

### DIKE BLAIR

By John Miller

## REVIEWS



DIKE BLAIR + (YVCCA) 1986  
Mixed media including glass, hydrostone, gouache, artificial plant and acrylic on canvas 30" x 96"

### Dike Blair Cash/Newhouse

Although hardly a buzzword, let alone a trend, in recent art, Epicureanism is a striking feature of Dike Blair's assemblages. Epicureanism encourages the pursuit of luxury tempered by ethical restraint. Thus it reconciles the telos of the pleasure principle with the demands of the social order, leading to the cultivation of such special tastes as flower arranging or book collecting – not reckless abandon.

What's curious, then, is how Blair's work conjures up the blatant hedonism of California Pop. Much of this is due to the choice of graphic emblems as well as idiosyncratic materials. Compare Blair's nautical flags and logos (the Tide detergent swirl) to Billy Al Bengston's chevrons. Blair's atmospheric spray painting also invokes Ed Ruscha. Here, the need for gratification emerges as the common

denominator. Pop art particularly chronicles the way desire is transformed into the consumerism of mass culture – the very event which eclipses the figure of the epicure, a reduction of his civilizing impulse.

Blair is primarily a landscape artist, albeit an unorthodox one. He uses an extremely vertical format, divided along a central horizontal axis, to create an opposition between top and bottom (reminiscent of El Greco's scales of heaven and hell) with parallel correspondences. But the effect of this device is only allegorical to the extent that it suggests that the world is ordered, or faith in that idea. The mirroring is introspective. It amounts to nothing so much as an existential acceptance of the prosaic: "Take things as they are, finding pleasure where you can." In this way, the artist becomes attuned to nuance. He renders not the generic, but the particular. His scenic vignettes, for example, typify distinct locales at certain times of the year, and so become convincingly realistic. He takes pains to transport a favourite (and cumbersome) rock to his studio to render from. That kind of modest observation is akin to the descriptions of Georges Simeon. It takes in the humble pleasures of birds, seasonal customs, drinking man's humour and computer graphics.

Two particular pictures in the recent exhibition cast a nostalgic eye at suburban or rural adolescence. Both show graffitied speed signs in which a "5" or a "3," perhaps, has been devilishly made into an "8." But who'd ever fall for such a crude trick? The naive precocity of youth is touching; simply to register the craving for excess is enough to assuage it. Grown-up (sublimated), these urges turn into, say, van murals, a kitsch/folk element which Blair likes to flirt with.

The preoccupations of the subject matter necessarily resound in the formal construction of the work. In the past, some pieces have featured up to a dozen different materials ranging from spray enamel, epoxy, plexiglass, gouache, styrofoam and masonite to lichen, artificial plants, shot glasses, fabric, plaster, polyester resin and oil paint. This array of media turns into a continuous picture as if by magic (in other words, after much labour-intensive crafting) so that reading across its variegated surface is intensely stimulating.

Less elaborate works on paper comprise most of the recent show. Here the artist has traded consummate effect for lightness and spontaneity. In the gouache and water-

colour sections he courts awkwardness, playing one odd passage off another.

Everything threatens to fall apart, but somehow doesn't. These paper works are mounted on patterned fabrics in custom-built, colour-coordinated frames. Despite the seductiveness, Blair is never facile. His feel for materials has been won out of the patience and determination that arises from sensuous involvement in the process. The poetry of the work lies in the culmination of its unaccustomed, felt-out ways.

The value of epicureanism, which may be marginalized but not eliminated, does not come from its claim to superior taste. Ultimately, choosing the path of pleasure depends on privilege. That should never be forgotten. Minimally, and most significantly, it preserves an ideal of harmony. The time when proscribing pleasure (in reaction to the blandishments of the commodity) was politically correct is blessedly gone. Historically, epicureanism has run a course from the principled serenity of the Greeks to the obsessional decadence of a Huysmans. Now an essentially conservative vision, it nonetheless has the virtue of maintaining a sort of vitalism, rather than postponing gratification for an indefinite future. Blair has taken this option with the utmost self-consciousness in response to what so often passes for "critical" work.

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