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Jed Perl on Art
Peep Show for Poets

I. Experimental film, for decades a black sheep among the arts, has been winning popularity contests in recent years. The turnaround can seem incredible, at least for anybody old enough to remember the hard pioneering days of avant-garde cinema, when film societies operating on shoestring budgets presented movies on tiny portable screens to minuscule audiences seated uncomfortably on folding chairs. Nowadays, the Dadaist and Surrealist films of Man Ray and Léger are incorporated in the galleries of major museums, where they are given a glitteringly deluxe presentation, playing over and over again in close proximity to masterworks by Picasso and Miró. An upsurge in scholarly studies of mid-twentieth-century culture is bringing increasing attention to the romantic dreamers of American film, figures such as Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Harry Smith. And in the commercial art galleries, which are as likely to show moving images as they are to display paintings or sculptures, all sorts of experiments that not too long ago would have been labeled avant-garde film and supported by a few fanatics are seen by the large numbers of people who make the rounds of the galleries in London and New York and Los Angeles.

There is a splendidly besotted inwardness about the best of the old experimental films, and this peculiar quality, at once megalomaniacal and discrete, has resurfaced in the tantalizingly lovely little movies that are being made by the thirty-four-year-old artist Jeremy Blake. "A peep show for poets" is what Blake calls *Sodium Fox*, the film that he exhibited at the Feigen Contemporary gallery in New York last fall, and that phrase is perfect for the beautifully crafted scale of Blake's work. Although Blake is an individualist, he is anything but an outsider. His work is saturated with an ultra-fashionable nostalgia for the psychedelic 1960s, and his already extensive résumé includes solo shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Reina Sofía in Madrid. In the most elaborate of his films, *The Winchester Trilogy*, he plunges into the sort of politically tinged reflections on the ills of American society that are sure to make an artist the talk of the seminar rooms in the MFA programs. But Blake's concerns are not art-school calculations. They bubble up from the man's avidities, and are wrapped in a grandly hedonistic feeling for rhythm and texture. The butterfly-wing bursts of mingled colors that are a leitmotif give Blake's work the quickening drama of an unfolding dream.

Blake's DVDs are kinetic collages that mingle film footage, still photography, and painted and digital elements to create layerings and shiftings that feel dance-like, intuitive, impressionistic. The photographic elements—which include fragments of architecture, figures, and faces—will flicker and then burst and then fade. Something familiar—the face of Sam Shepard, a Victorian mansion, a neon sign—will hover for a moment, only to be enveloped in washes of color that move across the screen, saturating or obliterating the photographic images. Blake has a wonderful instinct for keyed-up color. He is not afraid to indulge in burning reds and oranges, in velvety purples and blues. He also understands the possibilities of chiaroscuro, the way that a pinprick of light can suggest distant realms. In these films the rectangular frame is not a passive container but a roving eye. Blake will frequently give us the sense that the frame is a window spinning upward, moving from a terrestrial to a celestial realm. Or he will convince us that that window is whirling around, dancing through the densely overlapping images. I like the suave restlessness of Blake's work. He does not wish to be bored, so his images change very, very fast. The quickening pace brings a certain dispassion—you might call it a caffeinated dispassion—to Blake's whatever-happened-to-the-psychedelic-'60s imagery.

I recognize that some discriminating gallerygoers will be put off by Blake's fondness for technicolor Art Nouveau, and by the soft-core decadence of his themes in *Sodium Fox* and a slightly earlier film, *Reading Ossie Clark*. The cocktail-hour light and the seedy jukebox poetry of *Sodium Fox*—and the stripper who is its shadowy heroine—evoke the hedonism of the 1960s as refracted through the increasingly calculated sexual play of the 1970s. (*Sodium Fox* is a collaboration with David Berman, a poet who heads up the rock band Silver Jews.) In *Reading Ossie Clark*, Blake goes to the heart of the giddy art-and-commerce mix of the mid-century years. The voice-over—excerpts from the diaries of Ossie Clark, the fashion designer who was a key figure in Swingin' London—inspires a cascade of visualizations of Carnaby Street fashion, and air travel in the days when airports were still full of romantic promise, and sun-drenched vacation spots, and drugs and rock and roll. Blake doesn't present narratives so much as striking snatches of narrative. The storytelling is disjunctive and surreal, an arabesque of incidents and vantage points.

