

# ART IN AMERICA

## SEPTEMBER 18, 2009

### DIKE BLAIR WITH STEEL STILLMAN

by Steel Stillman



Dike Blair working on a sculpture outside his studio, 2009.

*Dike Blair is having a good year: in April he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in the visual arts, and this month a major exhibition of his work, "Now and Again," opens at the Weatherspoon Art Museum, in Greensboro, N.C. The show, Blair's first museum solo, is organized by Weatherspoon curator Xandra Eden and is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Eden and writer Gary Indiana. Born in 1952, Blair grew up in western Pennsylvania. He earned an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1977, and also attended the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. Since landing in New York in the mid-'70s, Blair has charted a singular path, making work that ranges from early paintings on glass to installations inspired by Disney World's Epcot Center. In the mid-'80s, Blair began to make modestly scaled gouaches, and has continued the practice ever since. Over the years these paintings have focused on a succession of thematic pairings: travel scenes and still lifes, windows and flowers, and more recently, eyes and nocturnes with parking lots or footsteps in snow.*

*About 15 years ago, Blair's sculptural inclination led to a series of assemblages made out of carpeting, light fixtures, photographs and benchlike elements. Then, about three years ago, the sculptures changed, and the carpet and light pieces gave way to an ongoing series that incorporates painted wooden crates as one of several recurring motifs. The exhibition at the Weatherspoon will gather 51 gouaches and 14 large sculptures dating from 2001 to the present, and will be installed by the artist to highlight his tendency to make work in pairs.*

*In addition to making art, Blair teaches painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. A collection of his writings, *Again: Selected Interviews and Essays*, was published by WhiteWalls in 2007. He lives and works in New York City, where he has been represented by Feature Inc., and in Hortonville, N.Y., where he has a large studio. We met upstate in July and, following lunch with his wife, Marie Abma, a costume designer, began our conversation.*

STEEL STILLMAN Were you interested in art as a child?

DIKE BLAIR I was. My mother is a painter, and I developed some ability to render at an early age, and that became part of my identity. I remember having the hope that I'd get more interested in something else, but it never quite happened. And I remember feeling uneasy about calling myself an artist, not just because it was an unstable profession, but because it seemed pretentious.

SS When did becoming an artist start to seem more possible?

DB I dropped out of college in 1971 after my freshman year, moved to New York, and while living and working there, took a course at the New School. It was a contemporary art history class with Jeanne Siegel that included visits to artists' studios. I remember looking at non-objective painting and feeling the scales fall from my eyes: suddenly I understood the language. Then, in 1974, during a student residency at Skowhegan, I realized that artists were the people with whom I was most comfortable, that the art world was the place in which I was most happy.

SS After some time in Chicago, you returned to New York.

DB In 1976, while I was still a student at the Art Institute, I spent a semester in New York, followed by another semester in the Whitney Program. Very quickly I met a lot of artists and musicians and beat a regular path between Magoo's [the art bar] and CBGB's and my apartment in the East Village. It was an absolutely great time to be in New York. I loved all the music, and was writing songs and sometimes performing on audition nights, which were on Mondays, at CBGB's. They never put me on a bill, but said I was always welcome to play Mondays because as a solo act, I set up quickly. And my friends drank a lot.

SS In the mid-'70s the art schools were addressing language and media culture.

DB Well, in the studio I was making black paintings on paper that were abstract and partially burned. I remember having long arguments with myself that involved whether to juxtapose album covers of bands I liked with those paintings. With the album covers up, the pieces seemed saturated with one kind of meaning; with the album covers down, an entirely different vocabulary kicked in. I went back and forth for a year or so, until finally I decided I wanted the paintings to be on their own. As stupid as it may sound, I think it was then that I declared myself to be something of a formalist; I wasn't going to trade so much in the readymade or in things that were more language-based. Who knows—if the album covers had stayed, maybe I'd have become part of the Pictures generation.

SS You've not been afraid to try new things over the course of your career.

DB From the beginning, I've allowed pieces to follow and react to the ones that preceded them, and along the way there have been occasional full stops, reevaluations and shifts. But since the early '80s, painting gouaches has been an ongoing practice. They began with very small watercolors of sailboats done somewhat ironically, something like Sunday painting. I remember having been startled by Dan Flavin's sailboat drawings, which just had a horizontal line and a couple of dashes; perhaps those planted a seed. The gouaches got me thinking about the possibility of reinventing landscape painting by injecting it with televisual and cinematic effects.

