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THE COLOR IN THE PETAL: DIKE BLAIR

by Chris Sharp



CHRIS SHARP considers why and how the work of the New York-based artist DIKE BLAIR feels especially relevant now. Is it the small certainties the work offers in such an unstable time, or more about the uncertainties generated by our social-media-saturated paradigm?

Why is Dike Blair—a former Feature Inc. artist active in the New York art scene since the early 1980s—suddenly coming into focus? Of the artist's last show in New York, Peter Schjeldahl wrote, "Blair has been painting coolly beautiful little still-lives of ordinary things in ordinary places for so long that, by now, they seem almost to paint themselves, for their own enjoyment. But the work nevertheless hits a contemporary nerve. Why does this work feel, at this moment—if not so urgent, then maybe so comforting yet unsettling? (Is it okay to be comforted? Do we have the right? Well, if we accept the immortal words of César A. Cruz, "Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable," It's pretty safe to say that we are all thoroughly disturbed at this point and could use a little comforting, a little solace, a little sugar in our bowl).

Indeed, in light of his recent outing at Karma in New York and his bright inclusion in Helen Molesworth's *One Day at a Time: Manny Farber and Termite Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Blair and his conspicuous visibility seem to raise more questions than answers. And yet, paradoxically perhaps, the conspicuousness of this work could be attributed less to its interrogative nature and more to its potential to offer certainties—some of the few certainties of our moment. When the big picture is an anguishing maelstrom of complete and total uncertainty, Blair's humble, virtuosic depictions of coffee cups, martinis, windowpanes, and sinks are liable to come off as dependably refreshing affirmations of the everyday. While we cannot be sure about the fate of modern democracy, our ecologically beleaguered planet, or even facts and science, those quaint luxuries of yesteryear, we can be sure of the smallest details of life. When the daily news inspires bewilderment, horror, and morbid reflections, the smallest quotidian details become almost precious, elegiac, the gilded stuff of a memento mori.

This might go a long way toward explaining Blair's newfound traction, but I believe there's yet more at stake. On the one hand, the work is as timeless as Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, and on the other it is topical, insofar as it reflects how we see and interact with the world technologically. Its alleged timelessness, as far as I'm concerned, is very much on the order of William Carlos Williams's pithy modernist masterpiece "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923):

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Let's pause and revel at length in the heartbreaking perfection, absurdity, and pathos of this poem (perhaps you should even stop reading here; let that poem be the last thing you read today). Glossing it, like all great art, strikes me as nothing short of petty and criminal. In lieu of a gloss, I offer the work of Dike Blair. Or another few lines, this time excerpted from James Schuyler's celebrated "Morning of the Poem" (1980):

So many lousy poets
So few good ones
What's the problem?
No innate love of
Words, no sense of
How things are said
Is in the words, how
The words are themselves
The thing said: love,
Mistake, promise, auto
Crack-up, color, petal,
The color in the petal,
Is merely light
And that's refraction:
A word, that's the poem.

Is that a valid gloss on Williams? I believe it is. I also believe it is a no less valid gloss on Blair. "Color, petal / The color in the petal / Is merely light" speaks directly and unequivocally to the quotidian materiality of what Blair portrays. Blair's light, however, is not natural; it is often the superficial light of the camera. These paintings are so contemporary thanks to their almost incidental digital mediation.

When I say "incidental;" I mean in the sense that they are inspired by very casual snapshots, arguably of little or no importance. Until the advent of digital photography, much of what Blair portrays, and how he portrays it (that is, with cursory compositional framing), would not have even been worthy of a photograph. It became worth photographing only when photographs themselves became almost completely worthless. This relative liquidation of value is not without a certain pathos, which is only heightened by the existence of Instagram. Nothing reinforces the ubiquity, incidentality (yes, neologism), and potential poverty of the photograph like Instagram. Indissociable from a logic of affirmation—a post attains value proportionate to how many "likes" it receives—Instagram generates and feeds off a culture of existential incidentality, or epiphenomena. No longer really interested in Henri Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment," Instagram revolves around everything that revolves around or is incidental to the main event (pictures of food, drinks, the weather, the view, palm trees, friends who were there).

Indeed, departing from Roland Barthes's assertion of "this happened," Instagram has largely inaugurated a photographic ontology of "I was here." It is an affirmation that depends, oddly enough, on affirmation-on being seen, liked, and therefore affirmed. As such, it is actually less an affirmation than a question. Was I here? Yes, you were. This is an entirely different kind of pathos from "this happened," one that would seem to be without issue (catharsis). But I believe that Blair's paintings offer an issue. Their issue is tantamount to that offered by Edward Hopper's depiction of the alienation and loneliness of the industrialized world. To put it in terms of Hopper's *Automat* (1927): instead of the woman staring at her coffee cup, we have the coffee cup itself (actually, in the classical postmodern version, we would have the woman staring at the Instagram post of the coffee cup in front of the coffee cup). Which itself would seem to be an affirmation, some kind of symbolic surrogate of the self, a metonym, which in the end becomes perhaps less an affirmation than a tin quest for affirmation, and as such a testimony of certain degree of absence, or the non-present self.

I am aware that this piece starts somewhere; and ends in an entirely different place, all but completely contradicting itself (affirmation versus interrogation/existential doubt). But I am not so sure that these contradictions can't coexist. What is more, I sincerely believe that in doing so, they actually speak to the dynamism of Dike Blair's deceptively simple practice, drawing out its breadth and complexity.