After Death, Unfinished Artwork Gets a Life
By Dan Levin

In the dark days and weeks after the suicide of the artist Jeremy Blake in July, his friends and colleagues were left to pick up the pieces, literally.

When he walked into the Atlantic Ocean off Rockaway Beach in Queens, despondent over the suicide of his companion a week earlier, Mr. Blake was just three months away from an exhibition of his recent video art at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and another show at the Manhattan gallery Kinz, Tillou & Feigen. Many wondered what would become of his unfinished work and whether it would shed any light on his life, and his death at 35.

His work in progress, “Glitterbest,” is a video portrait of the 1970s punk-music impresario Malcolm McLaren, with whom he collaborated on the piece. Having toiled on it for a year and a half, Mr. Blake left behind a completed audio track bursting with romping punk riffs, video-game blasts of intergalactic battles and clanging church bells and an impish 11-minute voice-over by Mr. McLaren.

But most of the visual presentation was unfinished. Embedded in his computer hard drive were numerous image files evoking an enchanted world populated by pirate ships, psychedelic phalluses and neon graffiti. The still frames were virtually a mere slide show, a far cry from the rich dimensionality of his previous animated, abstract work, featured in museums throughout the world and in the film “Punch-Drunk Love.”

Jonathan P. Binstock, the curator of the Corcoran exhibition, and Lance Kinz, a director of Kinz, Tillou & Feigen, decided to incorporate “Glitterbest” into their exhibitions in its incomplete state out of deference to Mr. Blake, who had approved inclusion of some of the images in the Corcoran exhibition catalog and advance announcements for the New York show. They hoped the unfinished work would give viewers insight into his creative process and provide a glimmer of what the video might have become.

“It was a way to remain true to the vision of the exhibition, and it furthers our efforts in exploring...
his theme of portraiture,” Mr. Binstock said of “Wild Choir,” the Corcoran show. Reflecting Mr. Blake’s most recent career focus, the exhibition presents lushly cinematic, deeply probing digital-video studies of three artists he admired.

In addition to his paean to Mr. McLaren, Mr. Blake produced homages to Ossie Clark, an influential Swinging London British fashion designer, and David Berman, an indie-rock musician and poet. In each case he used his artist-subject as a portal to explore seminal cultural moments, draping the viewer in a nonlinear fabric of color, film and sound.

“Given the terrible situation we were faced with, we thought it would be an interesting way to approach this challenge and wanted to share it with the museum audience,” said Mr. Binstock, who left the Corcoran this summer and is now senior vice president of Citigroup’s Art Advisory Service in New York. He continued to work on the exhibition after leaving the Corcoran.

But first they had to gain permission from Mr. Blake’s grieving mother and then find the correct files on his many computers, an arduous process that took weeks. Thus it was only at the end of September, less than a month before the Corcoran exhibition was to open, that they tracked down all the files.

With a deadline looming, Mr. Binstock approached a friend, David Sigal, a documentary filmmaker and videographer, to help unlock Mr. Blake’s intended arrangements. “I was concerned about the material being treated with the greatest sensitivity and the need to preserve the integrity of the artist’s work in process,” Mr. Binstock said, “and I knew I could trust David to exhaustively examine the material and do that.”

They discovered Mr. Blake’s labeled folders in Adobe Photoshop, the graphics-editing software. Each folder contained sequential picture files with titles. But within each dense file were numerous layers of the artist’s “moving painting” imagery, their intended direction and flow indecipherable. They also realized that Mr. Blake had tackled only the first five minutes, less than half of the work’s final visual component.

Armed with a copy of Mr. Blake’s hard drive and Mr. McLaren’s poetic though fairly incomprehensible narration, Mr. Sigal, 41, spent the next few weeks tinkering with the files on his laptop in his Greenwich Village apartment. He struggled to make sense of eerie scenes of World War II carnage shimmering with stars and bubbles; imperial imagery juxtaposed with psychedelic vegetables on the Moon; and mythical creatures that morphed into a swashbuckling Sid Vicious.

But the more he listened to the voice-over and scrutinized the layered images, “there were little clues and abstract lines that I would wind up understanding,” Mr. Sigal said.

He soon began to recognize phrases and words that corresponded to imagery and references from Mr. McLaren’s life growing up in postwar Britain and his time as the Sex Pistols’ flamboyant manager, a cheeky, rowdyish figure who personified the late 1970s. There was also a larger theme among the layers: that of recasting a quintessentially anti-establishment figure as a hero of the British Empire for his wild creative contributions. Seizing on that concept, Mr. Sigal felt more confident in mapping out the progression of Mr. Blake’s images.
“David worked very hard, and I think successfully, to unravel the specific details of Jeremy’s organizational structure,” Mr. Binstock said.

As the weeks wore on, Mr. Sigal also felt increasingly haunted by the tumultuous lives and tragic deaths of Mr. Blake and Theresa Duncan, his companion of 12 years.

“I thought I would be able to figure out Jeremy’s life by figuring out the puzzle of ‘Glitterbest,’” Mr. Sigal said. “It was an intensely emotional time.”

Searching for answers, he turned to the Internet to learn more about the couple’s final days. There he read newspaper and blog accounts of Ms. Duncan’s setbacks as a screenwriter and the couple’s growing paranoia and conspiracy theories, some of which were detailed on her blog, The Wit of the Staircase (theresalduncan.typepad.com).

Ms. Blake killed herself on July 10 in the couple’s East Village apartment by washing down an overdose of Tylenol PM with bourbon. She left a suicide note. Mr. Blake made his way to Rockaway Beach the following week, leaving a note with his belongings in the sand.

Mr. Sigal found the accounts of their descent into paranoia harrowing and was distressed by obsessive online speculation that they had faked their deaths. “It only wound up upsetting me and making things even more confusing,” he said. Eventually he finished piecing together the unfinished work and paced the images to last the length of the full soundtrack. The video was presented at the Corcoran exhibition’s opening event on Oct. 27 and at a memorial show on Nov. 10 at Kinz, Tillou & Feigen. (The Corcoran show runs through March 2, and the gallery show through Jan. 5.) The screenings enabled friends and visitors to grasp how Mr. Blake constructed his dense collages, layer by layer, and how he paid tribute to Mr. McLaren and his vision.

For Mr. Sigal and others, it was a bittersweet celebration of Mr. Blake’s legacy. “I found the images really beautiful,” he said. “I was sad that I was the one who wound up doing this. I wanted Jeremy to be there to complete it.”