

## “1 IS THE ZERO THST COMES BEFORE” Exhibition Essay By David Pagel

When he was just getting started as an artist, Nicolas Shake painted realistic pictures of himself in everyday settings. In each lifesize oil on canvas, his posture, expression, and body language suggested the kind of inner contentment familiar to anyone who has ever looked at European paintings of religious figures, particularly those from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteen centuries. Shake’s palette—an earthy mixture of somber browns, smoky blacks, glowing ambers, and glistening golds, as well as the luminosity of his densely layered paintings—amplified the religious overtones, especially as they played out against the unremarkable ordinariness of their plain settings and the every-man ordinariness of their subject, who appeared to be as surprised by the magic of the moment as were viewers who happened to come across these subtly strange paintings. The unlikely intersection of the mundane and the mysterious, or the sacred and the profane, gave Shake’s early works their curious kick, which was all the more potent for being unexpected, uncanny, and out-of-step with business-as-usual.

Shake took himself out of his next paintings, similarly life-size portraits of regular folks standing before their collections of mass-marketed items, like sneakers, or other things for which their enthusiasm seemed to exceed the object’s intrinsic or sentimental value. Like Shake’s odd self-portraits, these oils on canvas were less concerned to capture the uniqueness of the individuals in them than to evoke the elusive bonds between people and their surroundings, those invisible but by no means intangible links that bind us to the world around us, sometimes making us feel at home in the world and at others failing to anchor us to anything stable, lasting, or significant. Rather than embodying the confident grandeur of official public portraits, whose sitters are almost always politicians, civic leaders, and celebrities, Shake’s paintings of anonymous guys from the suburbs presented people who seemed to be embarrassed to be seen with the stuff they love—those intimate things that they had devoted a large part of their lives to accumulating, organizing, and caring for.

That sense of having one’s private life exposed as a guilty pleasure to an uncaring public is at the core of the works in which Shake found his voice as an artist: large-format color photographs of castoff household items he found just off the highways and byways in the desert around his hometown of Palmdale, California. The first of these digital prints were pretty simple pictures of discarded furniture, kids’ toys, car tires, and even the shell of a fiberglass Jacuzzi, its PVC plumbing dangling from its underbelly like the arteries and veins of a gigantic mechanical heart that had been ripped, sacrificially, from some larger-than-lifesize cyborg—as if to appease the gods of commerce or their worldly surrogates: money-grubbing Wall Streeters whose heartless greed caused the 2008 mortgage crisis that left millions of people who had bought into the American dream of home ownership high and dry, their homes underwater and all the stuff they once loved dumped in the desert, under the cover of darkness, to avoid being arrested for littering. Set against the inhospitable expanse of the desert landscape, the detritus of their lives took on the haunting quality of a grand, expansive *memento mori* for the early twenty-first century—a quasi-anonymous shrine to the fleetingness of all things, laced with the cruel beauty of it all.

The out-of-whack weirdness of modern life—and the complex contradictions that drive it—became Shake’s great subject, which he went on to explore in his first mature

works: a hauntingly beautiful series of twilight photographs that depict increasingly elaborate arrangements of desert garbage.

At first, he simply took pictures of what was out there, framing and composing and lighting his images by walking around various objects, moving in for close-ups and standing back for panoramas, and working mostly at dusk, both because, by then, the afternoon heat had begun to dissipate and, more important, because the setting sun gave him the greatest variety of bright, shimmering highlights, inky black shadows, and every tint in between.

Shake quickly discovered that documenting what was left behind in the desert was less intriguing than enhancing the objects' potential poetry by clustering the disparate, variously weather-beaten things in sculptural arrangements, making, in other words, abstract compositions out of the hastily disposed leftovers. So he started to move stuff around, at first slowly and tentatively, as if timid about disturbing the authenticity of the artifacts and severing the strands that once wove them into the social fabric, and then more confidently, as if there were no real point in leaving anything be, because it would not last long in the harsh environment. He stacked tires. Tipped sofas on end. Strung barbed wire around televisions. Made flimsy fences of mops, brooms, and rakes. Turned refrigerators into cabinets. And piled cardboard boxes to form sorry scarecrows, their abstract blandness giving them a head start on the path toward their inevitable decomposition.

Overall, Shake's cobbled-together arrangements of abandoned items from American homes and lives looked as if they might be the distant cousins of Jessica Stockholder's loosely configured sculptural installations. More forlorn, damaged, and much, much further off the beaten path, his fugitive structures appeared to have traveled to hell and back, where the good old American ingenuity in which they are rooted turned desperate—not quite harrowing and nowhere near despairing, yet too dark and knowing to be playful or carefree, in any simple sense of these terms. The innocence at the heart of Shake's art has nothing to do with naïveté: Burnished in failure, it maintains the cheery fatalism of true pragmatism.

To his increasingly elaborate arrangements, Shake added lights, first by shining his pickup truck's headlights on his temporary sculptures, then by placing industrial-strength flashlights in his makeshift compositions, and, finally, by wiring strings of outdoor bulbs to his vehicle's battery so that they illuminated his ad hoc monuments in ways that cast more dramatic shadows and made their scale shifts even more radical than before. In some pictures, the horizon line nearly vanishes, suggesting that we are not looking at the skylines of distant cities or the camps of hardscrabble nomads, but strange constellations in the night sky. The clunky materiality of the things in Shake's photographs distances them from the slickness of sci-fi futurism, bringing a sense of post-apocalyptic disaster front and center. In many, the lights intensify the mystery of the images, bringing some sexy shimmer to the gritty grunge of the desert. Dressed up with just a bit of low-budget artifice and do-it-yourself theatricality, his photographs accentuate twilight's power to mark a moment of transition, from day to night, when the light of reason yields to the shadow-world of dreams, where logic is no match for fantasy and irrationality sneaks, surreptitiously, out of its hiding places.

