

DIKE BLAIR GOUACHES

by Rob Colvin

This collection of Dike Blair's gouaches, which was released on the occasion of Karma Gallery's recent exhibition *Gouaches 1984 – 2015* and is the first book dedicated solely to the artist's paintings, offers an opportunity to track Blair's variegated interests over the course of thirty productive years, to note what persists and what changes, as well as how what persists changes.

Blair's paintings are derived from photos, snapshots of things or places—rarely people, with the notable exception of a few female nudes in 1992—that catch his attention. None of these photographs are included in the book, nor were they included in the show; since Blair sees his painting as a process of rendering faithfully in paint what the photo depicts—rather than, say, the photo being a point of departure for other artistic aims—their inclusion would only have served as curiosities in verisimilitude.

Since 1984, Blair's imagery has included sunsets bouncing off ocean waves; coffee cups on saucers and alarm clocks as reflected on slick table surfaces; cocktails and ashtrays; textured windows and skies seen through clear glass panes; pools aglow from underwater lights; camera flashes on hotel furnishings; and, in more recent years, fogged shower doors. Nearly all depict natural or artificial light in various projections and reflections or flairs and glares; an obsession with radiance persists throughout his oeuvre. What changes, and changed most markedly around fifteen years ago, is a widening of the artist's focus to make light itself the paintings' content.

Blair cites Martin Johnson Heade as an influence, unlikely as it may seem for an artist whose subjects are so quotidian and self-consciously cool. But one finds the references throughout: elements of Blair's compositional techniques and his preoccupations with light's optical power, for example, are reflected in the sun-soaked clouds across Heade's floral paintings. The hummingbirds and orchids of Heade are now Blair's ashtrays and vodka-tonics, with a table's reflection of artificial light operating as a sky-like expanse. If "Heade was a romantic masquerading as a realist," as a National Gallery of Art exhibition catalogue says of him, Blair is a Luminist masquerading as a downtown hipster.

The original photographs' presence within his paintings (evident in the flash lighting, washed-out whites, oblique cropping, etc.) creates the effect of partitioning the image from the viewer. And this effect is further enhanced by the book's continuation of that process of pictorial representation's transference: a photograph turned into a painting turned into a photograph turned into a print on the book's paper. Had Blair worked from direct observation, the approach to rendering his objects and spaces would likely be more improvisational and idiosyncratic, as is characteristic of traditional plein air painting. But Blair's application of paint masks his hand; much of the paint is sprayed on, giving the work a meticulous and deadpan affect.

By employing the photograph as the source of his paintings, Blair is creating an awareness of the subject's otherness, of something that is witnessed but not participated in. And this detachment highlights the tension between the callings of ascetic withdrawal or a kind of spiritual attunement and the conscious life of sensual indulgences. The light persists in a "heavenly" way, everywhere, on tarmacs or on cocaine, with Blair in the space between. This wavering between these worlds is more clear in the works where the paintings appear more subject-free, where the thing depicted is abstracted from its context: ashtrays on the periphery of an otherwise empty table top; edges of windows that frame the void of the sky; camera flashes that make fleeting impressions on walls next to gilded out-of-view paintings; the reflections of steel towel rods that disappear into condensation-veiled glass, glowing.

In the book's introduction, Jeff Rian suggests a soteriological underpinning to Blair's thoughts, "where restoration travel and therapy guide personal salvation" and "entertainment [is] a kind of bastard sublime." It's a provocative line of thought, sliding Blair's work into a quasi-religious frame. But this approach is blunted, in the end, with the reassurance that "Darwin and Nietzsche made God and metaphysics redundant"—one platitude that is soon followed by another: "Accurate portrayal [in painting], by hand, was usurped by photography." Neither statement is very persuasive, but to each his own. We still see through Blair's eyes that photographs and paintings of them can depict both something and nothing at the same time, and by extension, what life might be in the secular age.