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Chris Coy

Jeremy Blake Exhibition at  
Honor Fraser Gallery

for Nate Hitchcock &  
Michael Connor (Rhizome)

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Hello Chris. Thanks for taking an interest in my work, and Jayson's as well. Below are my answers in blue.

Sincerely,  
JB

1. How integral was Jayson Whitmore's involvement with you on the Winchester series? I noticed that you thanked him first in the introduction to the book of the exhibit. Did he do a majority of the animating and compositing of your imagery/drawings/abstractions, etc? Or was his role more to provide technical experience when you needed it and had questions?

Jayson Whitmore is the total motion graphics pro. He makes life easier on me because I can describe something to him and he can help me do it without much trouble. That said, its not the main reason I choose to collaborate with Jayson, because there are many people trained the way Jayson is trained, just as there are many people trained to draw and paint like I was trained. My work is also very technically simple, so technically Jayson is holding back some of his skills when he does my stuff. The reason why I always try to work with Jayson Whitmore first is because he's got a GREAT musical ear. He's got a sense for the timing of the movement and the content of the art that qualifies him as an artist in his in right. Its always an honor to work with people as outstanding and insightful as he is. The same can be said for a man named Jonathan Karp who helps us with sound, Brendan Canty from the band Fugazi who's done music with us in the past, and all the other great people I've been lucky enough to work with. I've been very fortunate to have such good people around me. Jayson is an unbeatable talent and has spent years learning the techniques he knows, and he frees up the time I need to perfect my imagery.

2. From your background in painting, and painterly approach to earlier works (like the ones employing traditional cell-painting) you have shifted to a more mixed assortment of collaged elements with your signature sixties abstraction inspired veil shapes.(that's an oversimplification I know) Does your current process still reflect that heritage? In other words, do you still employ a variety of techniques to realize your completed elements- or is it all done in the computer now?

I employ a wide variety of techniques which I can pull from years of painting, and I still paint, although obviously I don't have as much time to do so because of how complex the films are. You can't do what I do with just a computer. You can do some very cool things with just a computer though, so the young kids coming out of school making art now shouldn't give up on that approach either. Drawing is the key to everything visual though. Its not the only route to making great visual art, but its so immediate and it sweeps the cobwebs out of the brain.

3. You talk of time-based color field painting, yet it seems like they are quite pop in their referencing of contemporary culture and narrative structures. It's this mix that so intrigues me- painterly abstraction and "architectonic" cultural references like Raquel Welch standing in for Sarah Winchester. The archetypal cultural stand-ins and very symbolic nature of your almost sequential narratives remind me of things I am striving to understand in my own art... (this is more about a dialogue than a concrete question with an answer)

The simple answer here is that I am influenced by a wide variety of things that might contradict in say the mind of an art historian who specializes in one of my areas interests. That said, I think its fair to say that I make Pop art, although I think its darker and more personal and more involved with language now than most Pop art.

As far as symbolism goes, I don't have a strict system or any ideology to use in determining what is symbolic myself. Instead I tend to rely on signals from the culture to let me know what is actively symbolic or a hot issue. The Winchester rifle for example, and the larger issue of the gunfighter, are huge preexisting iconic images or subjects that loom large in many of the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be an American. I didn't invent this stuff obviously and I'm not trying to control what it means to other people. Instead I was exploring the complexity of all it can mean in order to get to new places with my work.

There can be some good in this gunfighter imagery since at best it inspires bravery and heroism , and some bad since at worst it inspires violence which might have been avoided. And there is a neutral interpretation which doesn't weigh the good or the bad of violence in a literal way, which is that this kind of imagery and story telling inspires one to think of bold and independent individuals taking risks.

In German academia they teach something which I think translates as idea reception ( I can't remember what its called in German) and basically it is a study of the evolution of ideas through history. I try to make work that shows this evolution of ideas in action, rather than work which tells people exactly what to think. The power of art is focus the range of interpretation and at the same time leave room for multiple views.

4. Benamin Weil lists your influences as people like: Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, Edward Ruscha, Richard Prince and James Rosenquist. Are there any others? Richard Hamilton, Harun Farocki, David Hockney? Are there any filmic influences?