Shake also put himself back into the picture, stepping into the frame of some long-exposures so that his body, in the resulting photograph, has the presence of a ghostly

apparition, all of the particulars of portraiture replaced by the blurriness of movement, the facelessness of anonymity, and the mysteriousness of a fleeting glimpse of something on the cusp of cognition. The border of awareness, where the undertow of what we sense pulls against what we think we know, is the territory Shake's anxiety-spiked photographs explore, their skeptical beauty all the more poignant for its precariousness, not to mention the sense that it is accidental—and that its longevity is not likely.

The restlessness that originally drove Shake into the desert eventually drove him back to the studio, where he began to make large paintings that accelerated some of the developments that were taking place in his color-saturated photographs. In the desert, Shake was drawn to the various ways nature had begun to reclaim his carefully arranged setups, blowing parts over, burying others, bleaching colors, cracking plastic, weathering surfaces, unraveling fabrics, turning cardboard into paper-thin carcasses, and, in general, turning his piecemeal sculptures into ruins. So, in the studio, his oils on canvas emphasized decomposition. But rather than capturing it, literally, in realistic images of decayed objects and tumbled structures, Shake made paintings that appeared, themselves, to be decomposing—right before your eyes.

The drips, swipes, smears, and splashes of turpentine-thinned pigments that made up his reality-based paintings went beyond depicting objects that seemed to be dissolving or melting or returning to the primal stew from whence they came and, instead, looked as if they were well on their way to becoming murk. The crisp, crystalline darkness that once described the nighttime darkness of Shake's desert backgrounds turned muddy brown. The precise contours of ordinary things—tires, boxes, and household items—blurred beyond recognition. And the glowing light that once illuminated Shake's damaged yet Romantic landscapes dissipated into the formlessness of its darkened surroundings. Distinguishing one object from another, much less determining scale, orientation, and perspective, got more and more difficult as Shake's realistic pictures became increasingly abstract, ambiguous, and energized by their own self-consuming movements. Eventually, the process of painting took on a life of its own.

With their connection to the desert stretched to the breaking point, Shake's latest paintings take us, simultaneously, in many different directions, traveling far and wide, or careening this way and that, as they ricochet around in the mind's-eye, confusing business as usual so as to compel us to see things anew. Whether that disturbs or delights is left up to viewers by Shake's curiously neutral paintings, whose gestures are neither expressive nor angst-laden. Unconcerned to convey the artist's subjectivity or to reveal his inner sentiments, these matter-of-fact paintings traffic in detachment, all the better to get us more intimately involved with the twists and turns of their rough-and-tumble beauty.

A deep appreciation of the differences between things—and the distances between things—fuels Shake's sculptures, which he began to make at about the same time that his paintings got less representational and more abstract, their pictorial spaciousness collapsing onto flat planes smeared with viscous pigments that often seemed to spill off of their expansive surfaces and into the three-dimensional space of viewers. With his sculptures, Shake did not import, straightaway, the grit and grunge of the desert into the pristine space of generically white-walled galleries. True to form—and adamantly opposed to such plodding literalism—he went to great lengths to bring what he loved about the desert into the gallery without violating the integrity of either. Neither turning

the desert artifacts into precious collectibles nor treating an exhibition as a referential exercise, he made sure that his art was not an arbitrary symbol that pointed viewers to dramas elsewhere but a physical presence that occupied the here and now, making demands on our bodies—and minds—by making us pay attention to every detail of the experience.

The here and now implies a lot more than immediately meets the eye and that is what takes shape in Shake's cast and reconfigured bits and pieces of desert flotsam and jetsam, each patiently remade in malleable plastic and stitched together, like Frankenstein's monster, only without the heart-wrenching drama, spectacular narrative, and special-effects-style storytelling. Shake's sculptures are ghostly assemblages; their components tenuously cobbled together with much of the make-do adaptability of his more rugged desert structures but also, significantly, with far more delicacy. Aside from size, the biggest difference between the sculptures that stay in the desert (and function as sets that get photographed) and those that inhabit urban interiors is that the latter are primarily comprised of a material known as "Friendly Plastic." This easy-to-use substance combines the physical properties of "Play Doh" and wax, a synthetic-organic combination that allows Shake to use it to make molds of the objects he momentarily rescues from the desert.

Unlike traditionally cast sculptures, which would be made from carefully shaped molds, Shake's out-of-step works consist of nothing that has come out of the molds, just the molds themselves—inverted or reversed or mirror-image renditions of the originals, something like photographic negatives but even stranger in that they also recall rubbings made from gravestones and other surfaces into which lines, shapes, and patterns have been incised.

Shake's gallery-bound sculptures result from a deliberate short-circuiting of the way cast sculptures are typically made. Traditionally, the molds, out of which the finished sculptures emerge, are not meant to be displayed. Many are destroyed in the process. But these are the main components Shake uses to make his scrappy works, each of which has the unsettling presence of a recycled chrysalis. By highlighting the fact that his works are not the endpoints of established processes or tried-and-true procedures, Shake demands that visitors get in on the action—that we use our imaginations to make something happen before it is too late. In the old days, this ethos might have been described as good old American ingenuity. In Shake's hands, it simply looks like surviving. Making a virtue of unfinishedness, his works transform the tragedy of getting stopped in one's tracks to the artistry of getting started—anywhere, anyway.