

‘IRONY IS PRACTICALLY UNAVOIDABLE’:  
A TALK WITH DIKE BLAIR

By Bill Powers



Dike Blair

Bill Powers: Tell me about your new exhibition at Secession in Vienna.

Dike Blair: The show is called “Floors/Doors/Windows/Walls.” It’s basically 50 paintings of those things segregated into separate rooms accompanied by three thematic sculptures. I’m in the basement and first-floor galleries, and Lutz Bacher’s show, “More Than This,” runs concurrently in the large ground-floor space.

BP: Can you describe the sculptures?

DB: I designed them in New York last year and am assembling them on site. They’re modular and each is composed of a painted wall, a sheet of glass, and a McCracken-esque slab positioned on carpet.

BP: Is there a little Gordon Matta-Clark in these pieces? They sound like domestic cross sections.

DB: Probably. And they do have a ’70s feel. After designing them it also occurred to me, “God, I’m just conflating Judd, Flavin, and Andre.” It’s interesting how deeply the stuff one absorbs when young—that was some of the stuff I cut my teeth on.

BP: The idea of using so many types of surfaces—be it textiles or glass—reminds me of a David Salle quote where he says that texture is color. Does that resonate with you?

DB: I think a lot of painters, when they’re really hitting it, feel that type of synesthesia. I wish that happened to me more often.

BP: In an interview you did with Joe Bradley a few years ago, you said something along the lines of “sincerity isn’t a necessary ingredient for a work of art.” Can you explain that?

DB: I think I said that sincerity in art is optional, but for someone of my generation, irony is practically unavoidable. Joe and I both found that things we might initially approach ironically become sincere

over time. Sincerity is tricky, especially when it comes to subject matter, which can often be a fiction or mask. For example, I think of Lisa Yuskavage's erotic subjects as red herrings; perhaps the real content, the sincerity, lies in the painting.

BP: Joe Bradley was your student as an undergrad?

DB: At RISD, when he was a senior. Joe was one of my all-time favorite students. I'm not sure I taught him much of anything, but I certainly encouraged him.

BP: Did you once say to me that for most artists, graduate school is a waste of time?

DB: Hey, I think we were drinking at a party. But I do have a certain ambivalence toward M.F.A. programs, especially if one went to art school as an undergrad. It's just more of the same, and educating oneself outside of school is gutsier. But for people with a liberal-arts background who are looking for a more sophisticated technical and theoretical education, or maybe seeking a peer group, it can make sense. Despite my reservations, I've almost never met an artist who regretted going to grad school.

BP: Who would you consider your peer group?

DB: I'm a baby boomer so there are a lot, and I like a lot of different kinds of art.

BP: So, someone like Carroll Dunham?

DB: Yeah, Tip and I are friendly and about the same age, and we were once in the same gallery. While I was never in their professional class, I was also friendly with artists like David Salle and Cindy Sherman. Richard Prince is one of my oldest New York friends. But I was closer to a group of artists like Nancy Arlen—who was the drummer for Mars—Frank Schroder, Tara Suzuki, and Steve Keister, who are less known. We were working on abstract stuff, mostly sculpture, with a kind of New or No Wave sensibility. Our work got totally eclipsed by Neo-Expressionism and Pictures.

BP: Richard Prince said I should ask you about playing at CBGB's.

DB: I performed there a couple of times in 1976-77 when I was in the Whitney [Museum Independent Study] Program. I was making abstract paintings that I'd burn with a blowtorch and writing three-chord songs. Now, I can't sing and I can barely play the guitar, but the idea of getting onstage at CBGB's, solo, with only a big Marshall amp was both terrifying and appealing. I had stage fright, which was part of the act, but wasn't really an act. I got the rock-star thing out of my system right then.

BP: Do you remember how you first met Richard Prince?

DB: Mutual friends introduced us at the Mudd Club, but then it turns out we both worked at the same time in a dinner theater restaurant called Mama Gail's in SoHo, where he was a busboy and I was a waiter, but we didn't know each other.

BP: Do you think teaching at RISD for 20 years hurt you or helped you as an artist?

DB: It certainly made my life more interesting, and perhaps had a positive effect on my work. School is a good place to talk about art...presumably that's what you're paid for. Outside of school it's embarrassing to talk to your peers about someone's brushstroke for more than about five seconds. And teaching afforded me something of a social life, because I'm not particularly social otherwise.

BP: In another interview you talked about wanting to capture that "first martini glow" in your paintings.

DB: It's a biochemical change that happens: edges become a little softer, glows become more erotic, your imagination loosens just a notch. I'm interested in luminosity and a certain kind of consciousness.

BP: The paintings of yours that I'm most familiar with are devoid of people. Did anyone ever try to get you to do portraits?

DB: When I was a kid my parents thought I'd make a good courtroom sketch artist. I've gone to the figure a couple of times. I painted some strippers in the 1990s and made an installation, a kind of strip-club simulacrum. Then more recently, maybe ten years ago, I started painting women's eyes in two-inch squares.

BP: Why no men?

DB: They don't have the same erotic charge for me. Now is that juvenile? Yeah, probably.

BP: What about your paintings of cocktails?

DB: Right before I quit drinking, I took all these pictures of what I thought would be my last cocktails. I painted them during my first year of sobriety; something like mementos of lost loves.

BP: Did that help relieve the tension of sobriety?

DB: Well, I'm drinking again....

Dike Blair's show in Vienna runs until April 3.