Too many to be named in film because even a TV show I watched as a kid might pop back up, or an idea about how a building should look or something like that from a film I'd forgotten all about. But picking up on a thread from the last question, if you think of some great American Pop films like "High Noon", "Invasion of The Body Snatchers", "Star Wars", "Apocalypse Now" etc. you'll find that all kinds of people want to claim that these stories reflect their particular

belief systems (Republican vs. Democrat, etc.) or what have you.

Well maybe they do in places, maybe they don't in places, but on the whole I don't think that is ever really the main issue to an artist. What's important to an artist is that you find an image or create a moment or series of moments that matters to you for personal reasons. Then, branching out from there you need to ask if your imagery or story or music etc. is also likely to energize people to think about their own situation critically and on a very personal level, and hopefully get a lift out of it. And if it does all that then you've struck gold. If what you make keeps doing that across decades and centuries then it stands the test of time.

5. How important was your upbringing as a catalyst for imagery and art-making? Are works like Bungalow 8 at all auto-biographical?

No, I hate to disappoint but I am a fairly traditional guy, and somewhat boring day to day. I have been with the same woman for over ten years and we live quietly and that's the way I like it. I'm not a tough guy gunfighter like the Winchester images might suggest, nor am I a swinging London-rock n' roll-bisexual-drug addicted- socialite like Ossie Clark, nor am I a wheeler dealer, party till you drop 1980's era businessman like the imagery in Bungalow 8 suggests.

I am just a person who tends to want to describe things that I can't look away from.

The stories around Bungalow 8 are all preexisting. The "Predator's Ball" which was an annual party some high living stock brokers and investment guys threw there in the 80's, Robert Evans getting discovered by the pool etc. All legendary stuff and great material for an American artist. I made those first DVD works at a time when I was working constantly in New York City-sixteen hour days and weekends and so on. I was processing all I had seen while at school in Southern California, and missing the light and the space. New York in the nineties was very work driven and there was a lot of economic optimism. I loved the ambition and the powerful energy I sensed in that, but at the same time I also I felt like maybe life was going by a little to fast in some ways. So as a reaction I made this slow meditative work that reflected some of the dream like pleasures and fears of the culture at that time as I saw it. When I came out to California where life has a slower pace, my work started moving faster.

An artist is usually better off if he or she is humbled by the size of the subject matter. Its like a surfer trying to catch a big wave and enjoy it and hopefully impress the crowd rather than being sucked under in front of everybody. Art making is very humbling on that level because you're always dealing with a culture that is much larger than you and you have to respect it, but you also have to be brave enough to try and make something new and exciting anyway.

As far as one's upbringing goes, its like the Eagles said "Some dance to remember, some

dance to forget.” My upbringing was not traditional in so much as my parents were divorced and I was growing up with in the seventies which was sort of an experimental and tumultuous time in the culture even if your family life was stable. Even so, a majority of the men on both sides of my family served in the military, including my dad who enlisted as an officer during Vietnam, and most of the women had kids which they stayed home to look after, so there was a lot of very traditional social life and family life around me on both sides growing up.

So am I the product of tradition or a break from tradition? I really have no idea. I don't even try to answer that question anymore since I'm always being subtly accused of being too liberal and too conservative for the exact same works of art.

The main thing is that I was read to a lot as a kid by my mom, so I had access to all kinds of ideas and imagery, and I was supported in pursuing my talent for drawing by my dad. Those were the biggest gifts my parents gave me and I'm grateful to both of them on that level every day.

I can tell you that no matter what your family life is like, art making is something that nobody is going to care about unless you care about it first.

Thanks for your interest Chris.

Yours,  
JB

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Jeremy,  
Thank you for taking the time to consider my questions and give me great responses. I'm finishing up my paper in the next two-three weeks. If you'd like I can e-mail you a copy of it. Just being able to talk has totally made my day- your art and approach to image-making/creation (not to mention your theoretical/philosophical approach) are very inspiring to me.