These brief films, ten or so minutes long, are about the surfaces of a period—but also about how it felt to live inside your skin back then. The two levels are collaged together to create fluid, kaleidoscopic impressions. I jotted down snatches of dialogue from *Sodium Fox*: "My mother was a party animal." "Crosseyed from giving too much head." "Frail cocktail-party hugs." The whole film suggests a frail cocktail-party hug. Watching *Sodium Fox*, with its twinkling bits of neon and its wavering pop emblems, you take things in easily, as you might at a party where you were just slightly stoned, enough to feel at ease in the role of the cool but nerdy observer. That's Blake: curious, engaged, but not taken in. Clark, whom many people will remember as the dark-haired young man in a famous double portrait by David Hockney, sitting in a chrome-and-cane chair, his bare feet deep in a white shag rug, suffered a ruinous decline. And in *Reading Ossie Clark*, Blake catches the dancing-on-the-edge-of-the-volcano obsessiveness of his life. Yet the mood in the film remains lyrical rather than melancholy. Blake presents Clark's recklessness so imperturbably that the gravity of the situation emerges without exactly being emphasized, a catastrophic pattern glimpsed amid the interlaced emblems and flourishes of the designer's glory days.

What carries Blake beyond the level of the brainy fashionistas is the delicacy of his touch. When he introduces a bit of crass lounge music, he gives it the elegant sting of an ornament in a harpsichord sonata. And the campy cigarette-smoke whirls of color have deeper resonances, too, evoking the color music of painters from Kandinsky to Morris Louis. There is a fineness to Blake's aestheticism that ultimately registers psychologically, in the subtlety of his portraiture. Although Ossie Clark and Sodium Fox are phantoms, they are beautifully drawn phantoms.

II.

Blake has been described as a painter who works on the computer. In recent years he has also exhibited paintings, works with a turgid photo-realist feel that suggest Elizabeth Peyton's smugly winsome little portraits. In these compositions, which often accompany his new DVDs when they are shown at Feigen Contemporary, Blake recapitulates themes or images from his films, but the results are best passed over in silence. Another aspect of Blake's work has been his collaboration with the movie director Paul Thomas Anderson on *Punch-Drunk Love*, for which he created abstract sequences that suggest the psychological moods of the movie's lovesick protagonist. Blake's contribution here may remind some people of Dalí's collaboration with Hitchcock on *Spellbound*, where the Spanish Surrealist was brought in to give a shape to the dreams that Gregory Peck confided to his beautiful therapist. Blake's work for Anderson is a version of the

floating color forms, morphing and shifting like animated technicolor Rorschach tests, that have been an element in all his best work.

Blake's involvement with *Punch-Drunk Love* is the kind of high-art-meets-popular-art interaction that is sure to endear him to the art world fast set, who are only comfortable with ivory towers when they are breaking into them or remodeling them with the help of Gehry or Koolhaas. But if Hollywood wants to kidnap a true aesthete now and again, I say more power to Hollywood, and Blake is the real thing. He is the rare film-maker who has grasped the artistic possibilities inherent in the shift from conventional film to computer technology, and working at his computer he has both revived the artisanal immediacy of early experimental film and taken the measure of our distance from that work.

The individual frames that made up the old reels of film had a way of working against the cinema's promise of absolute fluidity. And in the work of avant-garde film-makers such as Harry Smith and Stan Brakhage, who often created their films frame by frame, painting or otherwise formulating images by hand, the effect could be weirdly—and somehow pleurably—jittery. Even when experimental film-makers joined together separate stretches of film, the cut-and-paste nature of the process became an element in the final product, lending a constructivist crispness to the flowing imagery of a work such as Ralph Steiner's *H2O* (1929), with its exploration of water in all its aspects. But the particular fluidity of Jeremy Blake's films—a quicksilver quality, outrageously supple and self-confident—could never quite exist without the new computer-generated technology. Much as the invention of flexible tubes for oil paint enabled artists to go outside and tackle new subjects such as dramatic changes in the weather or bustling crowds, so computer technology has enabled Blake to make us feel that painting and photography and the entire history of film are swirling easily together in his cheerfully perfervid imagination.

