

Montgomery Clift through the eyes of Peter Blake



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**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Montgomery Clift was a Twin [fig. 1], painted by the English artist Peter Blake¹ between 1981 and 1983, is one of the most haunting and mysterious works of his maturity. Conceived a year before his sixtieth birthday and in the immediate aftermath of his separation from his first wife, the American sculptor Jann Haworth, it has a bittersweet atmosphere born both of his determination to restart his life in a positive mood—emboldened by the adage that “Living well is the best revenge”²—and by the melancholy reality of finding himself alone again after sixteen years of married life. The American screen idol shown here centre stage—dancing in a kind of daydreaming, gliding moment—becomes (almost certainly subconsciously) a kind of surrogate for himself at an important crossroads in his life.

In 1979, just at the moment that he was separating from his wife and returning to London after a decade in the countryside of Wiltshire, it was suggested to Blake that he travel to Los Angeles, which he had visited only once before sixteen years earlier. The invitation was from an English art dealer, Peter Goulds, to participate in a group exhibition of British painting called *This Knot of Life* at his recently established L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice, California³. As a father of two young daughters, Blake’s instinct was not to travel for openings, and out of habit he initially declined to make the journey; on reflection he realised that there was no longer anything to stop him. His fellow painter Howard Hodgkin, who had also recently separated from his wife, was also invited. After much vacillation they decided to travel there together, in the company of the print publisher Paul Cornwall–Jones of Petersburg Press, and to stay with their old friend David Hockney, who had moved back to Los Angeles in the previous year. “Howard was on a kind of voyage of discovery to decide if he was gay or not. I was just on my own voyage of discovery, just to start life again”. And Hockney, for his part, was excitedly rediscovering the city in which he had made his most exuberant and influential early paintings in the mid–1960s. It is in the context of these personal experiences, but also against the background of Blake’s earlier work, that his portrayal of Montgomery Clift (1920–1966) can be situated.

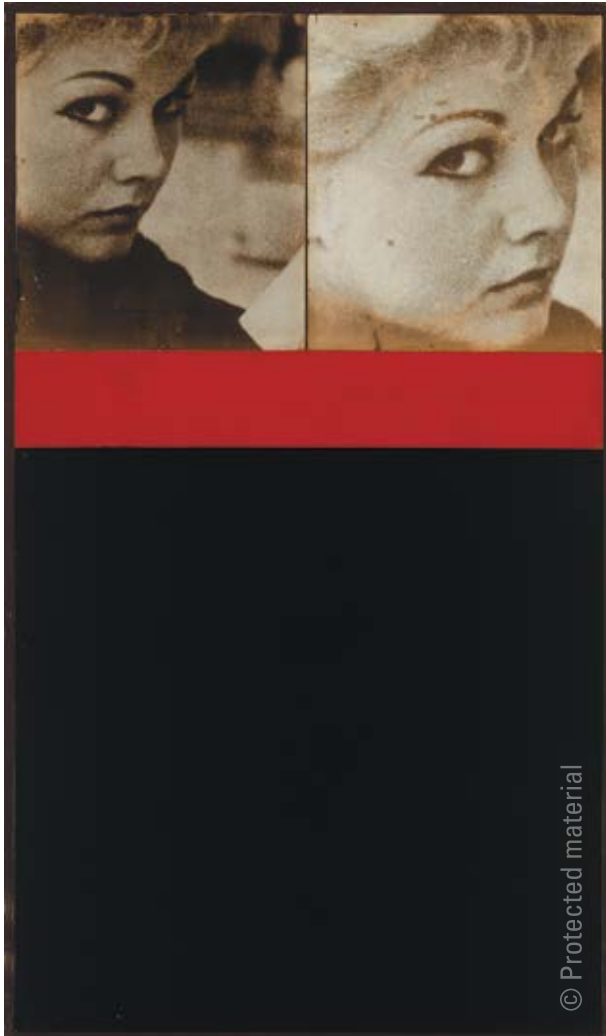
1 I would like to express my warm thanks to Peter Blake for his help in the preparation of this article. All quotations from Blake here, and much of the detailed factual information, are taken from an interview with the author that took place in his studio in London on 13 August 2004. The painting was acquired in 2002 by the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. Inv. no. 02/252.