Thanks again,  
Chris

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Good show Chris. I look forward to your paper. By the way, “Coy” is a dynamic last name.

Best,  
JB

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Subject: art history paper  
from year + half ago

Sat, Jul 28, 2007 at 3:44 PM

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Jeremy/

Feb/March of last year I emailed you with questions for a paper I was writing for an art history class. You were so generous with your answers and time and I failed to return the favor by sending back the completed paper. I've just dug it up of my I hard drive and am finally sending it off to you. I think in my head I had thought of revising it more and more in anticipation of your reading it and with notes from my professor to guide me on some minor changes.... but then just forgot about it and got busy.

Please forgive me for never sending you the paper I interviewed you for. I'm including it in this email. Thanks again- and if you have any thoughts / clarifications I would love to hear them.

/chris coy

ps. if you're interested in seeing any of my work, click on the link below.

////////// <http://www.seecoy.com>

(When I wrote this email I had not yet learned of Jeremy's death 11 days earlier.)

Chris Coy  
Contemporary Art  
ARTHC 355  
Magleby  
April 2006

Jeremy Blake's work is emblematic of a new breed of video-based art that appropriates the most popular forms of culture and their accompanying narratives into his *Winchester* trilogy (2002-2004). The complexity of his visually dense "time-based" paintings with their overlapping narratives and pop-cultural references make Blake a forerunner of a new type of video-art that Richard Hamilton, the noted pop artist would have appreciated. As Hamilton stated in his 1961 essay on the relevance of the finest art, namely pop,

"Epic has become synonymous with a certain kind of film and the heroic archetype is now buried deep in movie lore. If the artist is not to lose much of his ancient purpose he may have to plunder the popular arts to recover the imagery which is his rightful inheritance."

Hamilton's clarion call for the plundering of the popular arts in the early 60's resounds even more strongly today. Not only is Jeremy Blake a rhetorical heir to such a mandate, he is literally a child of Hollywood poised and ready to borrow from the *mise-en-scène* that is his reality. This vital concern with supposed realities is a thread that plays itself out strongly in the overall structure of the *Winchester* trilogy – as it explores the concepts of inner and outer worlds and parallel realities of the Winchester mansion and the inherent violence of American expansionism.

*Winchester* takes its name and premise from the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. A palatial structure, the 160-room mansion was built by Sarah Winchester, heiress to the late weapons manufacturer's immense wealth. With her husband's passing and the earlier premature death of their child Sarah believed herself cursed by the spirits of those killed by her family's guns. On the advice of a medium<sup>1</sup> she commissioned the building of the labyrinth-like edifice in an attempt to appease good spirits and ward off the evil ones with the sound of constant construction. The resulting house is one full of dead-end passageways, spiraling staircases and rooms arranged haphazardly across the estate. In the organic, nonsensical process of continual expansion Jeremy Blake finds metaphorical allusions to notions of self-identity, spiritualism and the way the west was won. As Blake explains, "my interest in the mansion is rooted in an understanding that the site is more than

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1 A person who is supposedly able to convey messages between the spirits of the dead and living people. Whoopi Goldberg's character in *Ghost* comes to mind.

just a monument to one person's eccentric preoccupation—it is the tangible outcome from a collision of social and historical narratives.” These social and historical narratives inform the entire work as he explores the inner and outer realities associated with American mythology and Sarah Winchester's monument to expiation known as the Winchester mansion.

