

MODERN PAINTERS

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WORKING PRACTICE: DIKE BLAIR

By Ben Carlson

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After 15 years in journalism, New York-based artist Dike Blair hesitates to describe himself as a writer. He prefers to identify with a less clearly defined category: artists who also write. The distinction is subtle but significant. By working in this gray area, he is allowed to explore a more idiosyncratic range of topics. "I simply write about things that interest me," says Blair. As a regular contributor to the many incarnations of *Elein Fleiss* and *Olivier Zahm's* magazine *Purple*, Blair has had a flexible forum for this pursuit. The journal has published his interviews with such diverse individuals as Robotics researcher Hans Moravec, sculptor John McCracken, and Nike shoe designer Gordon Thompson; Blair has contributed circuitous articles on Bruce Springsteen ("New Jersey and the Boss Belt"), Photoshop's blur tool ("Meanderings on the Age of Blur and Blah, Blah, Blah"), and abstraction in contemporary science-fiction films ("On Aliens, Abstraction and 2Kism"). Although originally written for a disposable magazine format, several of these articles will soon be back in print. This summer, the Chicago-based small press *WhiteWalls* is publishing *Again: Selected Interviews and Essays*, the first collection of the artist's writing.

Blair has explored themes similar to those discussed by Dan Graham and Robert Smithson—corporate architecture, popular science, drugs, New Jersey—but there is one essential dif-

ference between his magazine pieces and theirs. Whereas the previous generation of artist-writers frequently made articles as artworks, Blair makes a clear division between his magazine texts and studio work. "I very much segregate the practices, physically and mentally," he explains. Of course, both endeavors draw from the same catalogue of interests. It is tempting to look to the sculptures for a demonstration of ideas explored in Blair's writing. His counterintuitive

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use of fluorescent lights and industrial carpeting to evoke landscape, for example, relates to the pieces he has written on entertainment architecture like *Fantasea Reef*, an aquatic-themed restaurant at Harrah's Atlantic City casino. Blair, however, cautions that "trying to understand the work through the writing would be a mistake." Indeed, the writing functions less as an explanatory caption than an addendum that further complicates interpretation.

"While I formally separate my practices," Blair admits, "I also like to play with the formal relationships between the domains." For more than a decade, his studio work has been propelled by the tension between two distinct projects—Photorealist paintings in gouache and atmospheric mixed-

media sculptures. The gouaches are painted from Blair's own snapshots. In the early '90s he focused on casual arrangements of small objects. One painting from the period shows two packs of cigarettes stacked next to an inexpensive ashtray, a lighter, and one can of Coca-Cola; another early work depicts a teetering stack of VHS cassette tapes (*Blade Runner* prominently visible in the pile). About 10 years ago he shifted from still-life to landscape painting. He has since been

working steadily on a series of closely cropped botanical pictures, often painted from starkly lit flash photographs. In addition to flowers, Blair paints near-monochrome views from the windows of hotels, trains, cars, and airplanes. The works on paper, which channel the enthusiasm of a Sunday painter, serve as a necessary counterpoint to the somber sculptures he has made for more than a decade.

Inspired by the rules of Japanese flower arrangement, Blair's decor-like constructions evoke calming panoramas through the delicate manipulation of office carpeting, extension cords, fluorescent lights, Plexiglas, and painted wood. He says, "I found that using the Ikebana structure was flexible and sensible. It grounded me when I was unsure about how to create structures."

Typically a composition will include one or two landscape photographs that resonate with the ambience of the sculpture as a whole. Where the paintings copy, the sculptures extract and translate. Blair says, "The painting is more literal and the sculpture abstract, while, ironically, the sculpture is concrete and the painting illusory."

These disparate projects, however, are most resounding in unison. Installed alongside one another, the paintings and sculptures generate a chain of associations that is only strengthened by familiarity with Blair's writing. The formal vocabulary of his sculpture borrows from many of the same fields that he has engaged as a journalist—modernist furniture, the interior design of retail stores, casino architecture. But Blair is writing less often these days. The critical reception of his work is coming to a consensus, and interpretations are beginning to calcify. Blair observes, "I spent a number of years getting the sculptures and gouaches coordinated. I more or less became really satisfied with the results. So then what?" Fortunately he

DIKE BLAIR IN HIS STUDIO, HICKORYVILLE, NEW YORK, APRIL 2007. PHOTO: ALAN SMITHIEE

has started work on a fresh series of gouache portraits and related sculptures. The paintings, generously margined close-ups of eyes, are an unexpected departure from Blair's decadelong engagement with landscape. Of these gouaches, Blair says, "I very much like that I neither have an understanding of them, nor have I codified them." The new sculptures have a more casual, painterly, and rough finish. Each piece incorporates a packing crate and framed gouaches, which lean informally against the wall. Surveying the work, Blair notes, "But it's all interesting and lively in the studio, and that would seem to be the point."

For more information on Dike Blair, turn to *Index*, p. 126.