2 Around the time that he separated from his wife, Blake read a book by Calvin Tomkins, *Living Well is the Best Revenge* (New York : Viking Press, 1971), a study of Paris in the 1920s which concentrates on the story of the American painter Gerald Murphy, his wife Sara and the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. As Blake recalled in conversation, “I had taken that as my motto at the time. I still do.”

3 *This Knot of Life: an exhibition of current British painting and drawing presented in two parts* took place in November and December 1979.



1. Peter Blake
Montgomery Clift was a Twin, 1981-1983
Oil on canvas, 88.9 x 66 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 02/252



2. Peter Blake
Kim Novak Wall, 1959
Collage and enamel on hardboard, 76.2 x 48.3 cm
Private collection

Born in 1932 into a working-class family in Dartford, Kent, a town on the southeastern fringes of London, Blake developed an early taste for many kinds of popular entertainments including the cinema, the circus, wrestling matches, and popular music, specially jazz. All of these passions found their way naturally into his art by the time he was in his early twenties as a postgraduate student at the Royal College of Art in London between 1953 and 1956. During the same years that older artists such as the Scottish sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005) and the English painter Richard Hamilton (born 1922) were laying the theoretical basis for Pop Art through their participation in The Independent Group in London, Blake was creating his first proto-pop pictures as a direct, unpretentious and sincere response to his immersion in popular culture. Some of the earliest of these, such as *Children Reading Comics* (1954), in which he depicted himself as a boy with his younger sister, were explicitly autobiographical. These established a precedent for celebrated later works such as *Self-Portrait with Badges* (1961), in which he displays himself festooned with metal badges and clutching an Elvis Presley fan club magazine. In his paintings of imaginary circus performers (such as *Loelia, World's Most Tattooed Lady*, 1955) or invented wrestlers (beginning with *Baron Adolf Kaiser*, 1961-1963), Blake positioned himself in the role of the admiring fan.



3. Peter Blake
ABC Minors, 1955
Oil on hardboard, 76 x 49 cm
Museum Ludwig, Köln

He stated this even more obviously in his first true pop pictures from 1959, in which photographic images—either of movie stars such as Kim Novak [fig. 2] and Tuesday Weld or of popular musicians including Frank Sinatra and the Everly Brothers—were glued onto hardboard panels brightly decorated in primary colours to resemble fragments of doors and walls. The notions of the celebrity icon and of the passionate fan, each needing the other for sustenance, first emerged as important themes in Blake’s work at that time.

Blake was born just after the first “talkies”, and his lifelong love of the cinema, and especially of mainstream Hollywood movies, began when he was a very young child, when his mother took him to the cinema almost on a daily basis⁴. His oldest memories of films date from the age of three or four, when he saw his first Shirley Temple movies, less than a decade after the advent of the talkies. Later, when he was evacuated to Worcester in 1945, towards the end of World War II, he began attending the “ABC Minors” Saturday morning club for children with his sister Shirley, two and a half years his junior; his 1955 painting *ABC Minors* [fig. 3], which represents his brother Terry and a cousin, was a fond and nostalgic evocation of those often raucous occasions. In 1946, aged fourteen, Blake was again living at home, having already left school and begun attending a local art school, the Gravesend Technical College and School of Art. He continued going to the cinema with his mother, though now sometimes in the evenings, as a regular part of his rather segmented life, which included attendance at the art school as well as visits to local jazz clubs (usually on his own) and to wrestling matches.

4 “She was a very young mother, she was twenty when I was born. She probably would have taken me from when I was born, I guess [...]. As I grew older, I would still accompany my mum to the cinema.” These visits with her continued more or less until 1951, when he began a two-year stint in the Royal Air Force as his compulsory military service (known then as “National Service”).



4. Peter Blake
Jean Harlow, 1964
 Acrylic on hardboard, 44.5 x 36.8 cm
 Mr and Mrs Terry Blake Collection

At the start of his art school education, Blake had been advised by his tutors to train as a commercial artist—even though his ambition was to be a painter—on the expectation that it would offer him a more secure livelihood. He went so far as to apply for admission to the Royal College in the commercial art department; they accepted him instead in the department of painting, but by then he felt equally comfortable with the idea of working both as a fine artist and as a graphic artist or illustrator. Rare among his generation, he has continued to accept commercial assignments—resulting most famously in the cover he conceived with Jann Haworth for The Beatles’ most celebrated LP, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, in 1967—and to view them as an integral and valued element of his activities as an artist⁵. Two important early commissions from *The Sunday Times Magazine*, the first colour supplement produced by a national newspaper in Britain⁶, have a particular bearing on his Montgomery Clift painting and two other canvases concerned with Los Angeles that he initiated at the same time. The first, in 1963, was for a series of drawings of any part of the world, which he chose to use as an opportunity to visit Los Angeles, California, for the first time⁷; the second, for a portrait of the early Hollywood screen goddess Jean Harlow [fig. 4], resulted in an immaculately rendered likeness that presaged his later paintings of celebrities⁸.