As a triptych, *Winchester* explores three distinct views of reality in its individual components- external, internal and finally forward. While exploring the mansion Blake moves from imagery grounded in the historical surface to the internally fleeting spectral, ultimately ending on the adjacent domed cinemas emblematic of the 21st century's desire for an antiseptic, clean version of modernity. These pieces named, *Winchester* (2002), *1906* (2003) and *Century 21* (2004) together render the mansion's past, present and future as a series of interconnected narratives emblematic of something greater than their individual frames of reference. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's media curator Benjamin Weil posits that such an approach, “[demonstrates] how experiencing the world through the eyes of others (filmmakers, photographers, journalists) can subsume point of view, [Blake] underscores the idea that mediated reality is in itself a form of fiction, like all modes of representation.” Like the direct cinema aesthetic made popular by Jean Rouch<sup>2</sup> the idea of a “mediated” reality is one that begins the moment a camera is pointed in any particular direction. Real or implied viewing on the part of the creator and viewer creates a completely new experience that similar to Tony Smith's turnpike<sup>3</sup> can be uniquely rooted to a certain locale and mindset. What Smith doesn't seem to recognize (and what Fried<sup>4</sup> will argue) is the problematic nature of accepting experiential reality as absolute truth. Blake understands this and his simultaneously differing realities are presented side by side to ward off the evil spirits of an outdated dogma composed of simple answers tied up in -isms. The -isms here are even problematic: American Expansionism.... built on the notion of Manifest Destiny and grown in the soil watered by a trail of tears. Even Sarah Winchester's deep religious convictions in Spiritualism were the impetus for an extravagant display of action that resulted in a modern day tourist trap of Victorian architecture and rampant consumerism. It is ironic that this trap, like the Queen

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2) Frenchman Jean Rouch (b. 1917) was an extremely influential ethnographer, anthropologist and documentary filmmaker whose cinéma-vérité films heavily influenced the French New Wave. His style and willingness to expose the camera as an actor within the context of his films was a radical departure from previous modes of documentary filmmaking.

3) “When I was teaching at Cooper Union... someone told me how I could get on to the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike.... It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art... I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. “Talking with Tony Smith”, *Artforum*, New York, vol. 1, no. 4, December 1966, pp.18-19.

4) Michael Fried (b. 1939)- An American critic and art historian whose distinct contribution was to concentrate upon the specificity of the effects of paintings and sculptures, and thus to reintroduce considerations of spectatorship into Modernist criticism. Also mistakenly thought of as grandson to Ben Fried, inventor of the often mispronounced “fried rice”.

Mary<sup>5</sup>, is haunted more by camera-toting tourists (of which Jeremy Blake was one) than by actual spectral beings. The idea of haunting caused Philip Monk, Director of the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto to speculate:

“...that this dysfunctional house, haunted by the history of the settlement of the west, could cure itself by becoming the film apparatus it was in prototype. The house must give itself over to a haunting that would heal. It must release itself into an exercising medium that could spirit and expel specters, conjure them by projecting them into a movement that was proper to them. A motion picture could tell the story, not through the script of its inhabitants talking cure, but by letting the house reveal its distress, movingly, through time in a film cure. Film work would be a work of mourning. This would be the American way- to ally technology and spirit- since it was the technical invention of a machine that animated these spirits.” (20, Spirit Hunter)

Both Blake and Sarah Winchester are essentially after the same result- an appeasement and exorcism of the ghostly inhabitants of America’s mythic heritage and those victims of its nation-building dynamic.<sup>6</sup>

That Blake would choose to represent the multiple realities of these “social and historical” narratives via film is no accident. The late 19th century technological development of cinema coincided with Spiritualism’s latent desire to animate the immobile—communicate with the dead and immortalize them. Via séances and celluloid, a film camera becomes a medium<sup>7</sup> that helps to create a “parallel world of phantasmatic doubles alongside the concrete world of the senses verified by positivism.” (23- Tom Gunning) Blake addresses experiential and experienced realities in his visual exploration of the house and its architecture. His choice of film takes into account it’s ability to show the parallel world of “phantasmatic doubles” haunting the passageways- both architectural and neural. As Weil points out in an article on the exhibit, “Each film in the Winchester trilogy contains overt references to the history of cinema and to its mingling with other constituent elements of mass culture- the collective unconscious, as it were, of America... Fear and violence.” This collective unconscious is tied up not only in the geography of the west but the iconic language of Hollywood Westerns<sup>8</sup> that is still mined today by Texas oil boys in search of Saddams, “dead or alive”. Such language is

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5) Popular tourist destination in Long Beach, California. A former transatlantic ocean liner turned luxury hotel that is supposedly haunted by numerous spirits.

