

Dike Blair

WEATHERSPOON ART MUSEUM
GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA

Cameron Martin

ONE OF THE MANY gratifying aspects of Dike Blair's ten-year sculpture and painting survey, "Now and Again," recently on view at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina, was how it allowed the artist to fully exercise his understated but considerable talent for exhibition design. Though he operated well in advance of the design-as-art environment of the mid-1990s, transforming galleries into corporate lounges that worked as ambient takes on mass architecture, Blair left behind installation art per se many years ago. This exhibition's subtle staging, however, managed to come just close enough to that territory to make you wonder whether he might not be reconsidering. Confronting the expansive main gallery of the Weatherspoon—a long, high-ceilinged room reminiscent of a cargo ship's hold, and not necessarily well suited to the ruminative nature

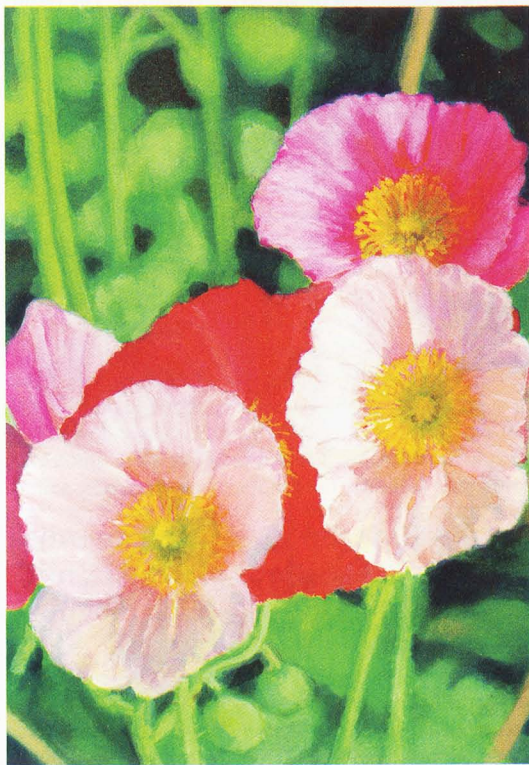
of his work—Blair reconfigured the space in a manner that produced a complex experience of both intimacy and the uncanny.

Entering at one end of the gallery, viewers were presented with a grouping of Blair's signature sculptures, elegant compositions he began producing about fifteen years ago, made up primarily of carpet, painted wooden platforms, light fixtures, extension cords, and photographs. Recent pieces also incorporated the handpainted crates the work is shipped in, which served as monolithic supports on which Blair hung spare, photo-based paintings of flowers or women's eyes. The sculptures had a particular eidolic resonance, in part because of the somewhat hazy atmosphere created by the unusual lighting in the room. In addition to the standard exhibition lamps, Blair bounced off the ceiling the "working lights" normally used during installation, slightly magnifying the reverberating halos and pale shadows created by the sculptures' fluorescent fixtures.

In the middle of the room, Blair built Sheetrock walls that formed a series of small painting galleries, smartly dividing the lengthy exhibition space. To view his meticulous gouaches (all untitled), you crossed through a doorway to find the ceiling lowered by a diaphanous scrim. The gesture created an architecture more appropriately scaled to his modest-size images of the things encountered in the course of quotidian experience: an empty parking lot, footsteps in snow, a dewy martini, or the corner of a bathroom where mirror and shower curtain meet, all rendered with a lucidity that extracts something metaphysical from the mundane. After you'd traversed

this austere warren containing fifty paintings and exited on the opposite end, an initial sense of familiarity quickly gave way to disorientation. The sculptures in front of you appeared to be the same as the ones you'd already seen, prompting you to wonder whether you had somehow unknowingly been spit out where you entered. But something was off. The carpet leading up to a crate was black instead of pink and light blue as you remembered it. And hadn't the lamp in that sculpture been more round than oblong? With time it became clear that this second sculpture court was in fact laid out as a mirror image of the first; each sculpture in the first room had a dizygotic twin in the second that had been placed in a bilaterally symmetrical relation to the implied seam bisecting the gallery. In leading viewers to this realization, Blair cleverly conjured an aerial view of the exhibition and a consideration of the space in its entirety.

While the doubling Blair played with was striking, even more significant in seeing so many of his sculptural works put together was the way the individual pieces had been arranged to go beyond the logic of mere juxtaposition. It became evident that Blair has been piecing together a puzzle little by little, slowly building the components of an expanding matrix, on view here for the first time. Of course, the sculptures have always had a material relationship with his installation work from the '90s, his 1991 EPCOT project in particular. (In that work, Blair reinterpreted the utopian-community-as-theme-park to disquieting effect, using music, furniture, light, and carpeting as a stage for noir images of futuristic technologies.) But individually the sculptures have tended to



Opposite page, from left: View of "Dike Blair: Now and Again," 2009, Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC. Dike Blair, *Untitled*, 2008, gouache and pencil on paper, 12 x 9". Dike Blair, *Untitled*, 2008, gouache and pencil on paper, 20 x 15". This page, from left: Dike Blair, *Untitled*, 2001, gouache and pencil on paper, 10 x 7". View of "Dike Blair: Now and Again," 2009, Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC. From left: *Want to Want*, 2006; *Day and Night*, 2008; *Some Of*, 2001; *(IN) out*, 2008.



be things people *view* as opposed to things with which they interact, and have not promoted the bodily awareness for which the earlier environments allowed. The arrangement here, however, prompted a much more physical engagement. Given the frontal viewing position suggested in earlier works that were at least partially anchored to the wall, such as *Some Of*, 2001, those pieces originally

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could have been seen as three-dimensional "paintings" as much as sculpture. When placed in relation to newer free-standing pieces like *Day to Day*, 2008, the sculptures became interdependent circuits, and the individuality of the works gave way to a more holistic experience. Having to move between and around the works defused their tableaulike effect and served to dovetail the forms with their setting. The floor, always a critical element of Blair's sculptural work, became something akin to the space between transistors on a circuit board, or the groomed sand in a kind of techno-Zen rock garden.

Other correspondences revealed themselves as well between what had seemed to be two distinct tracts in

Blair's practice, namely, his painting and his sculpture. In fact, it became evident that he is working toward some type of synthetic unity. Blair's winsome paintings are charged with the same tinge of melancholy and ambivalence about visual pleasure found in their sculptural counterparts. Reading as meditations on overlooked moments of existence, the artist's ultrarealist renderings of everyday subjects present as image the solitude and cool pathos of the more abstract sculptures. For their part, the paintings of rhododendrons and poppies could be seen as analogues to the decorative impulses engaged in the sculpture's design, as in, for example, *IN (out)*, 2008, which playfully faces the De Stijl-esque patterning on the side of a crate with a handsome Noguchi lamp at the end of a carpet runner. Blair's windowpanes, glass doorways, and nocturnal swimming pools participate in the same investigation of luminosity as the sculptures, which invariably use light as a component. The two strands of work are compelling individually, but the affect that occurs between the image and the object produces something even more complicated. It's there that Blair most effectively provokes the philosophical issues involved in experiencing versus seeing, asking viewers to confront the conflict between being present in real space and projecting into the illusionistic space of an image. That the most recent sculptures integrate paintings suggests he is consciously exploiting the potential of this friction.

Blair's work has often been distilled into discussions of thematics. Corporate design, motel interiors, ikebana, and Minimalism are regularly cited references for his objects and the questions they raise about how such elements are employed to manage contemporary consciousness and

desire. Never identified specifically with either the Pictures generation or neo-geo, despite bumping up against both, Blair clearly shares a kinship with those artists' use of mass-cultural matter and their self-reflexive relationship to images and libidinal manipulation. But despite his use of the ubiquitous material of commercial culture and the distancing endemic to his punctilious painting technique, the works on display here revealed a unique consciousness and artistic signature. Indeed, the work's facture is intentionally "detached," and the mediation of consumer society is consistently evoked, but these pieces also unquestionably form the precise poetic vision of one maker.

That vision has been honed over time into something increasingly sophisticated and associative. The references to the seductions of consumer culture, while still available, appear to have taken a backseat to a more phenomenological inquiry. With this exhibition, Blair seemed to be most interested in emphasizing what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the "primacy of perception," and the dual and sometimes conflicting roles played by psychology and philosophy in an art-viewing experience. The ambulatory nature of the show's installation advocated an amplified examination of sensory experience and placed additional emphasis on the relationship between ocular and corporeal engagement with images and objects. Providing perspicacious and urbane reflection on the intricacies of contemporary visual experience and spatial negotiation, the exhibition ultimately suggested that Blair is an artist who is skeptical, or at least agnostic, about the mind-body split. □

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