

## Overcoming Daily Life with Nayland Blake's Daily Drawings

In drawing every day for nearly three years, Blake has produced a playful diaristic record of their moods and flights of fancy.



Louis Bury December 14, 2017



Nayland Blake, "3.8.15" (2015) (all images courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery and the artist)

The 19th-century French writer Stendhal adhered to a self-imposed regimen of composing "twenty lines a day, genius or not." The idea behind the dictum was to produce small and steady increments of writing toward the creation of a larger, book-length work, even on days when artistic inspiration was not forthcoming. [Nayland Blake's #IDrawEveryDay](#) exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery, which contains over 70 selections from a series of daily 12-by-9-inch graphite and colored pencil drawings begun on January 1, 2015 and still ongoing, displays the

fruits of the artist's similar regimen. In drawing every day for nearly three years, Blake (who goes by "they") has produced a playful diaristic record of their moods and flights of fancy that evidences their charmingly mischievous artistic spirit.



Devotees of Blake's inventive body of prior work — sculptures, performances, videos, and drawings that wryly explore themes of gender, sexuality, and race — will spot familiar motifs in these latest drawings. Such references include Blake's [gender-fluid bear-bison furry persona, Gnomes](#); the bric-a-brac of their sculptures; cartoonish floating heads, eyeballs, holes, and phalluses with sadomasochistic undertones. But appreciating the exhibit requires no background or insider knowledge. Whatever their subject matter, the drawings contemplate how art can be used to foster personal habits that nourish artist and audience alike, even — especially — in times of duress.

Nayland Blake, "6.1.16" (2016)



Installation view of Nayland Blake's *#IDrawEveryDay* at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

This allegorical dimension of the work — which comments on the nature of artistic process — receives its most compelling articulation in Blake’s depiction of holes. Slim, dark, ovoid forms, each of which looks like a manhole with the sewer cap removed, appear throughout the series. These holes have obvious sexual connotations, as in the drawing “(6.1.16)” where a hairy phallic tail dangles over one such hole, but they also represent the unknown, as in the drawing “(5.21.15)” where a stick-figure bird peers with surprise down another such hole. In their self-imposed drawing regimen, it’s as though Blake has chosen to peer into a new creative void each day.



One great pleasure of the exhibit is watching Blake repeatedly discover that this void isn’t actually a void, that even the most barren-seeming of days bristles with creative potential. Many drawings look like doodles that managed to find a form that elevates them, compositionally, into something more. Others ward off a sense of doom with their infectious verbal and visual whimsy — as in “(9.1.16),” where a full-mast pennant informs its quizzical human interlocutor that, “YOU CAN’T PREDICT YOUR COLLAPSE.” Others push past creative blockages: a cloud hanging from a string reads “NO IDEA”; the phrase “no wrong” is written in cursive swirls of hot pink, magenta, and cherry red.

Nayland Blake, “7.30.16” (2016)

As a watchword for Blake’s daily drawing practice, “no wrong” gets it just right. To keep themselves alert and engaged, Blake has figured out how to have fun with the practice even on days when it might feel quite otherwise. This impish joy, manifested even in small details such as the pink and red colors, is refreshingly different in tone from austere Conceptualist experiments in seriality, such as those of On Kawara or Tehching Hsieh. Blake’s buoyant approach isn’t oblivious to daily tribulations — their month-long 2005 drawing series, *Dailies*, was undertaken in response to the death of their longtime partner, Philip Horvitz — but rather an acknowledgement that we can choose to meet our trials, however large or small, with humor and aplomb. The genius of these drawings is how easy they make this difficult task seem.



Nayland Blake, "7.28.16" (2016)

*Nayland Blake's [#IDrawEveryDay](#) exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery (523 West 24th St, Chelsea, Manhattan) continues through December 22.*