

# SUBCULTURAL TREASURES

**Nayland Blake participates in fandoms and kink communities, and makes work that borrows their imagery and their fluid rapport between artist and audience.**

**by Brian Droitcour**

Nayland Blake:  
*Heavenly Bunny Suit*, 1994, nylon with metallic armature, 75 by 35 by 19 inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

IN 1995 Nayland Blake co-organized “In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice” at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive at the invitation of then curator (now director) Lawrence Rinder. The catalogue essays reveal that the two principals had divergent agendas: Rinder wrote of “the dynamism and innovation evident in the work of the contemporary generation of young gay and lesbian artists,” whereas Blake was more interested in talking about Duchamp and punk. Rinder discussed the importance of institutional recognition for gay and lesbian artists; Blake, who had already organized exhibitions of queer artists at New Langton Arts in San Francisco, was openly skeptical about the premise of an identity-based show.<sup>1</sup>

With “In a Different Light,” Blake avoided essentializing identities by assembling artists and groups from various generations, not all of whom were queer, from Marsden Hartley to the Sex Pistols to Nan Goldin. What’s more, he devised an alternative taxonomy that organized the 117 participants (as well as related posters, zines, record sleeves, and other ephemera) not by age, geography, or movement but by the various dispositions that characterized their work. The nine categories included “Void,” the art of grief and withdrawal, and “Utopia,” the art of infinite possibility and beautifully fragile ideals; in the catalogue, several artists were listed under multiple categories. The curatorial rubric of queerness, in this case, did not designate an identity but rather a range of modes of expression.

Twenty-three years later, Blake has organized “Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward” at the Institute

of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, as part of the institution’s series of artist-curated exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> If “In a Different Light” featured canonized artists, some of them dead, the ones in “Tag” are mostly unknown and young. It’s a refreshingly rough and ragged show, with lots of things that exist at the art world’s fringes: Dusty Shoulders’s installations assembled from props for nightlife performances, Saeberg’s massive tableau of inflatable latex piglets suckling at a sow, Robert Yang’s lurid video games about flirting and cruising, a card game by Nica Ross that invites visitors to engage in collaborative storytelling. K8 Hardy, whose video *Express Views (of Outfitumentary)* plays in the first gallery, appears as something of a senior stateswoman here. The work is a sixteen-minute edit of *Outfitumentary* (2016), a feature-length record of thrift-store outfits worn over eleven years. Hardy’s project presages newer works that also approach dressing as an opportunity to play with the social demands of self-presentation. Buzz Slutzky burns portraits and self-portraits into wooden boards, a rugged presentation that contrasts with a tender sound piece, in which the artist reflects on wearing different garments to traverse the scale from butch to femme. In the early 1990s, Blake spotted the ascent of identity art—the institutional enticement for artists to package and present their selfhood in the census-taker’s vocabulary—and began to seek out ways to work around it. “Tag” once again swaps out identity politics for identity play, presenting code-switching as both a queer art of survival and a lot of fun.



CURRENTLY ON VIEW  
“Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward,” curated by Nayland Blake, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, through Aug. 12.



View of the exhibition "Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward," 2018, showing work by Dusty Shoulders. Courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Photo Constance Mensh.



Below, view of the exhibition "In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice," 1995, at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.



FOR THE LAST few years, Blake has opted to use “they/them” pronouns instead of the masculine “he/him.” The decision was made partly in solidarity with those whose gender expression does not fit a binary, as a nod toward a possible future of universal pronouns that aren’t loaded with social expectations. But it also came from Blake’s lifelong understanding of their own identity as hybrid. “Legally black,” in their words, but passing as white, Blake has never felt at ease with racial categories, and that experience, in tandem with queerness, gave rise to a skeptical attitude toward binary gender.<sup>3</sup> This position is the foundation of their art. “I believe there are two types of people,” Blake said in an interview with the *Brooklyn Rail*: “people who fuck to confirm an idea they already have about their identity and people who fuck to explore all the possibilities of their identity.”<sup>4</sup>

Born in New York in 1960, Blake moved to San Francisco in the early 1980s after studying at Bard College and CalArts, and got involved in the city’s art and kink scenes. What might have been parallel paths became intertwined in the artist’s work. The first sculptures to gain serious attention were pieces of furniture with restraints: metal tables and leather chairs that invite viewers to imagine themselves bound in them. When commissioned to make work for the lobby of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, then in its old building in Civic Center Plaza, Blake responded to the plaques that encircle the rotunda. Since the originals bear the names of Old Masters, the artist decided to display leather flails on plinths with name tags corresponding to those on the wall.

