

The Briar and the Tar

Nayland Blake at the ICA LA and Matthew Marks Gallery

At either end of a stainless-steel industrial countertop are two sprays of white nylon on poles, hacked somewhere between a mop top and a Warhol wig. The table is stocked with three cardboard buckets of tar. *Workstation (_baby, _baby)* (2000) stands ready—for what, it's unclear: either a backstage dance routine à la Britney Spears, or to concoct a monstrous asphalt doughboy. Either way, for your safety or your pleasure, a pair of leather cuffs hangs from a chain.

Nayland Blake's 30-year retrospective at the ICA LA, *No Wrong Holes*, bristles with suggestive work. The artist practices a found-object formalism of loops, collars, straps, and restraints; some sculptures demonstrate their potential uses on stuffed toys, while others imply that the viewer could be next. Some look ready to fit the body, others' proportions (such as a series of long poles with cuffs, or a tabletop with a rod in its center) might require some contortions. The results aggressively obey the rules of contemporary art, the better to define their own freedom. This from a queer, mixed-race artist buoyed by the "identity art" of the 1990s, yet—as the present bounty of work makes clear—irreducible to any one moment or movement. Blake is known for their daring collapse of categories, often taking up the formal limits of both art (minimalism, appropriation) and society (repression, bigotry) in the same object. As a result, the petroleum acidity in their work is often sweetly masked and must be sussed out.

The momentum of Blake's formalism is such that even decontextualized lists of their materials can seem

portentous: "Sock monkey and wooden chair"; "Two stuffed bunnies, wood, leather, rope, plastic knife, birthday candles, and plastic bell"; "Steel and gingerbread." The east gallery at the ICA, in fact, features the scent emanating from the gingerbread shingles of a small cabin (*Feeder 2*, 1998), part Brothers Grimm, part Uncle Tom. (Part spiced molasses; part tar.) Blake's work leverages its charged subtext, in which the pain of bondage simmers within the pleasures of BDSM, against its pinioning on the artworld floor and wall.

Just as important as their kineticism, though, is the sculptures' inertia. Meaning arrives in bursts—a stuffed rabbit hanging from a plastic Christmas tree in *Wrong Banyan (After P.)* (2000), is obviously lynched—yet it is also viscous, like the six glass bottles of "Brer Rabbit" brand molasses harnessed together in *Molasses Six Pack* (1998). For most folks, that's a lifetime supply—a grotesque amount of syrup. (That is, unless—like Blake—you need to bake enough gingerbread to shingle a small log cabin.) For most folks, too, the thick problematics of those six bottles will take a minute to pour out. Today, molasses conjures up those items printed on its label: pecan pie, a gingerbread man. Molasses also has a history as the sweetener of the poor. Further back, in more colonial times, molasses arrived in the United States from sugar plantations in the Caribbean; it still retains the bitterness of slave-grown commodities.

You may know the story of Br'er Rabbit—a cautionary tale brought to North America by enslaved Africans, racially deformed into Uncle Remus, then bastardized by Walt Disney—about a wily hare who uses reverse psychology on his captors (a bear and a fox). He convinces them to throw him into the briar patch then breaks out laughing: the briar is his beloved birthplace. You may not remember how Br'er Rabbit got himself in a position to be tossed in the first place. The canny predators, Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear, construct a little black child out of tar (yes, it's a racist story). When Br'er Rabbit, passing on



Nayland Blake, *Vanity 1* (2019).
Wood, steel, tin, plastic, Plexiglas, enamel paint,
acrylic, and clay, 85.75 × 39 × 10 inches.
© Nayland Blake. Image courtesy of the artist
and Matthew Marks Gallery.



Nayland Blake, *Bottom Bunny* (1994).
© Nayland Blake. Courtesy of Matthew Marks
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Above: Nayland Blake, *Starting Over* (video still) (2000). DVD video projection, 23 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

Below: *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake* (installation view) (2019). Image courtesy of the artist and ICA LA. Photo: Jeff McLane.

the road, says “Howdy-do!,” the tar baby won’t reply. Br’er gets hopping mad, punches it, and gets stuck.

