relies on autobiographical symbolic elements, such as recognized references like Brer Rabbit. Can you give an example of an artwork of yours that’s been particularly important to you as a kind of watershed moment, representative of this bifocal interest between formal and conceptual concerns in terms of the materiality of things and over-laden symbolism?

A really important show for me was in 1999 and it had a piece called *Feeder Two* in it, and a videotape called *Gorge*. *Feeder Two* is a 7 foot by 7 foot by 10 foot gingerbread house. Making the gingerbread house was like, okay, here’s this symbol, here’s this thing that kids have in their head, from the story of Hansel and Gretel, and let’s see what happens if we take this idea and make it literal. Here’s a house made out of gingerbread that you can get inside of.

Gorge is a videotape where I’m being fed for an hour. I went on to stage *Gorge* as a performance—I’ve done it several times, most recently in 2010—where I’m seated in front of a selection of foods, and people from the audience feed me over the course of an hour and I’ll eat whatever they give me. One of the things that happens with *Gorge* is that it becomes less about me eating, and more about how people in the audience decide to perform the feeding. It’s a piece that connects back to Yoko Ono’s 1964 performance *Cut Piece* where you become the forum for the audience’s chain of association and their actions. In essence you’re bottoming to them, but it becomes very clear that what one might think about that act shifts over the course of the hour that it’s happening.

I guess I would call that a watershed moment because I realized that I don’t have to build all these symbols into the work to be like, “Look, this represents me and what I’m thinking about.” If I set up the right conditions, all of those ideas would be in play as people—if I could get people to a thoughtful enough state then all of that stuff would happen.

And that’s where I think the work has gone subsequently. It’s interesting to me that there are performative gestures that in the art world are called “actions” or “interventions”, that are



Untitled (chandelier), 2012
10 utility lights with commercial plastic bags (blue, black, white), 3 "DUST" flags, 1 rubber mask, ribbon (green), paper chains, zip ties, stool, crushed red water bottle. Courtesy YBCA.

exactly the same thing as what's happening in the kink world without the hoity-toity language. Also, what the art world can really learn from the kink world is that there is no audience that isn't also an actor. This goes back to very early ideas in performance, such as the Living Theater and other attempts to radicalize the theatrical experience in the postwar era, practices that questioned what it means for someone to just sit there and absorb an experience.

What is interesting about the kink world is that in order to participate, I mean, in order to view, you pay with your participation. That is a powerful antidote to what I get called "situational aesthetics," right? Which is, let's take a really mundane activity and wrap it in such a way that everybody can stand back from it and think they're having an aesthetic experience.

That's a very good example. Can you talk a little bit about how this perspective you have is going to be present in the exhibition? How are you going to integrate performance and participation, the "show-and-tell" idea, and even pedagogy into the work? Tell us a little about what you hope will happen and what you want to achieve through those kinds of activities?

Sure. I guess I'll go to the pedagogy point to start with. The place I start from is that I don't know all the answers. The events in the show are about asking people to come in. It's like, "Welcome into this space and let's discover together what is going to happen."

So my hope is that as I talk to people about the Tool Box, as I talk to people about the early years of the queer community in San Francisco, some of the folks who built that community including those involved in the leather scene are still around, so I'm asking them to come into the galleries to talk about that time. I'm asking everyone who comes to our programs to bring an object with them to either present and discuss in a "show and tell" format, or to donate to the exhibition where it will become a component of an artwork. Instead of having a kind of unbalanced authority of the artist, I'm creating a space where people can contribute something that they're excited about.

That's one of the reasons why I wanted to include my 2002 work, *Ruins of a Sensibility* in the show. It includes my record collection and a turntable, and it's available for the public to DJ, where you get to tell your story through my records. And it's about the fact that, I grew up in a period when your record collection in some ways represented you, it was like a badge

of pride, but at the same time they're these mass produced things. It's interesting to me how we forge identities out of our collections. And I think it's not just enough to stick them on the wall and look at them. What happens when we activate them? What happens when I can hand the stuff that's important to me to you, and have you make something new with it?

When I use the term Queering culture, it's about adding a swerve into it. Adding the unexpected into it. Bending it, adding surprise. So that's why I'm inviting people into the space while I'm making the show instead of the typical big reveal, and all you can do as a viewer is stand there and look at what I, the artist, did. We've planned some events in early October and late November where your attendance will have an impact on what the show looks like, what's actually there in the space. When I come back to San Francisco from New York, where I live, midway through the exhibition and reconfigure the display of objects, it's because I believe that there is more than one option for how the works can be arranged, that it can be changed around, that we can look at it in a different way.