Blake, who had friends in the San Francisco leather scene, thrilled to the sight of leathermen attending the opera in full fetish regalia—a spectacle of high culture and subculture colliding—but

never felt comfortable with the community’s quasi-military polish and regimented attention to detail. Instead, the artist gravitated toward a nascent scene of guys who were too sloppy for leather and called themselves “bears.” The group developed nationally not only through the San Francisco-based *Bear* magazine but also via a daily email digest called the Bear Mailing List, serving one of the first queer subcultures to take shape online.

Blake’s practice of fashioning connections between art and kink has continued in videos like *Coat* (2001), a collaboration with A.A. Bronson in which the two cover their faces with chocolate and vanilla frosting (rendering them both alternately black and white) and proceed to kiss passionately. “FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!,” Blake’s

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2012 exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, memorialized a gay bar that had once stood a few blocks away. Among the show’s features were a reproduction of a Tom of Finland-like mural and stations where visitors could write down memories or leave objects related to the bar and the recent history of the rapidly gentrifying SoMa neighborhood. Blake also follows the paths of art and kink in parallel. They teach foundation courses at the International Center of Photography’s school in New York, and lead courses in scene design at kink conventions, showing participants how to set up rules for play, similar to the principles Blake uses to create videos and performances.

Given the importance of kink to Blake’s work, it can be jarring to read critical assessments that overlook it entirely. When David Deitcher wrote about *Gorge* (1998), an hour-long video in which Blake is fed continually by their partner, Philip Horvitz, the critic relates it to “self-punishing, endurance spectacles” in the tradition of Chris Burden. In other words, Deitcher wanted to position the work solely in a history of performance art. He identified its dynamic of dominance and submission, but analyzed it as an allegory of slavery without making the connection to BDSM play.<sup>5</sup> There’s no acknowledgment of feeding as a fetish—the process of making your lover bigger by inducing them to overeat, enjoying their fat and reveling in the release from the social control of bodies that makes fat shameful.<sup>6</sup> But Blake doesn’t see accounts like Deitcher’s as misreadings. Rather, the artist relishes the fact that viewers coming to kink from art or from art to kink can appreciate *Gorge* on their own terms. (These perspectives aren’t equally treated, however; someone who comes to art from kink is unlikely to be published in a museum catalogue.)

But perhaps more important, Blake likes to point out the contemporaneous emergence of BDSM communities and performance art in the 1960s and ’70s. Both were under the sway of post-Freudian thinkers like Wilhelm Reich who



theorized essential connections between social constraints on sex and bodies, and repressive political regimes. There’s no public record of Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, or other artists who choreographed personal debasement and physical defilement being involved in kink communities. And it doesn’t really matter whether they were or not. What matters is that, as Blake put it, “artists were doing things in public that others were doing in private.”<sup>7</sup>

IN RECENT YEARS Blake has become involved with furies, a community of people who take cartoon animals as alter egos, or fursonas. Most furies don’t have the drawing skills to illustrate their fursonas, so they hire artists to do it for them. Devotees who have the financial means commission fursuits—plush costumes like those worn by sports mascots or Disneyland entertainers—to give their fursonas a physical presence. Most furry activity consists of participation in online message boards, commissioning and sharing fursona drawings, and meeting at conventions and other social events where fursuits are worn.

Some furry art is erotic or pornographic, so furies are sometimes thought of as a sexual subculture, but fornication isn’t really at the center of it. The furry community is better understood as a form of fandom, like the networks of “Star Trek” or Harry Potter enthusiasts. Within those communities, some fans write and illustrate sexual fantasies about their favorite fictional characters, though that’s not the full extent of fan activity. But while the genesis of furry culture is often connected to Disney’s *Robin Hood* (1973), animated series like “Thundercats,” and other cartoons that sexualize anthropomorphic animals or present them as romantic interests, those characters don’t appear in the art or play of furies, who prefer to concentrate on their own fursonas. Furies have been

View of Blake’s installation *FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!*, 2012, at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. Photo JW White/Phocasso.