From time to time, you may still actually hear the whir and clack of an old-fashioned movie projector in an art gallery, where the antiquated technology is meant to exude a dessicated, rescued-from-the-scrap-heap magic. But it is in large measure the advent of new technologies that has brought increased attention to the shadow world of experimental film, and I feel the rising profile of those earlier experiments in Blake's films, where they are re-imagined for the computer age. The ease with which moving images can now be exhibited accounts at least in part for their heightened presence in galleries and museums. And from the point of view of anybody who is interested in the history of the experimental film, the DVD is a boon, providing access to many films that used to exist in relatively few copies and could only be seen in film libraries or at infrequent screenings.

While technophiles are often far too quick to assume that heightened access equals heightened understanding, access is surely one of the conditions for understanding. *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film 1894-1941*, a magnificent set of seven DVDs recently issued by Anthology Film Archives, the temple of avant-garde cinema in New York's East Village, will provide the raw materials for many a do-it-yourself reevaluation of the history of experimentation in the movies. Some hand-colored footage of a "Butterfly Dance" performed by Annabelle Moore, whose billowing costume is maneuvered to create delicious Art Nouveau patterns, suggests a startling prefiguring of the blots and blurs of color in Blake's film, although I have no reason to believe that Blake was thinking of this footage—or of the more famous films of Loie Fuller performing similar dances in fin-de-siècle Paris.

Unseen Cinema, which was organized by Bruce Posner and runs to some nineteen hours, is an astonishing achievement. The DVDs are presented thematically, although some of the themes are so capacious as to confound their own titles. The most sharply focused, *Picturing a Metropolis: New York City Unveiled*, moves from early footage of the city, including the Edison Company's heart-stoppingly poetic *Coney Island at Night* to Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's well-known *Manhatta*, to some work by Rudy Burckhardt, the filmmaker, photographer, and painter who was also one of de Kooning's earliest friends in New York. *Viva La Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance* is more variegated but still clearly delimited, opening with Annabelle Moore's "Butterfly Dance" and bringing, near its end, David Bradley's *Peer Gynt* of 1941, starring a teenage Charlton Heston.

What is evident in these selections—and only becomes clearer in the omnium-gatherum DVDs devoted to "new directions in storytelling," "music and abstraction," and "experiments in technique and form"—is how fluid the definition of avant-garde film turns out to be, at least according to the curators at Anthology Film Archives. *Suspense*—a 1913 melodrama in which a housewife and her baby are nearly attacked by a knife-wielding drifter—is included because of its split-screen techniques, but if this silent prefigures a certain kind of art film, it is also a potboiler with a place in the prehistory of the psycho-thrillers we all see at the multiplex. *Unseen Cinema* is a gloriously messy affair, in which Busby Berkeley, everybody's hero of Hollywood high camp, can rub shoulders with an abstract movie by the utterly highbrow geometric painter and *Partisan Review* editor George L. K. Morris.

The inclusion in *Unseen Cinema* of work by the Edison Company and D.W. Griffith and a host of other people who have secure places in the standard histories of

Hollywood suggests that film, a radically new medium around 1900, was once inherently avant-garde. And there is an even larger conclusion that some may want to draw from this anthology, which is that those who explore the possibilities of the moving image are by the very nature of their work members of a permanent avant-garde. Certainly the old idea that avant-gardism is essentially anti-commercial does not make much sense in this context. And if the early Edison films of Coney Island are indeed avant-garde, it is an avant-gardism that depends not on a reevaluation of tradition (which most commentators would say is the essence of the thing) but simply on the fundamentalism of the visual impressions, the almost unconscious freshness of the imagery.

This sense of film as automatically or inherently avant-garde, although it is easily contradicted by the numbing banality and conventionality of so much of the history of the movies, remains an idea with a powerful hold among museum curators and art dealers and art critics and art collectors. When Matthew Barney presents his turgid *Cremaster* epic at the Guggenheim or Bill Viola exhibits his slow-motion DVD riffs on gesturing hands in Northern European Renaissance paintings, whatever anybody may say about the work, pro or con, is somehow subsumed in the great fact of its moving-image-ness, which is accepted as itself a triumph of the permanent avant-garde. Indeed, considering the large-scale attention accorded to recent work by Barney and Viola, some commentators will be inclined to say that the very idea of experimental film as a separate category, neither exactly high art nor exactly popular culture, is an outmoded idea, symptomatic of a marginality that no longer describes even the personal film that has been created outside the standard distribution system. In any event, it can be argued that the art world has developed its own distribution systems, which, though not comparable to the scale of the multiplex, are turning Barney and Viola into names with at least the visibility of, say, Jim Jarmusch.