So there's definitely this interest in mutability in all aspects of what you're talking about, and certainly I think that it's a very queer way of thinking about the exhibition. We're going to find a lot of inversions and surprises through unexpected relations between the exhibition and the audience and objects and individuals, whether it's a sculpture or presentation or a video production studio. We're really excited about that. When I came in this afternoon you showed me an issue of Life magazine from 1964, and maybe that's the beginning, but it could also serve as an ending to our conversation as well because it's such a powerful object. You were telling me that the feature article on gay culture in it was the first time that homosexuality was presented in a mainstream publication. Not surprising that it featured the Tool Box.

I'm pairing it with the 1981 "Polysexuality" issue of *Semiotexte* magazine, which, for me, personally, was the first time that I saw sexuality exploded into so many different categories. It felt right to me. And the fact that it's an anthology, I mean, I think that's—I've never thought about it before, but yes, if I had to describe my sexuality, it's an anthology!

The sort of talismanic importance of that book and what it meant to me to read it is very similar to how important that issue of *Life* was to a generation of gay men who saw it, saw the Tool Box represented in it and got the idea, "Oh, I can go there. I can leave whatever town I'm in—"

It's like the article was saying, "San Francisco is a safe place for me to express who I really am."

And that's amazing, right? Because *Life* did go everywhere. Imagine being in a barbershop in Dubuque in 1964 and here was this thing. And it's not like the article is approving at all, it's actually talking about the problems of gay life, but it is—

It recognizes that it exists.

It is the first mass media depiction of leather men in pretty much anywhere I think.

Can you speak about the San Francisco and New York performance and queer culture scenes?

The thing about the show is that it's also trying to talk about the fact that both of these communities—fringe artistic communities and these less mainstream sexual communities—need access to cheap space in order to thrive. They involve a lifestyle exploration that needs to occur in a physical space, in particular kinds of physical space and the people who engage in it generally don't have a lot of capital. They're not financially rewarding pursuits. Right now New York is suffering from a really severe space shortage and there are people who are trying to work around that by creating migratory spaces where instead of having a location like an artist run nonprofit that has a specific home, they're moving around to different places. The same thing is happening in the kink scene, where instead of having a clubhouse or a particular dungeon, there are groups of people hosting events that move around to different places. People are using online resources to provide the connective tissue that a shared physical location used to provide. It's the same in the Bay Area, as it is in New York. The problem is that it becomes kind of self-selecting. If you don't have pre-existing connections to the scene it's hard to stumble into these locations. One of the things that's really powerful in thinking about the Tool Box, which was a sort of the generator for all this, is that once it was shown in a national magazine hundreds of people had a place that they could locate, had a place that they could go instead of just hoping that they would find out about the next party.

If you think back to the performance situation, it's places like Judson Church in New York or Kiki Gallery in San Francisco, artist-run nonprofits, that provide a place where you could stop in and still see something interesting; even if you didn't know the people who were doing something there. That's the power of fixed locations and that's the danger in them slipping away.

Is there anything else you want to add?

No, it's super fun to be working on the show and I was on the advisory board at YBCA when it was founded so it's totally thrilling to be doing this—it represents a real homecoming to me and I'm really excited about the show.

FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX! is organized by Betti-Sue Hertz, Director of Visual Arts, YBCA, and is on view at YBCA from Oct. 12, 2012-January 27, 2013. This interview took place at Nayland Blake's studio in New York on August 23, 2012.



Ruins of a Sensibility, 1972-2002 (with thanks to Lynne Tillman). Records, electrical equipment, plywood. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York



Installation view, FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, October 12, 2012-January 27, 2013. Courtesy YBCA.



depiction in *Black on Black*, 1986—Tunson's grotesque, caricature-like painting of a gun-and-knife fight—without being reminded of Leon Golub's gritty realism or Robert Colescott's sardonic satire. Unlike the practices of Kerry James Marshall or Radcliffe Bailey, however, among other younger contemporaries with whom Tunson's work should be considered, the output of this longtime resident of Manitou Springs (a town adjacent to Colorado Springs) is virtually unknown beyond state lines. This fact baffles when standing in the presence of works such as *Hearts and Minds*, 1993–95, a monumental wall relief, rendered with arresting craftsmanship, that measures twelve by twenty-four feet. A biting response to the inner-city violence of the 1980s and early '90s, the tightly integrated work comprises ten panels pieced together to evoke the multipart tableaux of a Renaissance altarpiece. Several components contain smaller divisions, framed black-and-white portraits of young African-American men interspersed with pop signifiers of urban violence and institutional control—guns, money, targets, jail bars, and skulls. Other standout works in the show include *Before and After*, a sketchy, almost cartoonish 1988 painting of Haitian leader types in formal military attire; and *Rare Deal*, 1992, an eight-foot-square mixed-media work on plywood, offering a stark view of a young black man (his head and neck loosely rendered in halftone dots) hanged with a noose made from an American flag, recalling—Lichtenstein aside—the Warhol-esque flag-wrapped Native American figures of Fritz Scholder.