*Gorge*, 1998, video, 60 minutes. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.





*Starting Over*, 2000, video, 23 minutes. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

around a while—Blake first befriended a furry while blogging on LiveJournal in the early 2000s—but they have entered the mainstream imagination only in recent years, through news coverage and increased visibility on social media.<sup>8</sup>

Gnomens, Blake's fursona, made a public debut at the New Museum in New York this fall, in "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon." Blake commissioned a fursuit and displayed it in a corner of the third-floor gallery. (Notably, the curators' objectives for "Trigger" were similar to Blake's for "In a Different Light": to make a show about queerness that didn't label artists' identities or diagnose a particular way of making art as queer.) Reviews of "Trigger" in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* misidentified Gnomens as a bear, but the creature is half-bear, half-bison, a hybrid identity indicated by the tufted chin of a bison on the bear-shaped head, as well as horns and a snout with a bull-like septum ring.<sup>9</sup> While such crossbreeds are uncommon in the furry community, Blake hasn't encountered any objections to it. The bigger issue, Blake said wryly, is that the fursuit produced for "Trigger" would not be considered authentic, as it was adapted from a pre-existing bear fursuit rather than built from scratch as Gnomens.<sup>10</sup> In *Crossing Object (Inside Gnomens)*, 2017–18, an occasional performance scheduled for a few days during the run of "Trigger," Blake donned the fursuit and rode the elevator. Visitors were invited to write secrets on buttons and pin them to the suit's synthetic pelt.

Gnomens is not the first animal suit to appear in Blake's work. *The Little One* (1994) is a doll-size black porcelain mannequin enclosed in a white bunny suit, and *Heavenly Bunny Suit* (1994) is a gold nylon bunny suit big enough for Blake to wear. In the same year, the artist made *Negative Bunny*, a video in which Blake ventriloquizes a stuffed bunny repeatedly declaring their HIV-negative status for thirty minutes. For the performance video *Starting Over* (2002), Blake danced in a 140-pound bunny suit until collapsing from exhaustion. But none of these bunnies were named, as Gnomens is; the bunny was an image, not a character. Blake was attracted to cartoon rabbits like Bugs Bunny and Br'er Rabbit as trickster figures whose creators exploited the Aesopian freedom of animation to play with taboos. The humor of Bugs Bunny draws on

Tommy Bruce: *Meerkat and Spruce Outside Warwa*, 2013, inkjet print, 12 by 18 inches.

vaudeville traditions; his appearance and speech code references to minstrel makeup and other forms of racial caricature. And he often gets dolled up in drag to pacify Elmer Fudd by seducing him. All these associations lurk in Blake's bunny works. If there's any similarity between them and the Gnomens project, it's in the use of costume play to externalize inner life. The bunnies, among other things, are a shamanic materialization of Blake's unresolved anxieties regarding race and sex; furry play transposes a fantasy other self into an image, and then from the image to a fleshly, furry social masquerade.

Media theorist Dick Hebdige views subcultures as a form of underclass rebellion that gets absorbed into the mainstream; members are "alternately dismissed, denounced, and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons."<sup>11</sup> Fandoms aren't quite the same. They begin with consumption habits. They cluster around relatively anodyne totems of mass culture, so there's never quite the aura of danger that accompanied rockers or punks. But they're still relegated to a margin—just a goofy, geeky one. Perhaps fandom of this type is less a rebellion than a means of adapting to a media landscape. Blake sees furies—as well as the upsurge of interest in BDSM among young people in both art and kink worlds—as a reaction to the socioeconomic realities of the present. These exaggerated embodiments help people cope with their acute alienation from what Blake calls "the white tube."<sup>12</sup> The definitive experience of contemporary urban life, the white tube entails frictionless movement and well-designed sterility: the reclaimed wood of cash-free coffee shops, the Airbnbs that let tourists slide into the residential fabric of a locale without actually living there, the ride-share apps that enable them to move around a city without spending time outdoors. Connections recede from attention; there's only the conduit, styled with sanitized signs of creativity and innovation.

