Nayland Blake’s Feeder 2

In Low, the catalog published in conjunction with a 1990 exhibition by New York artist Nayland Blake, experimental writer Kathy Acker retold the Hansel and Gretel myth as a way of helping the viewer enter into Nayland Blake’s world. “The realm that is seen when myth is found,” she wrote, “the realm of myth and fairytale, identifies human nature. Nayland Blake’s art is about what it is to be human.”

Not only did Acker’s words resonate perfectly with Blake’s memory-laden sculptures, they also inspired the artist’s future work.

During the 1980s Blake became known as an artist who complicated notions of cultural and sexual identity by means of humor and often disarming visual combinations. He frequently used the careful arrangement of objects such as sci-fi paperbacks, black leather restraints, gleaming steel shelves, faded artificial flowers, and eerily distorted marionettes to address issues of race, sexual identity, and personal transformation. Both Acker and Blake confidently and bravely confront the often uncomfortable details of our lives, loves, fantasies, relationships, and daily functions, wondering, How does desire work? Why do we form the relationships we do? Why do we blush and feel guilt at sexual and emotional urges and realities? How do we learn about gender differences and racial divides? And, importantly, what aspects of storytelling and art can raise these questions and engage the public?

One sculpture in the 1990 exhibition, titled Feeder, consisted of a large steel cage (84 x 42 x 120 inches) with no way in or out except for a long thin opening only a few inches wide along one long side of the cell. This opening riveted the viewer’s gaze in that it evoked a mouth—an aid to eating, licking, or sucking whatever might be offered from the outside in, or from the inside out.

After Acker’s untimely death from cancer in 1997, Blake reread her essay and was moved by the comparison of his work to myth, and especially by her retelling of the Hansel and Gretel story. He considers his response to her writing a sort of collaboration over time, which ultimately inspired him to create new art. Feeder 2 (1998), arguably Blake’s best-known work of the 1990s, was born from this dialogue with her writing.

Like Feeder, Feeder 2, which debuted at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York in the fall of 1998, is an unexpected and confrontational structure. It consists of an 84 x 84 x 120 inch steel-frame house with two windows on one long side and a short door on the other. The entire surface is covered with 10 x 10 inch gingerbread tiles. The 252 squares of gingerbread are custom baked and trimmed in place to fit the work. This unusual sculpting material emits a heavy, spicy smell that forms the first sensation of the work, even before one actually sees it. At Matthew Marks the scent drew viewers in, like an olfactory crumb trail through the white-walled “woods” of the Chelsea gallery.

But the initially comforting aroma, reminiscent of home and holidays, slowly becomes too much—sickly sweet and repellent—after visitors spend time in the gallery. The subtle and often imperceptible moment when Blake’s work switches from one emotion to another is one of the great powers of his art, and it occurs with many of his installations and performances.
The form of the life-sized gingerbread house immediately recalls the tale of Hansel and Gretel, which Blake describes as “a story about the uneasy relationship between parents and children revolving around various images of eating and food that is scarce or too abundant.” While the caged cell of Feeder can be thought of as representing the withholding of food, Feeder 2 suggests an abundance of food, a house for nibbling. Yet both are fantasies that can turn dark. The Hansel and Gretel story provides a good metaphor for Blake’s desire to keep walking deeper into his own dark woods—getting lost in the mixed emotions all of us experience. Although Feeder 2 does not offer conclusions or a happy ending like the Grimm brothers’ fairy tale, the disorienting experience of being in a room with Blake’s oversized gingerbread house becomes a catalyst for dialogue.

Feeder 2 has been shown three times since its debut. Each time, the exhibiting venue must find a local baker to mix and cook the hundreds of pounds of gingerbread needed to create the work. This requirement necessitates working collaboratively with bakers willing to adapt their recipe to the artist’s specifications. Thus, like all collaborations, each successive installation accrues a community through its making. Over time the recipe has been adjusted. The cookies produced are now drier, making for harder and less saggy tiles, and a final egg wash now adds another layer of stiffness to keep the gingerbread looking its best over the several months of each exhibition.

The most intriguing version of the work was commissioned by the shelter quarterly nest. After seeing Feeder 2, the editors invited Blake to create a wallpaper of gingerbread for Blake’s mother’s bedroom. The resulting installation, Gingerbreadroom (1999), consisted of over 400 pounds of gingerbread cut into 10 x 10 inch tiles similar to those used for Feeder 2 and attached with picture hangers to the four walls of Joan Blake’s apartment bedroom. The gingerbread recipe, provided by Eleni’s of New York, was published in an issue of the magazine, along with images of the installation by photographer Nan Goldin. For a yield of 2,708 feet, the recipe called for (among other ingredients) 180 pounds of flour, 30 pounds of molasses, 80 pounds of dark brown sugar, 56 pounds of sweet, unsalted butter, and 280 extra-large eggs.
Gingerbreadroom speaks to the complicated interaction between mother and son, in which the mother simultaneously provides for and overpowers. It represents the tugs of dependence and aggression that circle around parent-child relationships. In this work Blake created something for an audience of one, a gift for his mother—a warm gesture of comfort and goodness. But, as with Feeder 2, the smell eventually became overpowering and pervasive. His mother could not escape it as long as her room was a stage set for her son’s art.

Larousse Gastronomique explains that beginning in the eleventh century, gingerbread was made by French monks in the shape of “animals, little men, and flowers.” This information offers interesting commentary on Nayland Blake’s multilayered work. Think of men living in solitary cells, baking spiced bread in the shape of little men and animals. Then, nine hundred years later, along comes a single man who bakes spiced bread in the form of a cell and sometimes performs in an animal costume (Blake has regularly used the image of a bunny rabbit in his work of the past fifteen years). Though we shouldn’t carry these associations too far—Blake is, after all, hardly a monk—it is fair to say that he is on his own spiritual quest, searching for answers, or, more rightly, for better questions than those he has now.

Above: Nayland Blake and his mother, Joan Blake, in the Gingerbreadroom.

Notes
1. Nayland Blake’s exhibition Low was on view at Petersburg Gallery in New York, 6 October–3 November 1990. For the catalog, see Kathy Acker and Nayland Blake, Low: Good and Evil in the Work of Nayland Blake (New York: Petersburg Press, 1990), 19.
2. Conversation with Nayland Blake, 2 January 2006.
3. Feeder 2 and Corollary was on view at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 7 October–28 November 1998.
5. Feeder 2 was featured in the exhibition Nayland Blake: Some Kind of Love on view at the Center for Art and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 6 February–22 March 2003, and at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, 18 October 2003–4 January 2004. The work was also included in the 2002 exhibition The Garden of Violence at Historische Museum, Murten, Switzerland. A variant of the piece was made in 2001 for an exhibition in collaboration with A.A. Bronson at Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Unterowisheim, Germany. For that exhibition a gingerbread house was constructed that was longer and lower, more like a bunker or a gas chamber.