When people used to speak about experimental film or avant-garde film, they were not so much alluding to the restricted audience as they were suggesting the essential spirit of these films—a spirit that was at once quirky, romantic, and megalomaniacal, and that is in danger of being overlooked in the everything-equals-everything-else atmosphere of the contemporary art world. At this moment, strangely enough, the struggle for the heart and soul of experimental film may look a lot like the struggle for the heart and soul of painting or sculpture, for in each case a true feeling for the medium's possibilities depends on having a clear sense of the delimitedness of its means. For all its maddening self-reflexiveness and hopeless obscurantism, experimental film once had a revivifying power, the power of a howling-in-the-wilderness protest against the extent to which cinematic possibilities had been

sacrificed to the popularity of the medium. But these days, when it comes to moving images, the art world mostly produces pseudo-avant-garde products engineered to appeal to an ever-growing audience. There is a glibly upscale populism about the work of Barney and Viola and a lot of other artists who are now talked about; they sidestep the high-art prickliness of experimental film while falling far short of the easygoing appeal of Hollywood.

What Jeremy Blake regains for the moving image is the unto-oneself lyricism that P. Adams Sitney, in his essential *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* (1974), credits to "the film-maker behind the camera [who becomes] the first-person protagonist of the film." "In the lyrical form"—which Sitney identifies as one type of experimental film but I would say is the essence of experimental film—"there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and the editing, reverberates with the idea of a man looking." In Blake's films we are responding to precisely this sense of the film-maker as protagonist, who at once looks inward and outward, much as Man Ray did in his short films of the 1920s and Harry Smith did in his ebullient experiments in the 1940s with leaping, floating, quick-changing color. Just as the difficulty of modern poetry can bring us back to the freestanding power of words, so can the difficulty of experimental cinema sometimes force us to look and see in ways that we do not usually look or see on a Saturday night at the movies. After a couple of hours watching short abstract films, even the most intrepid cinemaphile may hunger for a good old-fashioned Hollywood thriller; but the single-mindedness of the experimental film can be clarifying, and like all single-mindedness in the arts, it is an endangered value.

III.

Jeremy Blake brings the geeky meticulousness of a techno-craftsman to images of wild abandon. He is walking a tightrope, and it is the sheer nerve of the high-wire act that has enabled him to move, with *The Winchester Trilogy*, into themes that reach further back historically and involve complex questions about the nature of American society. *The Winchester Trilogy* centers on the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California, an enormously weird Victorian mansion with some 160 rooms and dozens of staircases and thousands of windows and hundreds of doors, many of which lead nowhere. The house was constructed over a period of decades in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Sarah Winchester, whose husband was the heir to the Winchester rifle fortune. After the untimely deaths of her baby daughter and her husband, Mrs. Winchester consulted a medium who explained that these tragedies were precipitated by the spirits of people who were killed by Winchester rifles. The only way to deal with these

disconsolate spirits, Mrs. Winchester was told, was never to stop building, for the continual construction would somehow confound the spirits who were on her trail.

When I first saw part of Blake's trilogy—the entire project was exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art last year—I felt a shock of recognition, because I grew up in the Bay Area in the early 1960s, when the Winchester mansion was a decrepit tourist attraction in a deeply depressed San Jose. I was taken there by some San Francisco friends, who were something between latter-day beatniks and proto-hippies, and who adored the Mystery House as an example of American eccentricity, a sort of Northern Californian relative to Watts Towers, the homegrown gothic building in Los Angeles designed by the Italian immigrant Simon Rodia. The wonderfully bizarre mansion and the melancholy palm trees that frame it are a perfect subject for Jeremy Blake's psychedelic imagination. He understands the mansion in much the same way as those friends of mine in the early '60s understood it, for the gimcrack aestheticism of the Winchester Mystery House vibrates with a uniquely American mix of mysticism and materialism. And the very site of the mansion turns out to be pregnant with possibilities that link Blake's interest in spirituality and violence right back to his interest in the movies, for beginning in 1964 three futuristic movie theaters, in circular configurations that suggest spaceships, were built right next to the mansion, and named Century 21, Century 22, and Century 23. This is the kind of stuff you can't make up.