Though at times Tunson's work can seem overdetermined, it must also be remembered that his audience is broad and so the volume at which he transmits his art is calibrated accordingly. But no matter who's listening, one thing is clear: An incredible life force propels this expansive career.

—Kyle MacMillan

SAN FRANCISCO

Nayland Blake

YERBA BUENA CENTER FOR THE ARTS/
GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM

Get together, reuse, remember, give something away! These are feel-good values, even if rubber bondage masks may be among the souvenirs. Nayland Blake's recent pair of shows played ebulliently with *immensio*. But "FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!" a group of interlocking installations at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, really did mean to proffer a tool kit for sustaining communal pleasures. Running concurrently

at Gallery Paule Anglim, a miniretrospective—comprising just four works—was titled "Not Drowning, Waving." Twenty-six years into his career and counting, Blake inverts Stevie Smith's darkly comic 1957 poem on isolation and death ("Not Waving but Drowning") to express a comically dark affirmation of survival and saying hi.

"FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!" was organized as five "stations," though the exhibition checklist identified fourteen named parts, and it felt like even more. The first station featured, *Tool Box Again*, 2012, a history-painting-size reproduction of Chuck Arnett's mural for the legendary San Francisco leather bar the Tool Box. (An image of the mural appeared in a 1964 *Life* magazine article on "Homosexuality in America," and Blake included a copy of the issue, displaying it in a reliquary of Styrofoam, Plexiglas, steel chains, and nylon straps.) The guys in Arnett's image cluster close, as if to form one body, a sense of solidarity Blake emphasizes by connecting the figures with leashlike ribbons sutured to and draping off the banner. Nearby, a station titled "Maypole Way" was similarly ghostly yet festive: a plywood catwalk, carpeted with black rubber and decorated with a Felix Gonzalez-Torres-style lightbulb string installed beside a maypole-shaped assemblage festooned with banners reading *trust*—an anagram for *Strud*, another famous SF bar. So perhaps the waving surfer whom Blake celebrates died after all. The show comprises, in a way, scenes from his afterlife. But ashes to ashes, funk to funky, his memories seem happy.

Nearby, a station titled "Video Studio," was a side room appointed with gold Mylar panels, more dressing-room lights, and a turn. No one, on the days I visited, went in. No one pranced on the catwalk, either, and this emptiness, combined with the convention center-esque YBCA space, sapped energy from the peppy installation. Visitors did contribute to a hall of graffiti, as well as to "Rest Area" (station five), a wall of shelves on which Blake invited people to leave items symbolizing "freedom, liberation, safety, beauty, creativity, excitement." (Among the offerings: an empty half-pint of Wild Turkey, a faded Giants T-shirt, a studded collar, sets of keys, clay figurines, and a business card for the Kiwanis Club of Gorner Napa. Blake himself supplied the single clown shoe and the *sm* headgear.) Meanwhile, lone DJs also enjoyed station three's *Raise of a Sensibility*, 2002, which offered up the artist's collection of some two thousand LPs—acquired between 1977 and 2002 and presented here arranged on shelves beside a turntable deck—for anyone to browse and spin a set. Bowie, Yma Sumac, Devo, Nina Simone, the Butthole Surfers, the Partridge Family, *Score Yourself Sexual I.Q. Test*, and so on. All that was missing was a dancing crowd, a vital lack.