6) “Cinematic imagery is deeply implicated in America’s nation-building dynamic, and it continues to be an important impetus for social cohesion today.” -Weil (Art in Digital Times?)

7) see footnote no. 1

8) Jeremy Blake is in residence in lower Manhattan watching George W. Bush and his hawkish administration declare their fierce determination to hunt down Osama Bin Laden, rounding up their posse on television in the iconic language of Hollywood Westerns: “wanted dead or alive.” (Philip Monk. Spirit Hunter, p10)

proof of the continual pairing of technological advancement with expansionist ethos and is as American as apple pie as *Apocalypse Now*<sup>9</sup>. Film becomes the perfect popular medium through which Blake's metaphorical journey into the essence of Sarah Winchester's (and America's) psyche can take place.

From his abstract title sequences for Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love* to cover art on Beck's album *Sea Change*, Jeremy Blake extracurricular pursuits root him firmly not only as an interpreter of popular culture, but as an avid participant in its shaping. His background in traditional painting (MFA- Cal-Arts, 1995; BFA- Art Institute of Chicago, 1993) informs works that hail from a pantheon of painting gods including: Morris Louis, Barnett Newman, Richard Prince, Edward Ruscha and James Rosenquist. This painting pedigree manifests itself tangibly in the Louis-like veil forms that figure predominantly in his work. It's possible that such obvious historical referencing caused Roberta Smith<sup>10</sup> to condemn Blake for lacking visual originality at the 2002 Whitney Biennial. What Smith misses entirely is the interest in cultural riffing that also figures predominantly in Blake's work. Like the pop artists, Blake is engaged in the re-contextualization of "found" imagery and open acknowledgement of a vast visual heritage that makes his work a kaleidoscopic narrative of classic abstraction merged with contemporary concepts of space and movement<sup>11</sup> within a popular culture. It's a dense *mélange* of annexed imagery that defies traditionalist, dogmatic methods of archaic art criticism. While Smith vainly searches for the Shangri-La of originality in art (as if it ever existed anywhere but in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*), Blake has chosen to mine the past for its innate archetypal representations of truth and beauty. He makes art in the world, not some farcical fine art vacuum that seeks to leave the world on the street and the art on the museum wall. Smith should go on a walk with the ghost of Rauschenberg to exercise some of her own critical demons.

Jeremy Blake's continual return to themes of multiple realities and the artifice of cinema recall Monty Python's Flying Circus skits in all their Brechtian<sup>12</sup> glory; the actors are the same, but they play wildly diverse parts as they seek to find meaning in a sociopolitical and cultural present. What emerges from this interrogation of reality and artifice is an interesting dialectic<sup>13</sup> ambiguity. Blake's residence in L.A. and attitude towards the capital of American cinema shows his interest in "...the flexible, dynamic relationship between reality and fiction, object and subject- it is a place that reinvents, reinterprets, and re-presents

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9) Francis Ford Coppola's seminal film set during the Vietnam War, inspired by Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*.

10) Art Critic for the New York Times (Smith, Roberta. "Bad News for Art at the Whitney Biennial." *The New York Times* 31 Mar. 2002.)

11) Chris Chang

12) Bertolt Brecht- German poet, playwright, and theatrical reformer whose epic theatre departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion.

13) the process, in Hegelian and Marxist thought, in which two apparently opposed ideas, the thesis and antithesis, become combined in a unified whole, the synthesis

history and time in much the same way as it produces films.” (Weil, *Moving Paintings, painted Cinema*) The prevalence and deeply subconscious entrenchment of film in American popular culture is a treasure trove of thematic and social subjects that deserves the attention Blake gives it. He is technically proficient and aesthetically sensitive to the many works that compose and inform his cultural and artistic palette.

