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DIKE BLAIR BY OLIVER ZAHM
INTERVIEW BY JEFF RIAN
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Dike Blair, *Untitled*, oil on aluminum panel, 10 1/2 x 14 inches

JEFF RIAN — *You began painting gouaches in the early 1980s as a kind of side-line to your more complex electro-pop collage paintings on glass. For a while, you made sculptures with carpets, electric lights, and images, followed by plinths and shipping crates with lamps and images inside. The sculptures were always Zen-like, evoking ikebana flower arranging using DIY materials. The gouaches were something else. Were they a related but different part of your thinking?*

DIKE BLAIR — The gouaches began as “Sunday painter” things, which I saw as a separate activity. Toward the end of the '80s, I got interested in how some of the gouaches echoed the other work, especially as the sculpture became more sophisticated and incorporated photographic imagery similar to the gouaches. Then the crate sculptures were made to contain gouaches, albeit in a different format from the others.

JEFF RIAN — *Were the gouaches more personal?*

DIKE BLAIR — Initially they were, and the collage and installation work addressed media and corporate culture. But all my work has been somewhat autobiographical. I used to think the distinctions between work done in different media addressed and underlined formal thinking, but that seems less important to me now.

JEFF RIAN — *I remember your “Gray Goo Lounge,” a term for self-replicating nano- technology — a reflection on computer imagery, with the image of a pole dancer, long before the porn industry inundated Internet imaging. Did you sense the corporate takeover of perception — and sex?*

DIKE BLAIR — That piece was shown in four different venues: in Las Vegas in 1993; at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1994, for the exhibition “L'Hiver de l'Amour” organized and curated by Purple; then at PS1, titled “The Winter of Love”; and finally in New York at Daniel Newburg's SoHo gallery. A number of things came together at once. I was thinking of what I might make for “L'Hiver de l'Amour” that would address contemporary sexuality. I'd started to make gouaches of strippers, in large part to paint the human figure — an already objectified body. I was reading about nanotechnology, which at that point in time was still speculative. One day, I found myself studying photos of a stripper on my old Mac desktop for a painting, and the notion of a middle-aged man looking at a stripper on his computer was kind of pathetic and funny. I thought making “computer

art” with a lame machine and a black-and-white printer had a certain irony. That it all felt somewhat politically incorrect made me really want to do it. I would note that while I found it an interesting piece to make, I don’t think it was very good art.

JEFF RIAN — *Recently you made the switch from gouache to painting in oil. How did that come about?*

DIKE BLAIR — I still paint in gouache on paper, but much more of my time is now devoted to oil painting. For a few years, my gallery, Karma, had been asking what the gouaches would look like in oil. Of course, some of their motive was financial — oils are more expensive than works on paper. Another motive was to push me to keep things lively. I resisted the notion. I’d never done much oil painting. The few times I did, I felt like I was faking it. I was afraid of making bad work, and fear is not good for an artist. But I tried it and found the medium extremely compelling.

JEFF RIAN — *Did the shift require a retooling of your skill set, between your brain and hand?*

DIKE BLAIR — It required a lot of learning, but I was a little surprised that much of my knowledge from gouaches transferred fairly easily to oil. There were variables I hadn’t needed to consider using a water-based medium on paper: the chemistry of oil, different ways to manipulate the finish, the added surface, and impasto. Drying time is also a bigger factor. Playing with these variables has been quite stimulating.

JEFF RIAN — *I remember works on paper you made in college, burning the edges of paper, landscapes with words on them. I wondered, then, if you were trying to escape drawing and painting. And now you’re painting the world around you. What changed?*

DIKE BLAIR — When I think back to my student work, I tried quite a few different media and approaches to making things. Paint usually, but also photography, video, and performance. I tried out nonobjective, formal approaches, and I tried out layering humor, including texts, onto things. I was trying to figure out if I had anything original to add to the conversation, or if I was even part of it. One had to fuck with tradition and prevailing expectations to find something new. Like a lot of art students, I was an insecure smart-ass, and, of course, things I thought were new simply weren’t. While my later work contains DNA from the student work, tracing that heredity would be too tedious to relate. Art requires thought and effort. I wouldn’t call it a struggle because it’s a pretty luxurious way to spend time. There are times when I feel I’ve done about as much as I can or want to do with a body of work, and I try to force a change. Those can be uncomfortable times for me because it usually means I make something not so good, like the “Gray Goo Lounge.” At the same time, one’s art can’t do anything but evolve or devolve, and the reasons one makes it and one’s relationship to it are always changing.

JEFF RIAN — *You once said the gouaches were of things around you — books, comics, coffee cups, shower glass, views from cars, snow steps, etc. Some of those things, such as cigarettes and alcohol, touch on indulgence or addiction. I see your subjects as casual affirmations of commercially available escapism and transcendence.*

DIKE BLAIR — The gouaches always change. Those first ones were landscapes, then I added still lifes, and I’ve tried working with the figure. The first gouaches were painted en plein air and from memory. Later, most everything came from snap- shots. I have a number of subjects that I repeat and revisit — though I’m discovering new subjects at a slower pace as I age. The juxtaposition of subjects creates a narrative, but like a fictive self-portrait. At a recent survey of the gouaches at Karma gallery, an artist friend said he saw a lifestyle-improvement narrative, which is funny and probably true. My motel rooms and cocktails got fancier. Speaking of cocktails, I first started painting them after I quit drinking, in part because I missed them. I’m drinking again and paint them because I really like cocktails. The same applies to cigarettes, although I rarely smoke one anymore. I find it odd if anyone has a problem with that.

JEFF RIAN — *Does treating pleasure as an experience rather than a potential vice allow you to avoid morality?*

DIKE BLAIR — I like pleasure in life and art. That’s not a terribly complicated position, but any kind of moralizing about it would be. I don’t espouse drinking and smoking. Advertising does that, often interestingly.

JEFF RIAN — *You showed drawings for the first time at the Linn Lühn gallery in Düsseldorf. Karma published a book. What got you back to drawing?*

DIKE BLAIR — I hadn't done much drawing since being a student. I wrote an introductory essay for the book, and I hope you don't mind me quoting a passage here to answer your question: "I've never been happy about not drawing. Every couple of years for the last three decades or so, I've gone to the art supply store, bought drawing pads or paper, charcoal, carbon pencils, graphite, erasers, and shading stumps, laid all of this on the table before me, and then drawn a blank. I'd do a few half-hearted squiggles, and then everything would go on a shelf. A little over a year ago, I was arranging to do a studio visit with an artist, and he asked if I did drawings because he'd be happy to trade drawings. I really wanted one of this artist's pieces, so I went out and bought paper, etc, and immediately did a rough, relatively quick drawing of an ashtray, an image I'd rendered in both gouache and oil paint."

JEFF RIAN — *I visited your studio when you were preparing for your recent exhibition of oil paintings at the Modern Institute in Glasgow. On the wall was an array of photographs to be painted — a variety of images that, to my mind, represented a way of seeing the world and not simply single views. I thought that if I were a collector, I'd try to repeat something like that, with varieties of subjects put together. What were you thinking when you made that selection?*

DIKE BLAIR — What might make an exhibition interesting to others is a juxtaposition of subject matter and imagery. The combinations of things add up to a narrative and are maybe more interesting than the images themselves. My photographs aren't terribly interesting, but they are usually based on how a thing or a space might look as a painting. So much of how and what I paint is pretty straightforward or even banal, so the editorial process of selecting things to paint is possibly the most creative part. Also, I paint in groups, even more so now because of the drying time in oil painting. In order to keep from getting bored, I make each painting of a group different. Each painting is therefore a challenge. Frequently I need to figure a specific technique for each painting. That's part of my pleasure in making them.

JEFF RIAN — *If I were to imagine the ghosts of influence, early on especially, I see photorealism fusing with minimalist design and building materials. Were there specific influences?*

DIKE BLAIR — Pretty much from childhood, I was interested in and exposed to an awful lot of art. Oddly, the photo-realists never attracted me much, at least the ones who showed at Meisel back in the '70s, when I came up. When I was young, the realists I liked were the Hudson River painters, especially Martin Johnson Heade. I was also influenced by abstract work, like the Color Field painters, and in the '70s, the minimalists — Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre. Ed Ruscha was also a shining light. Somewhere I said I was working a kind of Home-Depot minimalism and saw that as an unconscious mash-up of Judd, Flavin, and Andre. But I'd also liked comic books and ikebana flower arranging, which flavoured the stew. So, there's nothing objectively logical about my influences. It's mostly subjective.

JEFF RIAN — *You've always been a fairly prolific reader. Now you listen to audio books, including when you work. Does your reading influence your art?*

DIKE BLAIR — Literature, especially certain postmodernist and science-fiction works, was important to me when I was younger. So was pop music, bands like Television and The Psychedelic Furs. Somehow, the work from the last decade or so tends to chase its own tail now... I think mostly about how to develop or allow something evolutionary to happen around my own subjects and themes. I listen to audio books almost exclusively now. But I favor plot-driven fiction, often airport lit, to engage just enough of my brain to relieve the tedium of painting.

JEFF RIAN — *I'm always surprised at the accuracy of your colors. It's the most obvious feature in your work.*

DIKE BLAIR — Getting the right color and light has always been of great interest, and I've gotten better at it over time. My source material is almost always an ink-jet photo print, so I'm translating from CMYK into commercial art paint mixes. I have pieces of scrap paper that I'll stroke my mix onto, then hold it next to the printout to see how close I've gotten.

JEFF RIAN — *The gouaches, paintings, and drawings are small and intimate — like contemporary versions of 17th-century Dutch still life and genre painting — and the opposite of grand- scale art. You don't paint people but focus on the accoutrements of life, the stuff a lot of middle-class people have. Do you think about the sociopolitical ramifications of your subject matter? What do you think about?*

DIKE BLAIR — I love Dutch still life painting, especially Pieter Claesz — I've done a couple of paintings of his paintings. I don't think about sociopolitical implications, but I do think about what the subject should or could be. For the most part, I look at what's in front of me, and then I might take a picture and paint it, which sometimes complicates the thinking. The way I might consider and snap a picture of a window, for example, certainly involves formal thoughts about framing the image. My subject matter has usually divided between things that are centered in a painting, like a cup of coffee, and vistas that are more like fields, windows, and footprints in snow, for example.

JEFF RIAN — *Do images come from other sources?*

DIKE BLAIR — My wife, Marie Abma, is so familiar with what attracts me that she takes no small percentage of the pictures I paint from. Very often I'm not sure whether she or I took a certain shot.

JEFF RIAN — *Painters have to convince with a gestalt, often at a particular distance. Portraits tend to be painted at conversation distance. History painters stepped farther back — as did Impressionists. But with a lot of abstract art, distance can disappear. It can be up close or far away. Distance is native to visual experience. Do you think about that in a particular way?*

DIKE BLAIR — Optimal viewing distances — long, middle, close — were often a subject of the group crits when I taught. Certain really good artworks appear better at different distances. I usually want mine to attract at all distances. In that regard, perceptual distance and scaling image to panel size are a critical but possibly invisible consideration. An image's relationship to the size of the panel is something I always need to figure. My works are pretty small, but there is a big experiential difference between rendering the same subject on an 8 x 6-inch or a 12 x 9-inch panel.

JEFF RIAN — *This issue of Purple is about the brain. Hands link to motor neurons for movement and motion and mirror neurons for mimicking behavior, such as learning to draw or dance. Practice improves one's skills...*

DIKE BLAIR — Practice certainly comes into play. It used to be that I would avoid certain images that felt too difficult to paint. I'm pretty confident now that I can do justice to most any image of my choosing. One curious thing I noted about my brain, and this relates to listening to audio books, is that I can pay attention to speech when rendering an image, but cannot follow a sentence when I'm working on something abstract, like a sculpture. It seems clear that the two different kinds of creative thinking engage different and separate regions of the brain. Another painting-brain thing that I experience, unfortunately very rarely, is a kind of synesthesia when brain/eye/hand are in perfect sync so it feels like the brush is applying light instead of paint.