At Paule Anglim, two recent small sculptures reiterated the trope of chains as ties that bind, while an older suite of drawings, *Bunny Group*, 1997, brought Blake's longtime mascot back into the mix. *Br'er, Bugs*,



Nayland Blake,
Tool Box Again, 2012
nylon banner, cotton
cord, candle, faux
candle with electric
tube, 12' x 24' x 8'

Peter, Harvey, the Energizer, Playboy; magician's assistant; prolific copulator and shitter. The rabbit, for Blake, is perfectly polymorphously perverse. Nevertheless, in his new video *Stab*, 2012, the totem-animal becomes a sock monkey. Blake and a former boyfriend bought it. Then they split up, and Blake's dog mauled the doll. Distraught, he brought it to Liz Collins, whose artist's project *Mewl*, 2012, offered "knitting interventions." In *Stab*, Blake's camera holds on Collins's hands as she stitches up the mangled body in her lap; we hear Blake explain the monkey-boyfriend-dog backstory; he and Collins and two other women chat about cult films. The lesbian sewing circle saves the gay man's treasured, injured past, and the community is present, finally, in real time. It's sweet and simple. For us as viewers, though, it's a DVD on a monitor—quite different from being at a party.

—Frances Richard

James Sterling Pitt

ELI RIDGWAY GALLERY

In her 2011 book *Under Blue Cup*, Rosalind Krauss understands artistic medium as "a form of remembering"—a metaphor made poignant by the loss and recuperation of self she experienced following a brain aneurysm (a disruption the book both describes and, in its fragmented, aphoristic form, mirrors). Like Krauss, artist James Sterling Pitt also underwent intensive physical and cognitive rehabilitation after a brain injury, and, in the wake of this sudden change in state, he too allowed the disorientation to inform his work, specifically by adapting his art to function as a mnemonic system.

"On a Clear Day We Were Lightning," Pitt's second solo exhibition at Eli Ridgway Gallery, comprised some twenty painted plywood sculptures, each bearing a different abstract form that the artist had derived from a visual diary he uses to mark time and document events. However, this "object-based journal" chronicles less the physical appearance of the world the artist encounters than those very cognitive processes by which he apprehends it, thereby depicting that intangible threshold between outer and inner reality in which consciousness resides.

Insistently planar, the resultant freestanding sculptures resemble shadow boxes: Multiple plywood layers have been cut out and sandwiched together to create a shallow, framed space, within which spare, schematic patterns of line, shape, and color are silhouetted. Some works are strung with metallic painted nylon or wires suspending small disks, as though the works were orreries or abacuses. The motifs employed—grids, cells, webs, lattices, ladders—call to mind any number of scientific diagrams that map geological or biological structures. Yet if such models generalize and abstract the world, Pitt's sculptures are unequivocally concrete and specific. Functioning as windows, they offer glimpses of the artist's observations and memories, many of which allude to the New Mexico landscape so familiar to him. Occasionally, it is possible to guess the literal referents in his work: to imagine, for example, fluttering blossoms in the pale greenish-beige circles of *Untitled (For the Tree in the Breeze 8-6-12)*, or turquoise water aglow with suspended mineral content in *Untitled (The Color of the Lake Before the Storm/The Color of the Lake During the Storm)* (all works 2012).

Yet to read these objects as mere illustrations is to miss the point. Pitt seeks to portray the world not as it appears at any given moment in time, but as it *feels*. This wasn't always the case, however. Returning to his studio after his accident, the artist began working again by making (out of wood, acrylic, paper, and glue) faithful replicas of his favorite book and album covers. These shells conveyed the surface of the world: silent, still, and devoid of interaction. In many ways, the works



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NAYLAND BLAKE

Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York

The title of Nayland Blake's solo exhibition, *What Word Wrong?*, made me do a double-take. I read it initially as it could be read, not as it's spelled. The same happened with Blake's name, laid out in vinyl on a gallery wall as 'Nakand (Blakel), with two long, looping lines drawn on the wall to graphically indicate where one letter has been switched with another. Blake's play with words hints at a slippery semantic slope, it, as Ferdinand de Saussure claimed, language is a closed system in which 'everything depends on relations: one stray 'a' and the whole thing is fucked, ragged out. Along those lines, *What Word Wrong?* posed identity as intrinsically gartled, the exhibition becoming an open-ended articulation of sexual and national identity. It juxtaposed found and fabricated source material - from stuffed animals and plastic toys to vintage gelatin prints and appropriated art works.

In a nice bit of sexual self-mythologizing, Blake confronted visitors to Matthew Marks Gallery as an imposing Leather Daddy, wearing sunglasses, a leather harness and a black cap, the artist's image was printed on vinyl and stretched across the front and back of a tidy, two-metre-high modular shelf. Seated in front of the gallery entrance, it was labelled at the top by the name of a fictional leather bar, The Spectre NYC. In tandem with two jars of firmless Crisco shortening floating grotesquely in two glass jars atop the shelf, *Eleventh Fall* (2013) had a suggestively dirty, if muted, sexual energy. It combined the formalism of Tom Barn with the explicitness of Bjørn Melgaard. Placing both aesthetics of gay culture in productive tension, it shared with the other works a predilection for tasteful abjection: there's just a whiff of George Barabell's *Solar Anus* (1927), kept carefully in check.

