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Music to the Eye

Jeremy Blake's 'Moving Paintings' Are a Brilliant Coda to a Life That Ended on a Sad Note

By Chris Richards

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Jeremy Blake's "Reading Ossie Clark," a meditation on the 1960s British fashion designer, is among the works in the Corcoran Gallery Show.

It feels like channel-surfing through your dreams.

Pam Grier appears on screen, her neon 'fro-pick shaped like a brainteaser from junior high geometry. An animated constellation rains down on a platter of toast like powdered sugar or David Bowie dandruff. There's a cartoon skeleton dousing its skull with Pabst Blue Ribbon while a fleet from "Star Wars" opens fire on some hillside real estate.

These images drift in and out of "Sodium Fox" by Jeremy Blake, the locally raised artist whose suicide in July stunned family, friends and an art world that had celebrated his young career. Organized before his death, "Wild Choir" at the

Corcoran Gallery of Art presents three of Blake's "moving paintings" -- digital videos positively buzzing with the imaginative cool that made the 35-year-old an emerging art star.

According to curator Jonathan Binstock, Blake's work displayed "a disregard for the boundaries that have traditionally distinguished different disciplines. It's painting, it's film, it's video, it's photography, it has to do with popular culture and popular imagery as well as the history of art."

And, of course, music. All three pieces in "Wild Choir" are fragmented, animated portraits of rock-and-roll luminaries: fashion designer Ossie Clark, punk impresario Malcolm McLaren and poet-

singer David Berman. "Jeremy's heart was with youth culture," Binstock says. "He found the idea of the generation gap as very compelling."

Raised in Takoma Park, a teenage Blake got his youth-culture kicks in Washington's then-burgeoning punk scene. In the early '90s, he roadied for fabled underground band Nation of Ulysses before heading off to art school in Chicago. Blake earned his MFA from the California Institute of the Arts in 1995, the same year he met his partner, Theresa Duncan, at a Fugazi show in Washington. (Blake's death came a week after Duncan took her own life.)

His art career got off to a quick start, and Binstock (a former Corcoran curator, now an art adviser for Citi in New York) was there from the start.

"I saw his first solo gallery show . . . in 1999," Binstock says. "I suppose I fell in love with the art. . . . I was interested in the subject of painting, and I saw Jeremy as a new voice, a new language."

Binstock mounted Blake's first museum show in 2000 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the rising artist also snagged a spot in that year's Whitney Biennial. He was soon recruited by director Paul Thomas Anderson to animate a dream sequence for the 2002 film "Punch-Drunk Love." Also that year: the cover art for Beck's "Sea Change" album and a wistful, kaleidoscopic music video for "Round the Bend."

Those saturated colors reappear in "Reading Ossie Clark," on display at the Corcoran, but without feeling as somber. Blake's meditation on the eccentric British fashion designer synonymous with "swinging London" of the 1960s is the most ephemeral piece in the show, with playful wisps of rainbow smoke billowing over hard-edged Kenneth Noland geometry.

"Sodium Fox," Blake's 2005 portrait of David

Berman, poet and singer of the indie rock band Silver Jews, is even better. Berman narrates the piece with fragments of poetry to accompany Blake's sleek parade of images. "Four stars twinkled in the sky like a restaurant review," Berman deadpans, as if lifting a one-liner from comedian Mitch Hedberg. On screen, a quartet of Alka-Seltzer tablets radiates a fizz of hand-doodled bubbles.

Focusing on Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, "Glitterbest" was not complete when Blake died. Glowing on a flat-screen TV, it's the smallest of the three pieces -- the other two are larger projections. Shown in its slide-show-like state, the colors are sharp, the content the funniest: punk icon Sid Vicious mean-mugging in a Navy uniform, a phallus shooting cartoon lightning bolts. McLaren narrates the soundtrack in hyperbolic cockney as Blake's stills fade in and out like some psychedelic mash-up of the History Channel and early MTV. Unfinished, it still captures Blake's keen handle on the visual and the musical.

"Musicians speak another language," Binstock says. "Jeremy was one of those people they talked to. He spoke the language and walked the walk."

And while Blake had a crew of friends in the Washington punk scene, they're reticent to talk, perhaps still reeling from the spate of media coverage that revolved around Blake earlier in the summer. A blitz of articles appeared after Duncan's suicide and Blake's subsequent decision to walk into the ocean at New York's Rockaway Beach on July 17. Much of the coverage speculated on what drove the couple to their decision -- all of it left readers wondering who Jeremy Blake really was.

Do the pieces of "Wild Choir" provide an answer?

"He was a very generous guy," says Binstock of his friend and colleague. "His heart was big. And it was complicated."

Wild Choir: Cinematic Portraits by Jeremy Blake continues through March 2 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th Street NW. David Berman is scheduled to speak at the Corcoran's Hammer Auditorium Thursday, Feb. 28 at 7 p.m. Call 202-639-1700 or visit <http://www.corcoran.org>. Admission is \$6, children 6 and under admitted free.