

Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE | ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
| WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell AND *Emily Stamey*

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,

Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,

AND *Robert Silberman*

PHOTO-ESSAY BY *Larry Schwarm*

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(cat. no. 16)

Back cover: Tom Otterness, *Millipede*, 2008 (cat. no. 45)



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VIBRANT COLORS AND HYPNOTIC RHYTHMS CHARACTERIZE WHAT JEREMY BLAKE CALLED HIS “TIME-BASED PAINTINGS,” digital animations whose shapes morph and mutate in translucent layers. He began making these works in the 1990s, drawing upon his training as an abstract painter, his knowledge of twentieth-century art and architectural history, and his fascination with popular culture. Although highly abstract, the animations are often rooted in uncanny narratives, both real and fictional, taken from artists’ biographies, popular contemporary legends, and Blake’s own imagination. The artist did not tell these stories outright but instead hinted at them with carefully chosen sounds and images. In a 2001 interview about *Mod Lang*, he explained: “I am interested in the fact that narrative cues, such as suspenseful noises, are extremely disorienting when used in a largely abstract, time-based artwork. . . . It’s important to me that the threat of a narrative intrusion transforms the work.”¹

Mod Lang was first the title of a larger installation that included two other digital animations, three chromogenic prints, and a set of ten drawings that provided a sort of storyboard for the show. There, the drawings told Blake’s story of a teenage hipster, Keith (“Slick”) Rhoades, who wrecks his motor scooter on a rainy London street one night. Believed to have suffered brain damage due to the accident, Rhoades razes a historic castle and in its place erects a home for stylish vampires. This leads him to be banished from England and sent to southern California, where he lives happily in exile. The three projected animations, on a separate wall from the drawings, were loosely related to the story. In the title animation, *Mod Lang*, sliding doors part to reveal what might be a hallucinogenic image of the slick street on which Rhoades crashed. Rivulets of rich, viscous hues stream down the screen – expanding, contracting, overlapping, and merging into one another.

These streams of color evoke the mid-twentieth-century paintings of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, who explored the possibilities of color saturation by pouring paint onto unprimed canvases. The influential critic Clement Greenberg championed these color-field artists, whose work represented his ideal of modern painting, which was that it should simply be about the application of paint to a flat surface. Blake consciously referenced the color-field paintings but also purposely linked them to a story and, by setting them in a continuous animated loop, created the illusion that their flow is perpetual.

Blake’s approach to his art – at once serious and lighthearted – is succinctly conveyed in his explanation of the title *Mod Lang*, which originally was the title of a song by the Memphis rock band Big Star:

To me, “Mod Lang” calls up a nice range of possible interpretations. It could be short for something as high-minded as “modernist language,” or it could be “languid mods,” maybe after a group of young people who are blissfully wiped out after being up for 48 hours.²

Emily Stamey

54 *Mod Lang*

2001

Digital animation, dimensions variable

Museum Purchase, 2002.0028



1. Blake interviewed by Tim Griffin, “H-h-h-his Generation: Jeremy Blake Remakes Mod at the Turn of the Millennium,” *Time Out New York*, October 18–25, 2001: 76.

2. Blake quoted in Sarah Valdez, “Attack of the Abstract,” *Art in America* 90, no. 3 (March 2002): 104–5.

About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (2000), *Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s* (2002), and *The Old, Weird America* (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include *Marsden Hartley: American Modern* (1997), *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002), and *Painting Berlin Stories* (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, *Living to Tell* (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, *Bound*, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former *New York Times* photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series *American Photography: A Century of Images*.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, *On Fire: Larry Schwarm*, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.

Emily Stamey, the Ulrich Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of *Jolan Gross-Bettelheim: The American Prints* (2001) and *The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968–2005* (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.

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