From the '80s to the present, the gouaches have served various functions, especially in relation to my sculptural and installation work. For me, there has always been a "drawing" quality about them; the fact that they take time to make allows me to ponder whatever else I'm working on. At a certain point I realized they could be the equal of that other work, and I began to enjoy colliding what might have seemed disparate practices in one exhibition space.

SS Much of the imagery in your early gouaches seems to come from being on the road.

DB Initially I painted the gouaches either from direct observation or from memory. But as I got more serious about them, I started painting from my photographs. Like most everyone, I find myself visually stimulated when I leave my usual environment, so many of the earlier gouaches are based on images I'd take at vacation destinations, like Las Vegas or Disneyland, or on the roads in between.

SS Did the materials you began to use in the mid-'90s for the carpet and light sculptures also come from those kinds of places and experiences?

DB There is a paradoxical overlap between the paintings and the sculptures: they get at the same information in different ways. I might have a painting of a casino interior and a light sculpture that includes casino carpet. The painting uses deadpan illusionistic rendering, whereas the sculpture is an abstraction, conceived in a constructivist form. One is a near-photorealist representation of a subject that may contain a certain ambience; the other is a concrete manifestation that, among other things, tries to get at a similar ambience.

I tend to work in binaries, and they show up not just between one practice and another, but within each of my practices. It always seems to me that if you make a decision to do one thing that the opposite decision makes just as much sense. There's always a flip side. I often work on sculptures in tandem—a tendency that the installation at the Weatherspoon will highlight. As I'm developing a piece, I'll make a decision to go one way, fully aware that I could have gone the other; the second sculpture is about what happens on that other road.

SS How will viewers encounter these pairs at the Weatherspoon?

DB I've divided the main exhibition hall, which is long and narrow, into thirds, with two large, nearly square sculpture courts at either end. In the middle third, separating the sculptures, will be a series of three painting galleries. My idea is that viewers will travel from one sculpture court, go through the paintings rooms and into the second sculpture court, where they will discover that a number of the sculptures are siblings of works in the other court, and that the layouts of the two spaces are, to some degree, reflections of one another.

SS When you were working on the carpet and light sculptures, all of which include photographs, were your snapshots sources for the sculptures?

DB Some were prompted by an image, some were prompted by a particular material, and others were based on a formal composition. For instance, *not one leaf remains the way it was* (1998) started with a photograph of cherry blossoms. But for another work, *spring snow melts easily* (1999), I began with a marbled linoleum mat that reminded me of a childhood friend's kitchen in western Pennsylvania, and the way it felt and looked when we'd come in from dirty snow and track a slushy mess across that floor. The sculpture was built from that memory, and the abstract photographic image it includes is one that I found in my files.

SS The carpet and light sculptures can feel like fragments of rooms; or like fragments of non-places, those transitional spaces of contemporary life. Strangely they feel already inhabited. The person who rolled up the carpet has just stepped out, leaving the lights on.

DB I think that's a good read. They certainly have aspects of interior design, but one might also enter them as a landscape or as a 3-D painting. They were always intended to be very open despite how specific I was in their making. My interest was in seducing, not controlling. My aim was to create sensoriums and possibly to encourage contemplation of formal flip-flops while I indulged my decorative tendencies.

SS The photographs you include in the carpet and light pieces seem enigmatic, like clues to be interpreted.

DB The photos are a possible key, and people look at them right away because we're all so well trained to search for meaning in photographs. Often they're very abstract in order for the key not to be too obvious.

SS By contrast, for all their photographlike illusionism, your gouaches are so evidently not photographs. Looking at them, one becomes absorbed in the grain of their making.

DB The invested labor in the paintings slows down how the image gets read. Obviously a great deal of the pleasure in looking at paintings comes from decoding the sequencing of their making. Much of my pleasure in painting them is simply figuring out how to do it, how to get gouache to look like

something. Perhaps there is some pathos embedded in the paintings, some residue of my repeated efforts to approach a photograph without ever getting there.

SS The windows in some of your most beautiful gouaches are impossible to see through. Frosting, or textures, or raindrops thwart our gaze. The subject of these is the surface itself, its impenetrability, along with the radiance of glowing light beyond.

DB I'm something of a luminist and have always been fascinated by glass. I think there's a certain romanticism about the glow, a transcendental thing. Perhaps there's some sweet sadness about looking at light through semiopaque glass. SS Starting around 2001 it seems you pared down the subjects of your sculpture and painting, and you mostly worked with images of windows and flowers. What led to these nested pairs of juxtapositions?

