

FLASH ART NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 1997

DIKE BLAIR

By Jeff Rian

O U V E R T U R E

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Untitled, 1996. Gouache and pencil on paper, 16 x 12".



Gray Goo Lounge, 1993/94. Installation view.

ONE OF THE UNSUNG highlights of the decade was Dike Blair's *EPCOT* installation at Ealan Wingate's gallery on Broadway in 1991. Painting the walls mauve, installing a mauve carpet, white metal tubular chairs, frothy ferns spot-lit in velvety purple, ambient music, and a number of his glass paintings under square spotlights, it was both soothing and compelling, bringing together a different ambience for viewing art (imagine Disney doing a Dalai Lama room) and offering a vibrant, pictorial, yet abstract style of painting, using glass.

The installation was inspired by Disney's *EPCOT* center, where he took the photographs for his glass paintings in its neon-lit corridors, at the motel, and in the parking lot. He'd been making glass paintings for a number of years, juxtaposing painted landscapes and contemporary still-life images with photographs he'd polyurethaned onto the back.

Blair focuses on technology's allure, combining it with hand crafting. His imagery — alcohol, cigarettes, motels, car interiors, *EPCOT*, or an Apollo gantry — arises from the countervailing forces of a society founded on scientific management, motion studies, industrial psychology, and the entertainment, stimulants, and intoxicants that are its substitutes for transcendence.

Following *EPCOT* was the *Gray Goo Lounge*, a gray tableau vivant that incorporated a topless dancer gyrating to thumping rock music in front of pixel images of herself — gray goo referring to computer pixels as a kind of cybersperm or image DNA. But where his *EPCOT* exhibition was about entertainment and technology replacing nature, *Gray Goo* showed computer technology's relationship to sex and the nude. It was a reminder of the social and economic impact of fast technology on sexual fantasy.

After *Gray Goo*, an installation called *Vanitas*, combined self-expression with a theme that traditionally evokes the transitory nature of life and the hubris of our material possessions. In a gray room hung with gouaches of nudes, ashtrays, cocktail glasses, landscapes of Las Vegas, and Shelter Island, the in-

swimming pools, fantasy dining rooms, hi-tech escalators, napkin and sugar dispensers, a view out a train window, etc. comprise a catalogue of entertainment iconography, as do the nudes, which appear as looking-glass homunculi. But these are transcendental images and comprise an agnostic's quasi-religious art that reflects a world in which film is the cathedral of art, and entertainment engenders the iconography of transcendence, its ancillary products being our means of escape.

To the culturati of the rarefied world of visual art, the artifacts of escape and entertainment — even as art — are infra dig. They belong in the midden heap of bad taste, out in Las Vegas behind the Liberace museum. The so-called problem with this kind of transcendental art — unlike religious art, historical art, portraits, still lifes, or recent political art — is that it does not convey a moral. Blair does, in fact, tiptoe the bristling psychological line between escape and transcendence. Thus the beer and dirty ashtray plays against the sunny holiday motel with its ice and Coke machines. The former represents a road that bifurcates at a gutter or the twelve steps of redemption. The latter — i.e., where we take the kids and relive our lost hopes — are a cheap substitute for transcendence.

The best part of art is its potential generosity. Blair offers a lot to perceive and peruse, while bottling it up in a style distinctly his own. Thus a sodden suburban nightscape about the size of a *Wired* magazine cover is as bizarre as a David Lynch framing shot, as familiar as a home movie, and as succinct and speculative and succulent as a haiku. There he draws you in, as he has me, to the ultimate, best, last, and only form of escape and transcendence: Art.

Jeff Rian is a critic based in Paris.

Dike Blair was born in 1952 in New Castle, Pa. He lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows: 1980: Nancy Lurie, Chicago; 1981: Stefanotti, New York; 1983: Serra Di Felice, New York; 1986: Baskerville + Watson, New York; Christminster, New York; 1989: Koury Wingate, New York; 1990: Dart

Glass generally ends up broken, so it is not the ideal material for longevity, but it befits our fast-food, green glass, image world.

terior of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting room, under spotlights, he set up three pedestals with a circle of glass and objects on them that referenced the gouaches. He was inspired by the computer game *Myst*, so he designed a tourbook, which stood on a pedestal at the entrance. This was a Nabokovian frame, a conscious artistic device wherein his artistic alter ego confessed to "the flawed interface between my urge to transcend and my urge to escape."

His gouache images of entertainment architecture, parking lots, motels, Coke machines, lounges, car interiors, lobbies, empty

Gallery, Chicago; 1991: Ealan Wingate, New York; 1993: M D J Art Contemporain Galerie, Neuchâtel (Switzerland); 1994: Daniel Newburg, New York; 1995: Hubert Winter, Vienna.

Selected group shows: 1984: "Artists Call," Metro Pictures, New York; 1987: "Playback," Hubert Winter, Vienna; 1989: "Bellevue," The Museum of Modern Art, Vienna; "Image World," Whitney, New York; 1992: "Les mystères de l'auberge espagnole," Villa Arson, Nice; "Tattoos," Andrea Rosen, New York; "Icebana," Jack Tilton, New York; 1993: "Cadavre Exquis," The Drawing Center, New York; "June," Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris; 1994: "The Winter of Love," PS1, New York; "L'hiver de l'amour," arc, Paris; 1995: "Purple 8 1/2," Jousse-Seguine, Paris; 1996: "Beige," Saga Basement, Copenhagen; "Telephone-mind the gap," Basilico Fine Arts, New York; 1997: "Hello," Feature, New York.