5 See Usherwood 1986 and London 2003.

6 Blake’s association with the magazine, initially called *The Sunday Times Colour Section*, was cemented with its first issue, on 4 February 1962, which included an article by John Russell on Peter Blake, “Pioneer of Pop Art” (pp. 16-17).

7 These were reproduced in “Peter Blake in Hollywood”, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 15 November 1964, pp. 27-31. “*The Sunday Times* asked three artists to go anywhere in the world, and there would be a set fee of £300 and you could choose wherever you went, but if you spent it on the fare you had less fee. So there was myself; Philip Sutton, who went to Tahiti; David [Hockney] went to Egypt and did those wonderful Egyptian drawings.[...] Jann and I had just married, literally that year, she had left a lot of unfinished business in Los Angeles anyway, and I wanted to go there.” Blake concedes that it is quite possible that his own enthusiasm for this sprawling southern California city spurred Hockney into going there at the end of December 1963. In the event, Hockney settled there for several years and returned intermittently before finally making it his more or less permanent home in 1978.

8 In notes for the catalogue of Peter Blake’s one-man exhibition at the Robert Fraser Gallery, London, in 1965, the art critic Robert Melville wrote of this work: “Although the commissioned portraits are not usually of people whom Blake would feel any compulsion to paint, he has become a fan of the Blonde Bombshell, in retrospect so to speak, as a result of making her likeness.”

The Jean Harlow portrait, published as the cover of *The Sunday Times Magazine* on 22 November 1964, provides a particularly close precedent for *Montgomery Clift was a Twin* in being based on a photograph but painted entirely by hand in what Blake himself terms his more “academic”, naturalistic style. It is very clearly based on an official studio publicity shot, complete with autograph⁹. It was around this time, too, that Blake conceived three large paintings on Hollywood themes, all of which proved to be very long-term projects, including *Portrait of David Hockney in a Hollywood Spanish Interior* [fig. 5]. The starting date for this painting, on which Blake worked intermittently for nearly four decades¹⁰, is normally given as 1965, but he is convinced that he began work on it in 1964:

For about three months I rented a studio in Chiswick¹¹. At that point it was the only time I had had a real studio, so I bought three canvases. Two were six foot by five, and one was six foot high by ten feet long. One of the pictures was *David [Hockney] in a Hollywood Spanish Interior*. The second one was *The Tarzan Family in the Roxy Cinema*. And the third one [...] simply was a battle. I wanted to paint something that was about as unfashionable as you could possibly paint [...]. Having decided to use frames when I did—it couldn’t have been more unfashionable in the sixties, when nobody was using frames—I wanted to paint a picture that was ludicrously unfashionable. So it was a battle scene. I think it was just called *Battle*. It was a fight between good and bad. As far as it got, “bad” were wrestlers in golden masks and golden helmets, and “good” were stills from movies. So there was Douglas Fairbanks Jr. sword-fighting a golden hooded man. There was Tony Curtis in a strip at the top, so it was like a balcony looking down into an arena. In the strip at the top there was Shirley Temple, W. C. Fields, the Bowery Boys and Abbott and Costello. Lou Costello is hitting people over the head. It picked up on a lot of Hollywood imagery.