DB Well, the experiment got more specific. I was always interested in an interchange or scrambling of formal qualities between painting, photography and sculpture; the paintings are photographic and the sculptures are painterly but include photographs. The juxtaposition of subjects relates back to that notion of flip sides. The binary between the flower and the window gouaches is between fullness and emptiness, nature and architecture, outside and inside; one is centered, the other is edge-related, and so on.

These binaries operate like questions: you might wonder, in an exhibition, why is this flower painting hanging next to that window painting; and both the question and the answer occupy the space in between. And the same kind of question occurs between the paintings and the sculptures: Why does the guy who makes this kind of painting make that kind of sculpture? It may sound evasive, and maybe it is evasive, but for me there is some mystery and meaning in the reconciliation of these approaches and images; and it happens in that funny in-between space.

SS What led you to the packing crate sculptures?

DB I'd reached a point with the carpet and light pieces where they just felt finished, complete. And there were practical issues as well; the carpet and light sculptures were relatively pristine and required careful storage and handling to protect them from damage. So the crate pieces began to form in my mind as a solution to storage and damage.

The crate sculptures are more unitary than the carpet and light works—they are less dispersed or environmental. In terms of scale, they relate more closely to the body, and tend to be more suggestive of particular entities or things. One big difference is that after years of segregating painting and sculpture, I've now brought them together by including framed gouaches in the crate pieces. And because many of the gouaches are of women's eyes, the sculptures have become somewhat anthropomorphic.

SS The crate sculptures seem nomadic, suggestive of bodies or domestic arrangements that can be relocated on a moment's notice.

DB Certainly the packing crate aspect is one's first impression. But just as in the carpet and light sculptures, where specific materials and objects became subsumed in a more comprehensive ambience, I'd like you to get over that first impression fairly quickly and begin to see them more abstractly.

SS What inspired you to include the Noguchi lamps?

DB I used them for (IN) in and (IN) out (both 2008). Originally I planned to design lights of my own, but my studies and models weren't very good. I'm a huge Noguchi fan and was happy to pay homage to him; I also love the way they pack so easily into thin boxes, which can be stored in the crates. My designs weren't nearly so elegant.

SS Why do you pair the crate sculptures with the nocturnal gouaches of parking lots and footsteps in the snow?

DB For me, the binary that mirrored the windows and flowers was parking lots and women's eyes. I'm still feeling a little inarticulate about why that relationship seems to work, except to say that it feels completely right. The pairing of sculpture and painting almost always works best when juxtaposing work made over the same time span. Of course now, the sculpture physically includes the painting.

SS It's curious that you've paired these newer, more domestic-seeming sculptures with images of being out on the dark, lonely road. Somehow I think of Godard.

DB Or David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. The painted line on pavement must be the most ubiquitous landscape painting in the world. I wasn't thinking of Ruscha, but now his parking lots come to mind.

SS One difference between your work and his is telling: your images depict the camera's flash or the sweep of headlights, two very particular kinds of illumination that make the viewer instantly aware of the person behind the light.

DB I've always been aware of point of view. I think a lot about where I'm looking from, especially in the paintings. When asked why I paint the things I do, especially the still lifes, invariably the answer is that these are the things within the reach of my arm: a drink, a cigarette pack, a paperback. And I've painted them from my own tabletop perspective.

SS Do you think of these images—or of your work more broadly—as diaristic?

DB I do. There is something of a self-portrait that emerges in linking together a series of subjects and themes. It's fictionalized, of course, and some of the earlier work indicates I'm some sort of noirish guy, and that's a little embarrassing. Probably more interesting is the stuff that isn't premeditated but gets revealed to me after the fact. For example, I used to wear extremely thick glasses—some portion of my childhood was taken up with eye exercises—so I'm sure there is a connection between those eyeglasses and the paintings of eyes and my fascination with windows. It's not impossible to think that I'm a visual artist simply because of all the time I spent just trying to make my eyes perform, to see correctly.

SS Do you think of your artwork as bringing order to the random profusion of everyday life?

DB I'm not so sure I want to order the everyday as much as I want to glorify it on the one hand and escape it on the other. Paying close attention to anything—and painting is one way of doing that—makes it attractive and interesting. One of the reasons I sometimes paint cocktails is because I love them; they take me away, and I'm not above cheap transcendence. I have a desire for a kind of perfect emptiness even though that's unattainable, at least until I croak.