

# ART IN AMERICA

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### DIKE BLAIR WITH STEEL STILLMAN

by Steel Stillman



Dike Blair working on a sculpture outside his studio, 2009.

*Dike Blair is having a good year: in April he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in the visual arts, and this month a major exhibition of his work, "Now and Again," opens at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, in Greensboro, N.C. The show, Blair's first museum solo, is organized by Weatherspoon curator Xandra Eden and is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Eden and writer Gary Indiana. Born in 1952, Blair grew up in western Pennsylvania. He earned an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1977, and also attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Since landing in New York in the mid-'70s, Blair has charted a singular path, making work that ranges from early paintings on glass to installations inspired by Disney World's Epcot Center. In the mid-'80s, Blair began to make modestly scaled gouaches, and has continued the practice ever since. Over the years these paintings have focused on a succession of thematic pairings: travel scenes and still lifes, windows and flowers, and more recently, eyes and nocturnes with parking lots or footsteps in snow.*

*About 15 years ago, Blair's sculptural inclination led to a series of assemblages made out of carpeting, light fixtures, photographs and benchlike elements. Then, about three years ago, the sculptures changed, and the carpet and light pieces gave way to an ongoing series that incorporates painted wooden crates as one of several recurring motifs. The exhibition at the Weatherspoon will gather 51 gouaches and 14 large sculptures dating from 2001 to the present, and will be installed by the artist to highlight his tendency to make work in pairs.*

*In addition to making art, Blair teaches painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. A collection of his writings, *Again: Selected Interviews and Essays*, was published by WhiteWalls in 2007. He lives and works in New York City, where he has been represented by Feature Inc., and in Hortonville, N.Y., where he has a large studio. We met upstate in July and, following lunch with his wife, Marie Abma, a costume designer, began our conversation.*

STEEL STILLMAN Were you interested in art as a child?

DIKE BLAIR I was. My mother is a painter, and I developed some ability to render at an early age, and that became part of my identity. I remember having the hope that I'd get more interested in something else, but it never quite happened. And I remember feeling uneasy about calling myself an artist, not just because it was an unstable profession, but because it seemed pretentious.

SS When did becoming an artist start to seem more possible?

DB I dropped out of college in 1971 after my freshman year, moved to New York, and while living and working there, took a course at the New School. It was a contemporary art history class with Jeanne Siegel that included visits to artists' studios. I remember looking at non-objective painting and feeling the scales fall from my eyes: suddenly I understood the language. Then, in 1974, during a student residency at Skowhegan, I realized that artists were the people with whom I was most comfortable, that the art world was the place in which I was most happy.

SS After some time in Chicago, you returned to New York.

DB In 1976, while I was still a student at the Art Institute, I spent a semester in New York, followed by another semester in the Whitney Program. Very quickly I met a lot of artists and musicians and beat a regular path between Magoo's [the art bar] and CBGB's and my apartment in the East Village. It was an absolutely great time to be in New York. I loved all the music, and was writing songs and sometimes performing on audition nights, which were on Mondays, at CBGB's. They never put me on a bill, but said I was always welcome to play Mondays because as a solo act, I set up quickly. And my friends drank a lot.

SS In the mid-'70s the art schools were addressing language and media culture.

DB Well, in the studio I was making black paintings on paper that were abstract and partially burned. I remember having long arguments with myself that involved whether to juxtapose album covers of bands I liked with those paintings. With the album covers up, the pieces seemed saturated with one kind of meaning; with the album covers down, an entirely different vocabulary kicked in. I went back and forth for a year or so, until finally I decided I wanted the paintings to be on their own. As stupid as it may sound, I think it was then that I declared myself to be something of a formalist; I wasn't going to trade so much in the readymade or in things that were more language-based. Who knows—if the album covers had stayed, maybe I'd have become part of the Pictures generation.

SS You've not been afraid to try new things over the course of your career.

DB From the beginning, I've allowed pieces to follow and react to the ones that preceded them, and along the way there have been occasional full stops, reevaluations and shifts. But since the early '80s, painting gouaches has been an ongoing practice. They began with very small watercolors of sailboats done somewhat ironically, something like Sunday painting. I remember having been startled by Dan Flavin's sailboat drawings, which just had a horizontal line and a couple of dashes; perhaps those planted a seed. The gouaches got me thinking about the possibility of reinventing landscape painting by injecting it with televisual and cinematic effects.

From the '80s to the present, the gouaches have served various functions, especially in relation to my sculptural and installation work. For me, there has always been a "drawing" quality about them; the fact that they take time to make allows me to ponder whatever else I'm working on. At a certain point I realized they could be the equal of that other work, and I began to enjoy colliding what might have seemed disparate practices in one exhibition space.