Blake's coinage is an obvious wordplay evoking the white cube, the gallery environment extensively analyzed and critiqued as the removal of social context from art. The tube/cube rhyme suggests that the condition of the work of modern art has enveloped the contemporary subject. Blake has always worked to expand the purview of art institutions through other



Valentine's Day party at the ICA, Philadelphia, Feb. 14, 2018. Photo Derek Rigby.

codes and engagement with other communities, where play and embodiment matter more than they do in the museum. "Tag" includes a selection of portraits by Tommy Bruce, who photographs furies in their costumes or in the process of putting them on, in their homes, in their cars, at conventions. In an exhibition where most of the work has the lo-fi look of experimental video (like Hardy's self-portraits), Bruce's lush, beautifully lit images, glossy as a fashion editorial, take on an ethereal grandeur. On Valentine's Day, Blake and Bruce hosted a party at the ICA, inviting furies, cosplayers, and others to the museum for a queer mixer with music by DJ Knox the Disco Dog.

Blake credits Bruce with the insight that furies are a fandom without a canon. Other fan communities take shape in relation to extant media. But furies make their fursonas through an ongoing process of socialization and collaboration with other furies and artists.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, one could say that furry culture blurs the distinction between fandom and kink; kink doesn't have a canon either, just a set of protocols for play. What excites Blake about those communities, and furies in particular, is the element of participatory creativity. A furry convention is like the opposite of a museum: you go there not to look at art that's already made, but to meet artists and make commissions. The museum tends to cordon off social relations (and, often, identities) for aloof contemplation from without. Blake's project is to undermine that distance, and open up the possibility for communal connections again. ○

1. "Situation: Perspectives on Work by Lesbian and Gay Artists," co-organized with Pam Gregg, was on view at New Langton Arts from June 18 to July 13, 1991. Blake also made efforts to include queer artists in other group shows at the venue.
2. The inaugural exhibition in the ICA's guest curator program was "Ensemble," a show of sound works organized by Christian Marclay in 2007. Other artists who have taken part in the series are Virgil Marti and Kara Walker.
3. Interview with the author in New York, Feb. 20, 2018.
4. "Nayland Blake with Jarrett Earnest," *Brooklyn Rail*, April 2013, p. 25.
5. David Deitcher, "Nayland Blake's *Feeder 2* and *Corollary*," in *Nayland Blake: Some Kind of Love: Performance Video 1989–2002*, edited by Ian Berry, exhibition catalogue, the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y., 2003, pp. 48–51. In making the slavery analysis, Deitcher notes Horvitz's darker skin tone and reads the work as an allegory for white guilt, "or in Blake's case, to the potentially even greater guilt of the light-skinned bi-racial man who can 'pass' as white (p. 51)."
6. Blake used the jargon of fat fetish in several earlier works. Notably, the term for someone who encourages a lover to get bigger serves as the title for *Feeder* (1990), a metal cage with a mouthlike opening, and *Feeder 2* (1998), a giant gingerbread house. The latter piece was inspired by Kathy Acker's essay on *Feeder*, which relates the cage sculpture to the story of Hansel and Gretel.
7. Interview with the author, Feb. 20, 2018.
8. In 2012, Katie Notopoulos, a BuzzFeed reporter specializing in online subcultures, attended Anthrocon, the second-largest furry convention, held annually in Pittsburgh since 2005. After drawing criticism for a preview piece that presented furies as freaks, she wrote a gentler account of the conference itself, saying how much she liked the people she met there. Katie Notopoulos, "What Is a Furry?," June 14, 2012, and "Are Furies Really So Bad?," June 19, 2012, buzzfeed.com.
9. Holland Cotter, "Let (Gender) Confusion Reign," *New York Times*, Sept. 29, 2017, pp. C13 and C16; Peter Schjeldahl, "The Art World as Safe Space," *New Yorker*, Oct. 9, 2017, newyorker.com.
10. Interview with the author in New York, Feb. 19, 2018.
11. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 2.
12. Interview with the author, Feb. 20, 2018.
13. Interview with the author in New York, Mar. 12, 2018.