

Jeremy Blake • Winchester
Jan. 17 – March 31, 2006
Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Winchester is the first in a series of short continuously looping films inspired by my interest in the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. The mansion is an architectural wonder constructed by Sarah Winchester – widow of the heir to the Winchester rifle fortune – over the course of 38 years, beginning in the late 1800s. After suffering the premature death of her husband and child, Winchester, informed by a deep belief in Spiritualism, decided that the angry spirits of those struck down by her family's guns had cursed her. An advisor agreed, and suggested that she build an enormously large house – an endeavor that would both accommodate good spirits and ward off evil ones with the sounds of never ending construction. The result is a sprawling mansion, well outfitted for the undead with staircases going nowhere, doorways leading out into open air several stories above ground, and miles of darkened hallways to roam.

This DVD work, which combines static 16mm shots of old photographs of the house, hundreds of ink drawings, and intricate frame-by-frame digital retouching, is meant to provide an abstract or emotional tour – not so much of the architecture, but of some of the more fearful chambers of Sarah Winchester's mind. Paranoiac glimpses of shadowy gunfighters, painterly gunshot wounds blossoming into Rorschach tests, and a spectral and embattled American flag derived from an old Winchester advertisement, are all made visible to the careful observer.

My interest in this site is rooted in an understanding that the Winchester Mystery House is more than just a monument to one person's eccentric fears; it is the formal outcome of a narrative pile-up. Several mythic strands are knotted together in order to justify this architectural free for all, the most significant of which are fundamental to American national identity. The figure of the gunfighter (whether lawman or outlaw) who facilitates spiritual regeneration through violence is treated with reverent fear here, as are the ghosts of his victims. The drive to expand into new territory plays a vital role in Winchester's conception of the house as well, although in this case the need for expansion is informed by morbidity. The Protestant ethic, which anticipates not just earthly but also spiritual rewards for hard work, has perhaps never been more fervently expressed – in this case as a kind of exaggeration which proves the power of the rule. The pursuit of happiness (or at least the pursuit of freedom from anxiety and guilt) is also energetically engaged, although here by someone for whom it has proven elusive. In many respects I think the Winchester Mystery House is a most hyper-American of places, and Sarah Winchester a sort of "director of homeland security" in her vigil to protect against unseen threats.

Jeremy Blake, January 2002

Jeremy Blake, *Winchester*, 2002, 18-minute continuous loop, digital animation with sound on DVD, collection Johnson County Community College, gift of H. Tony and Marti Oppenheimer and the Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation

