

DIKE BLAIR

By Frances Richard

REVIEWS

Dike Blair

D'AMELIO TERRAS

Dike Blair's recent show was a mini survey of gouache still lifes made between 1988 and 1997. Presented in D'Amelio Terras's front room by arrangement with Blair's regular gallery, Feature, Inc., these works had not all been shown together before. The artist began last year to incorporate similar hyperrealist paintings on paper into his post-Minimal sculptures, which typically also involve light boxes, power cords, and industrial carpeting. But when not constituting conceptual devices within larger works, Blair's early stand-alone scenes from the life of mundane objects occupy an oddly indeterminate position.

The items depicted—stacked VHS tapes, for example—are immediately familiar, but one feels their creeping obsolescence. Like artifacts under glass, the works' subjects betray their age. At the same time, the sense of touchstone objects having been hermetically walled away behind transparent sheaths express a deeper, totally contemporary preoccupation.

The fifteen small, untitled paintings on view were arranged roughly chronologically. Earlier works depicted studio setups, composites of late twentieth-century consumerism with a faint masculine flavor: books by Philip K. Dick and J. G. Ballard, a Maxell cassette, a Mennen Speed Stick, a Marlboro soft-pack, open cans of Coca-Cola Classic. Blair is genuinely interested in the charge of pleasure and boredom attached to incidentals like ashtrays and comic books. But his real fascination is with the way in which reflective surfaces keep the handmade realist image strangely liquid, simultaneously opposed and indebted to the simulacral, instrumental reproduction. Blair arranged his name-brand totems on sheets of glass painted on their undersides,

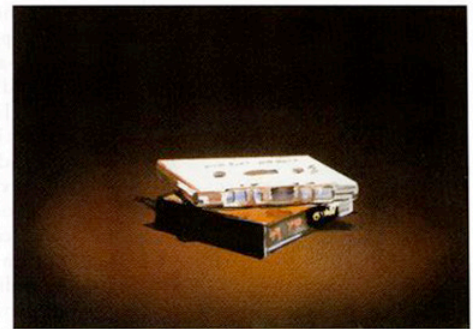
photographed the arrangements, and painted from the photographs. Occasionally, he spray-painted the paper before modeling the image in gouache and pencil. Through such simple technical procedures, the arrays appear to hover on richly hued, smoothly continuous, subtly mirrored grounds. A travel alarm clock (Braun) and a carton of cigarettes (Marlboro) ghost themselves in pools of reflection. Then, of course, the pictures are framed behind glass, adding random reflections of the gallery's interior or viewers' faces.

This literal transparency registers most strongly in the second group of works. These derive not from studio contrivance but from accidental arrangements on restaurant tables—that is, scenes you might glimpse through windows—also photographed and exactly copied. A diner coffee cup and a half-full plastic water glass, a napkin or sugar dispenser thus rest on, and are observed through, seamlessly reflective surfaces. It's a realm of airless totality, in which a flashbulb hot spot on the rim of a saltshaker threatens to swallow all adjacent existence, a bright black hole on a fast-food countertop.

Doubled and insubstantial, a hip dude's bedside or lunchtime detritus thus takes on the otherworldly sheen of a Dutch still life, which itself then collapses into light-boxed ads of the sort one might find in a convention center. Merging memento mori with hedonistic celebration, Blair's too-perfect, psychically invested possessions feel intentionally solipsistic, even quietly insane—the way half-eaten meals and small-town streets in Stephen Shore's photographs feel violent, exhausted, peculiarly American. Blair's more of a softie, though, than Shore. Enthusiasts of chrome and plate glass like Richard Estes and Audrey Flack come to mind, as do object-catheted diarists like Vija Celmins. There are hints of glam melancholia that recall Wolfgang Tillmans, and narrative spellbinding suggestive of Edward Hopper and Norman Rockwell. The fact that some of these Pop lyricists hail from generations well anterior to Blair's, while others follow him, only ratifies the tenacity of the problem that is the contemplative fine-art image of a disposable mass-produced thing. What is realism? Why is it useful? The answer is always a variation on the theme of normalizing, via conventionality, the radical low-grade psychedelia of experience.

Perhaps Blair himself explains it best when, in an interview, his friend Richard Prince asks about the best place to install his work. Blair admits that the paintings are domestic and look good in homes. But his favorite site, he says, would be "a meditation room at an airport."

—Frances Richard



Dike Blair, *Untitled*, 1988, gouache and enamel spray on paper, 9 x 12".