These and other Hollywood paintings provide a reference point for *Montgomery Clift was a Twin* and two other canvases executed during the same two-year period: “*The Meeting*” or “*Have a nice day, Mr Hockney*” [fig. 6] and *A Remembered Moment in Venice, California* [fig. 7]. Blake had been interested in Montgomery Clift, more as a person than as an actor¹², and had identified with him partly because they had both suffered road accidents that left them partly disfigured facially: Blake had a serious bicycle accident in summer 1949 which exacerbated his shyness and led him to grow a beard soon afterwards to cover the scars¹³, and Clift, at the height of his acting career, nearly died in a car crash in May 1956 when he was drunk at the wheel, leaving a section of the left side of his astonishingly handsome face permanently paralysed¹⁴. Wanting something to read on the trip, Blake took with him a recently published biography on Clift by Patricia Bosworth which he found particularly intriguing on the subject of the actor’s confused sexuality¹⁵. While he himself is heterosexual, Blake had long had a passing interest in the subject of homosexuality as a theme for his paintings, for example as a subtext of many of his wrestling pictures. After witnessing so much of the gay subculture of Los Angeles in the company of Hodgkin and especially Hockney, who had made it a point of

9 “I think *The Sunday Times* supplied the photographs, and it was a black-and-white photograph. I adapted it to colour. So there wasn’t that much choice, and it was the most interesting of that group.” Blake painted it with a brand of acrylic paint called Cryla at a time when he was working mainly in oils, perhaps because this synthetic medium, with its bright colours, seemed more suitable for such subjects and for his more illustrational style. He used Cryla also for paintings of *Bo Diddley* (1963) and *The 1962 Beatles* (1963-1968).

10 Born in 1937, Hockney studied at the Royal College of Art between 1959 and 1962 and got to know Blake, whose work he much admired, at that time. Blake traded the painting with Hockney for a set of the younger artist’s already famed etchings *A Rake’s Progress* (1961-1963), but he kept possession of the canvas until he decided it was finally complete and in the meantime was able to exhibit it in unfinished states in several retrospectives and in exhibitions of Pop Art. Hockney donated it to the Tate Gallery, London, immediately on taking possession of it in 2002.

11 Chiswick is a district in West London. Blake resettled there in 1979 after moving back from Wiltshire on the break-up of his first marriage, and he still lives there today in a house purchased in 1981 with his second wife, Chrissy.

12 He has not made a point of seeing all Clift’s films. He thinks that the first movie he saw starring Clift was *From Here to Eternity*, released in 1953.

13 See Rudd 2003, pp. 10 and 15.

14 Bosworth 1979, pp. 298-302. The book was originally published in hardback by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., in 1978.

15 Like other movie stars of his generation, Clift had hidden his homosexual tendencies from public view. Bosworth’s biography was one of the first to deal openly with such issues, which had previously been considered taboo.



5. Peter Blake
Portrait of David Hockney in a Hollywood Spanish Interior,
 begun 1965
 Acrylic on canvas, 182.8 x 152.8 x 2.1 cm
 Tate, London



6. Peter Blake
*'The Meeting' or 'Have a nice day,
 Mr Hockney'*, 1981-1983
 Oil on canvas, 97.8 x 123.8 cm
 Tate, London



7. Peter Blake
A Remembered Moment in Venice, California
 1981-1983
 Oil on canvas, 79.4 x 105.4 cm
 Private collection

honour to be open about his sexuality since his early twenties in both his life and his art, the idea formed of making a portrait of Cliff that would address, tangentially, the question of the actor's sexual orientation¹⁶.

My picture is about the fact that he [Montgomery Clift] was a twin to a girl. And over the years he became kind of prettier, and she was a rather plain twin. And as he became more and more homosexual, he became very much the prettier of the two. That's what the painting is about.

Bosworth recounts that Clift, his twin sister and their older brother Brooks, two years their senior, were all brought up in the same way and dressed in a unisex manner¹⁷. Twenty years after making his painting, Blake has forgotten such details but is sure that they would have informed the painting at the time.

On the return flight to London, Blake proposed to Hodgkin that they each paint three pictures linked to their experiences in Los Angeles, with the idea of eventually showing them together¹⁸. The plan never materialised as intended. In early 1981 he was invited to have a major retrospective of his art at the Tate Gallery in London; the opening date of 9 February 1983 gave him a final deadline, which he did his best to meet, but Hodgkin produced only one of his paintings in time as well as one work on paper¹⁹. Blake's three works were shown in varying stages of completion, and the most elaborate of the three—"The Meeting", which he had begun a couple of months before the other two—was sold soon afterwards to the Tate and handed over to them in a state that Blake considered unfinished. A parody of Gustave Courbet's "The Meeting", or "Bonjour Monsieur Courbet", "The Meeting" is the most playful of the three Los Angeles paintings and the one that deals most overtly with the circumstances of Blake's visit to Hockney in the company of Hodgkin. Hockney assumes the role of the master allotted by Courbet to himself in the 19th century picture, while Hodgkin is shown rather mischievously as the humble and obsequious servant. Blake presents himself as Hockney's equal, but one who has come to pay him homage. As he recalls it now:

On the way back from the trip, I said to Howard, "Why don't we do an exhibition where we each paint three pictures about our experience there and wherever it is—if it's in Waddington, or wherever it would be—we would recreate a California gallery. So we will make a three-sided, open-fronted, false-floored, open-topped [space], and on each wall we will have a picture by you and a picture by me." And we will maybe have a white-painted floor and put some sand on it, to get a very bright light, to get that L.A. feeling. I had already made the drawings and taken some photographs for *Have a Nice Day, Mr Hockney*. And the second one: Howard and I had seen this incident, when we were walking back on Venice Beach. Just opposite the L.A. Louver was a big parking lot, and you looked across. It was the end of the day in that bit of time between people going home and people going to dinner, and there was one single girl of about 14 roller-skating in the middle with these big roller skates on. And it looked like her mother's dress, a black dress that almost came to the ground. And she was just doing little figures of eight and drifting and dreaming. It was such an extraordinary image. So that became *A Remembered Moment in Venice, California*.

16 Blake had observed homosexual behaviour within the London art world, too, and recalls that this also had an effect on his interest in the subject. In the 1960s he had shown with Robert Fraser, whose flamboyant behaviour left no one in doubt about his sexual tastes even before homosexual acts between consenting male adults were finally legalised in 1967. Much closer to the time of his Los Angeles visit in 1979, Blake had been friendly with another London art dealer who was then between marriages and exploring his homosexual side. Instigated by that art dealer, and in the company of heterosexual artists, including such unlikely figures as Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Coldstream and R. B. Kitaj, he says that he frequented gay clubs—where he sometimes danced drunkenly with other men—and spent evenings combining dinners with boxing matches screened at cinemas in the early hours of the morning. A social history of this aspect of the English art world at that time remains to be written, though perhaps not while all the protagonists are still around.

17 According to Bosworth, "Monty and the others were being raised as triplets, given identical haircuts ('Dutchboy bobs'), clothes, lessons, and responsibilities, regardless of age or sex. Sunny [their mother] believed strongly that she was being fair and impartial [...]." Bosworth 1979, p. 19.

18 Rudd 2003, p. 79. Rudd mistakenly refers to Blake as having just read Clift's autobiography; there is, in fact, no such book.

19 See London 1983, pp. 104-105, listed as "Californian Pictures". Blake's three paintings were exhibited as catalogue numbers 104 (*Montgomery Clift*), 105 (*The Meeting*) and 106 (*A Remembered Moment*). Hodgkin showed *David's Swimming Pool* (1982, mixed media on paper), cat. 104a; and *David Hockney in Hollywood* (1982, oil on wood), cat. 105a.

And then when I went back a year later to take more photographs—that’s when I took most of the Venice Beach ones—when I went to find the parking lot I couldn’t adjust to what was going on. What had happened was that I had looked at it looking out to sea, and when I went back half of it had a building going up. So I then reversed the situation, so you are looking across with the sea at your back, and the building being built. So that was about time and experience as well. In a year, this building was being built. So it was about the little girl dreaming, and it was about L.A. changing and developing and things like that. And then the little girl was [my daughter] Daisy, of course, I used photographs of Daisy.

Shortly after the first trip I met Chrissy [Wilson]. I decided to go back [...]. We actually travelled on my birthday [25 June, 1981]. I think I had probably booked my ticket, and then Chrissy and I met. She started to visit me and then moved in. And then I said, “Do you want to come with me to Los Angeles?” So that was even odder, I then immediately went to Los Angeles with Chrissy. So it was again “living well is the best revenge”.

Blake concedes that *Portrait of David Hockney in a Hollywood Spanish Interior* must have been on his mind when he was staying with Hockney in 1979, and that it may have reinforced his decision to produce new Los Angeles pictures in a closely related style. There are similarities not only in the paint application and technique, but also in the reliance on photographic sources²⁰. As he himself points out, however, these are all characteristics of that particular aspect of his painting practice throughout his career. He based his painting of Clift entirely on a grainy black-and-white photograph of the actor on holiday in Paestum, “an old Greek colony, south of Naples”, featured in the Bosworth biography [fig. 8]²¹. There is so little information in the reproduction that Blake, in effect, had to invent the details for himself, while remaining faithful to the hazy and indistinct atmosphere of his source. Blake also purchased other recently published books on Clift²² and black-and-white film stills that could be found in specialist shops on Hollywood Boulevard²³, but in the end he relied on just the one photograph. He transferred the composition by projecting the page (torn out of the book) onto the canvas with the aid of a Victorian epidiascope, and then tracing it out. Like its companion paintings, it was made to fit exactly into an old and battered gilt frame intended to exaggerate the “academic” look of the finished work, as if it belonged in the atmosphere of one of the great nineteenth-century Salons. The only adjustments to the composition were made for the sake of fitting the picture into the existing frame, and specifically into its oval format. The association with Victorian photographs, frequently made in that oval “vignette” shape, is confirmed by the sepia tones adopted for most of the scene; only the limpid blue sky and the actor’s flesh-coloured face are picked out in brighter colours.

Some years later, Blake returned to Montgomery Clift’s image in other works, notably in *Montgomery Clift* (1987) [fig. 9]²⁴, a painting with collaged postcards in the manner of his 1959 pop works, and as part of a grid

20 The background for the Hockney portrait, with its image of a pretty and flirtatious young man posing on a set of stairs, was based on an enormous photographic print measuring 190.5 x 129.5 cm which Hockney himself had handcoloured. It is reproduced in London 1999, p. 16.

21 It is reproduced in the section of black-and-white photographs printed between pages 212 and 213 of the 1979 paperback edition. Bosworth 1979, p. 193, devotes only a few lines to this day trip in February 1950 in the company of the actor Kevin McCarthy and his wife: “They spent an entire day at Paestum: a strong wind whistled through the ruins the afternoon they were there, so Monty tied a scarf around his head like a gypsy. And Kevin snapped him doing an exultant little dance against one of the great battered pillars.”

22 Kass 1979, essentially a picture book of film stills; Laguardia 1977.

23 The first ones that he bought were inadvertently left behind on a visit to the house of film star Tony Curtis, and were never recovered. He bought more on his next trip, but by then had no real need for them.

24 This work was made for a solo exhibition in Japan which he entitled *Peter Blake: Déjà vu* (Tokyo, Nishimura Gallery, 9-31 May 1988), the idea for which was to make new versions of his key early works or new works in his previous styles. Citing in his catalogue introduction the recent vogue for appropriation, Blake reasons that it is “better to have ripped myself off, than to have been ‘ripped-off’.” Most of Blake’s vintage celebrity portraits using photographic collage and enamel paints featured female rather than male film stars. The 1987 *Montgomery Clift*, created when he was working on portraits of Elvis Presley and James Dean, two other iconic figures of the 1950s, appears to be an entirely new work rather than a remake of an old one.



8. Kevin McCarthy
Photograph of Montgomery Clift



9. Peter Blake
Montgomery Clift, 1987
 Postcards and enamel paint on wood, 57.8 x 37.5 cm
 Private collection



10. Peter Blake
I is for Idols, 1991
 Screenprint on paper, 72.1 x 50.6 cm (image); 103 x 77.5 cm (sheet)
 Edition of 95 / Waddington Graphics
 Courtesy of Alan Cristea Gallery, London

of favourites in a screenprint, *I is for Idols* [fig. 10], from his *Alphabet* series of 1991. Clift's later reappearances are accounted for by Blake not as a form of hero-worship but as part of his iconography of celebrity:

He's an icon, as Elvis is an icon but not my favourite rock'n'roll star. He's an icon, not on the scale of Elvis but in a kind of cult way, I think. So I think it's on that level, more or less. So he's joined this kind of repertory company of people one uses. There's a repertory company of strange people, and there is a repertory company of idols who would spring to mind: it would be Elvis and Marilyn at the top, and then Montgomery Clift and Kim Novak and James Dean and perhaps Marlon Brando.

"Monty" may yet come back in other pictures by Blake, but in *Montgomery Clift was a Twin* he will remain forever lodged in our memories as an elusive, mercurial, troubled and ambiguous figure to haunt our imaginations.

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