What is remarkable about Blake's work in *The Winchester Trilogy* is that he gives the provocative subject matter an unfussy allegorical power. *The Winchester Trilogy* has already inspired two books: a catalogue for the SFMOMA exhibition and Philip Monk's *Spirit Hunter: The Haunting of American Culture by Myths of Violence: Speculations on Jeremy Blake's Winchester Trilogy*. Monk, the director of the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto, where the trilogy has also been shown, pushes deep into the iconography of the series, and explores the life of Sarah Winchester, and discusses Blake's relationship to earlier films. There are moments when I think that he presses too hard on the trilogy's relationship to contemporary politics and what he calls an "American administration [that] plays its fearful population." My problem is not Monk's view of Bush, it is that the power of *The Winchester Trilogy* has everything to do with the openness of its implications. At his best, though, Monk understands the richness of the film-making, admiring the "shimmering insubstantiality," the "diminishing flashes of energy," the "gleaming images that masquerade as figures themselves masquerading the past," and the "dissipated antique vampires." He gets at the power of Blake's films

when he observes that in his work "the past and present are locked in one reinforced rhythm."

The Winchester Trilogy is not a sermon about what's wrong with America. It is a cinematic poem on certain aspects of America: its extremism, its crankiness, its desperation. The Winchester mansion, a structure that is ordinary in its details but extraordinary when it is considered as a whole, has a way of turning sociological ruminations into lyric flight. That is what Blake loves about the place. His subject is not so much the darkness of America as our love for that darkness—and our desire to illuminate it. When Blake dissolves the Winchester Mansion in the same saturated colors that he uses to illuminate *Sodium Fox* and *Reading Ossie Clark*, some may complain that he is revealing the limitations of his viewpoint. But I think that these are simply the colors that he always sees before his eyes—and it is this intensity of visual feeling that gives *The Winchester Trilogy* its personal stamp, and that earns Blake a place in the lyrical tradition of what Sitney calls "visionary film."

Blake's splashing colors bring to mind the bright surfaces of the 1960s, everything from the rock-concert light shows to the psychedelic posters to the tie-dyed T-shirts. This is a world that Blake, who was born in 1971, quite rightly regards as an ambiguous Eden. The kids who were part of the original counterculture often had what they imagined were their deepest insights while contemplating themselves in the magnifying mirror of mass culture—a magnifying mirror that Blake certainly admires. To have your first love affair take place during the Summer of Love could feel wildly exhilarating. The danger, of course, was that the public measure of the experience might become the only measure that mattered; and although the '60s involved a genuine celebration of inwardness and authenticity, what is remembered most clearly is a conformist, culture-by-consensus mentality of which the effects can even now be felt in the intelligentsia's inclination to regard all culture as mass culture. I'm glad to report that Blake understands the 1960s well enough to recognize that the youth culture was not all anti-art or even anti-traditional, and he reminds me of

some of the best of the '60s when he invokes the ripe-to-the-point-of-bursting aestheticism that was an aspect of those years. (I have my own memories of '60s aestheticism: I spent many an afternoon in 1968, during my freshman year in college, getting stoned and reading Henry James's late novels, and the drugs had the effect only of heightening the slowed-down intensities and insights in *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl*. I have friends who can tell similar tales.)

Blake is far from being the only artist now working with moving images who looks back to mid-century culture in general, and to the movie culture of the '60s and '70s in particular. There are days when I wander through the galleries and get the feeling that there is nothing on anybody's mind except *Last Tango in Paris*, Sergio Leone's westerns, and movies by De Palma, Scorsese, and Coppola. Compared to that trio of moviemaking megalomaniacs, today's art stars generally look like a bunch of wannabes. Their epics are the epics of mini-minds. But not Jeremy Blake. What sets him apart is his feeling for the possibilities that are available only to the solitary film-maker, which are the old possibilities of experimental cinema. He may allude to Leone, but the mid-century movies that his work draws closest to, at least in spirit, are works such as Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, a riotously mystical opium den of a movie, or Harry Smith's great animated fantasia *Heaven and Earth Magic*, with its airy playfulness. Blake evokes the light shows at 1960s rock concerts, but also the luxe of Gallé glass and the primitivism of those early Edison films. The range of allusions is at every point stamped with his individualism.

Jeremy Blake has the clear-sighted cheerfulness of the madman working at the margins. Like every artist who has crafted something with a personal savor, something that can elude the hard-sell tactics of the contemporary art world, he is at once inside tradition and inside himself. That his tradition includes works of which he might be unaware, works as curious and uncanny as the footage of Annabelle Moore in her "Butterfly Dance," reminds us once again that every true tradition is a magnification of modesties. ■