Equally restrained, if suggestive, was *Buddy Buddy, Buddy*, which looked something like a walk-in IKEA wardrobe made entirely of glass and chipboard. A double-sided mirror down the centre of the structure orientated two reflective surfaces towards the viewer. On one hung a precariously quantity of plastic toys - an Ewok figure, gnomes, cartoon bears, among many others - all strung together by their necks and weighed down like a perverse garland. On the other side, an antique-looking stool propped up a teddy bear with a plastic leg pulled crudely over its head. It was about eye level with a small circular hole cut into the wall, just large enough to accommodate a dick. Reticent of a buddy booth, Blake's clearly cut gloryhole was positioned right next to the sad little thing's mouth. Two re-photographed found gelatin prints completed the picture. Hanging from a long pole straddling the top of the structure, they could have alluded to both urban street scenes and countryside cruising - the latter image, of a photographer whose shadow cuts a sharp silhouette against a group of trees, felt particularly voyeuristic.

Speaking of which, the toilet at Matthew Marks made a surprise appearance in *United*. The gallery's corner bathroom door had been removed and, in its place, long sheets of transparent orange vinyl transformed this ramshackle water closet into a really festive place to piss and shit, if one gets off on being watched (and if a black chain didn't dissuade actual usage). A large piece of vinyl in the shape of a door hugged the adjacent wall, as if it were always open, though it looked ominously more like a tomb lid than anything else.

Elsewhere, Robert Indiana's too-cute 1964 Christmas card design and off-photographed LOVE sculpture was drained of any red for *Spirit of 68*. Turned a dusty and cold black, miniature LOVE's were stacked like an oversized, goth charm bracelet on a suspended wood table dangling from the back wall. Draped in chains, it was like a makeshift strangled and piled high with crap a little lantern, a lot of love - hanging off a side bar like dead little Indiana earrings.

This was some dark shit, an America so wrong that everything seems so right, as evidenced by Heritage.com's buxid image of old people golfing, repeated three times side by side and stretching three-and-a-half metres down one wall. Hanging from a disguised shelving unit, little spirals of brackets inched up the wall behind it, making apparent how the image was both modular and manufactured - a false construct of happy times, if ever there was one.

Perhaps Oh drove the point home: it resembled an American flag made of wood, seemingly blown to pieces, with nothing left but little stars lost on a spindly pole. A product of his time, Blake's vision of America is a dark one, transgressed with sex and a hint of the violent.

DAVID EVERITT HOWE



Nayland Blake
Eleventh Fall, mixed media,
183 x 90 x 47 cm

MAYA BLOCH

Thierry Goldberg, New York

With this latest suite of canvases, *Two You Are!*, Maya Bloch further established herself as one of the more exciting and able young painters exhibiting in New York's galleries, whether rendered alone or in small groups. It is the human figure that continues to anchor her distinctive, narrative acrylics, blended in several recent works with oil pigment, and layered in at least two others with spraypaint and ink, respectively. Generally laid in thin, multi-fused washes, Bloch's paint tries to reveal physiognomies and faces, treated with wags of colour, or bloomed into misshapen masks. Her surfaces occasionally recall the deconstructive experiments of Max Ernst or Oscar Dominguez, in that they exploit aleatory traces of wayward paint, in which portentous forms appear to lurk and flow into view.

These effects tend mischievously to wrest attention away from the bodies they help describe, pooling or curling into form aberrations that solicit scrutiny on their own terms. *United (2011)* reveals a girl close up in three-quarter view, her head resting on her fist, a fiery red shock of hair veined with capillaries of black. In *United (2012)*, a torso and face appear tenuously visible from a cloud of silvery paint, which swells to the canvas's edge and swallows ground as much as figure. While the later painting reveals a veiled field of flowing shapes, it is the former - its figure(s) undermined in ways at once more stark and subtle - that repays a close, slow look. So, too, does *United (8 Figures)* (2012), which uses collage to yoke together figure of different size and scale. The work's oils and pastels - by means of which a male individual appears surrounded by a cluster of faces - are tucked in at the seams. Seemingly cobbled together with the resonance of memory or dream, images rise up as if seen from different angles, yet occupying the same shallow space. Yet *United (Head and Torso)* (2012), the same has ventured for the first time a vertical diptych, in which a head and swirling mass do not quite fit upon the torso that fills out the work's lower quadrant.