Blake’s work falls somewhere between the tar baby and the briar patch. The artist approaches the structures of contemporary art with a gleeful, unbound quality, playful, and tricksterish—and they are equally willing to confront moral stickiness, at the risk of throwing the wrong punch. *Restraint Shoes* (1992) consists of five shiny, black, leather shoes chained to the wall at a single point: enough for permutations of two to five individuals. The shoes prompt images of how these figures, anchored together with only a little slack, would negotiate their footwear and, by extension, one another. Legs cross, bodies recline. It’s a little funny; a little sexy, and sinister; a little whatever the viewer brings. Like the rabbit in the bear’s clutches, Blake plays to survive. Installed beside the lynched, stuffed brown rabbit is a video, *Gorge* (1998), that depicts the white-passing artist being force-fed donuts and watermelon by a black-presenting lover/friend, while the bunny hop plays in the background.

Who is the rabbit, to Blake? They seem to have been working that out in a suite of six dozen drawings circa 2000, hung at the ICA in a handful of grids. In one, a thumbnail-sized rabbit is on fire. In another, a cottontail ass is below a sign that reads, “I have betrayed my race.” Race is a big reason for that bunny: Blake points to the stereotype—pinned to Bugs and Br’er alike—that black men are flighty, anal, and sexually obsessed. This stereotype gets a macabre, punny mascot in the video *Negative Bunny* (1994), in which a stuffed brown bunny tries to convince the viewer to sleep with them. Negative, because the bunny is HIV negative; negative, because the answer seems to be no. “Do I remind you of your father? Is that it? Well I’m *not* him,” the bunny prods. Having explored the rabbit as image, as lover, and as legacy, Blake himself puts on the skin. A number of hoods and full costumes at the ICA resemble bear-sized bunnies, like the raver gold *Heavenly Bunny Suit* (1994). In *Costume #4 (Two Act Comedy)* (1992) a pair of

square nylon masks—one in white, one black—are linked together by an arc of chain weighted with a testicular pair of medieval clubs. The eye and mouth holes are the barest slits, stitched with thread, a hint of burning cross.

In their video *Starting Over* (2000), Blake takes on the rabbit image in a feat of endurance. The video begins with the artist on their back being tied into a pillowy white bunny suit. It is weighted with dry beans to equal the 146 pounds of Blake’s partner of many years. Once dressed and standing, the artist begins a rough, heavy clogging routine. A soundtrack of weary footsteps booms in the gallery. The suit’s weight becomes apparent as the performance drags on, and Blake grows visibly exhausted. Wrestling the rabbit, in more ways than one, Blake takes on pain for our pleasure. The rabbit suit, and the idea of *rabbit*, like the distinctly racialized subject, are treated like a debilitating armature daring to be performed.

Blake does one better: they outperform. A concurrent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery compliments Blake’s retrospective with three recent bodies of work. A 2019 series of tall, thin assemblages combine cans, paint, new and old wood, and chains, in arrangements reminiscent of the restraints of the 1990s. Like melted Gary Indiana plop art, drippy candles shaped like the letters L-O-V-E cover three low aluminum racks. But another, untitled series from the 2000s best sums up Blake’s attitude towards the restraints of the white wall, the buttoned-up kunsthalle-style contexts where his work appears: a row of small rectangles of acrylic, roughly and expressively drilled through with holes, laminated on top of mirrored acrylic and panel. Each piece hangs cheekily on a foot-long piece of wire, wrapped around a single screw. For such an expansive, dynamic artist, not afraid to show us tar babies, they’re sure comfortable in the briar patch.

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Nayland Blake, *Untitled* (2007).
Plexiglas with mirror coated Plexiglas paper,
mounted on panel and wire, 14 x 11 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
Matthew Marks Gallery.