“The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested.” -Walter Benjamin

The *Winchester* series works as a film- but is painterly in its execution. It exists in a netherworld of sorts that is a type of Greenbergian purgatory- mixing very graphical abstract traditional motifs with video, photography and sound. The effect is a unique type of artistic exorcism that in Blake’s own turn of phrase uses the computer to “amp” the painterly heritage. It is as if the present is continually existing and reasserting itself as successive frames propel the viewer onward through narrative space and time. But like a guided tour, Jeremy Blake chooses to focus the audience’s attention on facts and objects he deems most relevant. As Blake expounds:

“The entire Winchester trilogy takes off from the idea that the Victorian aesthetic (embodied by the mansion’s architecture) and the psychedelic sensibility (referenced through hallucinatory manipulation of the film) are sympathetic opposites. Beneath the dreamlike flow of images, therefore, the structure of each work is very deliberate.”

The idea of architecture and its deliberate structure (in each of the works) is tied to specific locality via photographs and footage of the mansions exteriors, interiors and adjacent structures. The dreamlike, painterly abstractions move through the frame in a sort of spiritual attenuation and contraction that paradoxically is heavily manipulated by computers and technology. The pairing of these opposites creates a lexicon of spectral symbols and surroundings that helps convey the depth of meaning Blake seeks.

The first of the three films, *Winchester* (2002) takes an external view of the “mystery” house with its densely packed turrets and Victorian architecture looking like another house of seven gables. Quoting the work of Muybridge<sup>14</sup> and his sequential photography of the human in motion, the whirring filmstrip soundtrack accompanies a subtle flicker of movement and contrast while the ominous house waits... It’s as if you can see the outline of Norman Bates’ mother watching from the window. Then suddenly, painterly tendril-like forms colorfully seep

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14) Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) a brilliant and eccentric photographer, gained worldwide fame photographing animal and human movement imperceptible to the human eye. The main body of his work was completed from 1884-1887 at the University of Pennsylvania.

from its darkened windows and transmute this metaphorical stand-in for the late Sarah into a complete abstraction. As journalist Peter Goddard wrote for the Toronto Star, the architectural relic “is not [too] many psychic miles from the William Randolph Hearst estate, Orson Welles’ Citizen Kane or Hugh Hefner’s Playboy mansion - nor from Hollywood Blvd. itself.” Blake continues the psychic allusions as he travels inward (both metaphorically and figuratively). The almost-claustrophobic tour of the interior seeks to resurrect both Mrs. Winchester’s demons and those of America’s past. The title *1906* (2003) refers to the earthquake that damaged portions of the vastly expanded mansion. Rather than tear down the damaged parts, Sarah Winchester chose to build around them. Like scar tissue the damaged portions remained covered and haunted by Blake’s abstract forms amidst the Victorian patterns and aesthetic preferences. With *Century 21* (2004) the mansion and its spirits are transferred onto the movie screen as their mythic archetypes play out the drama in the adjacent, decidedly modern movie theaters. Advertisements and Wild West cartoon stereotypes cavort onscreen in a very current vocabulary of popular culture references. Blake’s new cultural lexicon is composed of the unified mythic characters from American cinema such as John Wayne and that beautiful import Raquel Welch as a “stand-in” for Sarah Winchester.

Jeremy Blake’s critique of the American expansionist ethos turns the gun that won the west on itself. The image of a dead sheriff’s RGB bleeding bullet hole “forces the collision of two primary and contradictory hallmarks of American culture: an idealistic embrace of progress and a deep ambivalence about the nation’s history.” (Weil) As film historian Thomas Elsaesser<sup>15</sup> states:

“...with the advent of the cinema, the world has become visible in a radically new way, with far-reaching consequences for all spheres of life, from the world of work and production, to politics and our conception of democracy and community, for warfare and strategic planning, for abstract thinking and philosophy, as well as for interpersonal relations and emotional bonds, for subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.”

The subjective nature of multiple realities adroitly describes Blake’s fascination with American filmic subtexts and their accompanying mythologies. All of the elements, even disparate at times, coalesce into a unique whole that exorcises the ghosts of the Winchester mystery house while providing a forum for further discussion. “Amping” his feelings of ambivalence towards American expansionism as seen in Sarah Winchester’s mansion, Blake’s *Winchester* trilogy plunders the popular arts and proves that in this case, the medium is the message.

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15) taken from an article on another film-based visual artist, Harun Farocki

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