For the most part, however, nearly every canvas in the exhibition was stretched at roughly the same, quadrangular dimensions, even as they evoke different kinds of



Nayland Blake
Ruddy Ruddy
 Ruddy 2013.
 Mixed media,
 77 x 70 x 40 1/2 in.

NEW YORK

Nayland Blake

Marlowe Marks Gallery // February 7–April 20

THE DOOR IS A JAR. In "What Went Wrong" which delights in drift, disorienting transpositions right down to its title, every entrance is a vessel and vice versa. In one corner of the room a translucent orange curtain is draped ceremonially in front of a shallow supply closet. It's not quite a passage to nowhere, but it comes close. The installation is populated by tall boxes of cheap plywood that seem to function like closets as well. One holds a long pink towel, another, a string-up collection of toys. But these lonely wardrobes are open at either end, giving the impression that a person might pass through the hidden compartments instead of store things in them. Likewise, every surface of the installation is tapestried with photographs are scored with grossnets, and the wooden structures are punctuated with holes at waist height. This may be the first time that electrical cord holes come to mind at the same moment as glory holes. (Who am I kidding; it can't be the first time.) All these elements allow for a viewer's dramatic, physical engagement with the exhibition. When Blake says, "My tendency is to make everything about sex," this may be because sex is about everything: performance and participation, intimacy and expectation, visual distance and physical contact. This is rich territory for sculpture, and Blake does not in much deal explicitly with sexuality as he sexualizes the entire space. In this work, surface becomes object, object becomes passageway, and the installation is impossible to understand

without moving through it.

Perhaps this is why Blake has resorted to documentation in the past, and while "What Went Wrong" has been photographed, images don't really cut it for this show. That may be because of the artist's interest in multiple modes of thinking. The gallery describes Blake as a "modern-day flaneur" because he collects things. But what seems more relevant to flaneurism is Blake's understanding of objects through movement and manipulation. A small, worn table seems like a "thing" until it's hung on the wall, at which point it becomes a dangling figure, a collection of attributes, or a proposition, losing its usefulness while retaining, in its aged surface, a sense of history. (It may be an accident that the object suddenly, uncannily resembles a grandfather clock.) A poster of a bearded, starless leather daddy in a harness and chains advertises "The Spectre NYC," an apt name for a leather bar that may not exist at a time when Internet bookups have taken the place of real-world communities. For Blake, this is a loss and this show is a place for repositioning for reimagining alternate realities. Blake has voiced an admiration for the theater of Richard Foreman in the past. Here, the artist reveals the arrangement and presentation of objects to be, at its core, a kind of possibility. As the ready leader of an acting troupe says in Tim Roppen's play *Remnants and Guilt* on East Ave. Road, "We do onstage things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of irony, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else." —Nova Bennett

NEW YORK

"The Book Lovers"

The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space // January 24–March 8

VISUAL ARTISTS HAVE long flirted with the written word. Consider the phenomena of the artist-as-critic, book-as-object, and document-as-artwork. In "The Book Lovers," curators David Maroto and Joanna Zielinska—an artist and art historian, respectively—define the "artist novel" as a distinct literary form. Far from a nostalgic meditation on the changing nature of publishing, this exploratory exhibition frames the novel as a contemporary extension of social practice and research-based art. Compact and infinitely reproducible, the artist novel

challenges traditional forms of visual "authorship" in the same manner that the printed multiple, video, and photography have done. But while the market has more or less absorbed those forms, "The Book Lovers" asserts that the category of artist novel retains a slipperiness and contingency ripe for examination.

Maroto and Zielinska construct the exhibition around a growing body of evidence—a curated selection of more than 100 artist novels displayed on tables in the center of the space. This book collection, recently acquired by M HKA, in Antwerp,

is available for perusal; readers may also consult an online database—a practical, though less seductive, option. The books range from c. *A Novel*, 1968, Andy Warhol's transcript of his daily conversations, to recent narrative experiments like the science fiction novel *Philly*, 2007, collectively written by a group of eight artists, and curated by Mai Abu ElDahak. Spanning artistic generations and geographies, the archive contains books by authors like Yayoi Kusama, Stewart Home, Sophie Calle, Pablo Helguera, and Maroto. Eight installations by

