

DIKE BLAIR IN CONVERSATION WITH HUDSON KARMA, NEW YORK, 2018.

Interview with Hudson of Feature Inc.

Dike Blair: What exhibitions are you looking forward to?

Hudson: "Recent Autodidacts." "Oh don't be an asshole, silly; it's just a circle." "The East Village and the YBA" Some women artists of the last 25 years, however not those who have been most celebrated, with essays and interviews which focus on differences between male and female art making and art. An exhibition of noted artists' works considered to be failures or atypical. And two small, amusing exhibitions: Richard Prince re-photographs and Alex Katz paintings 1979 – 1988, as well, paired abstractions by Gerhard Richter and Howard Hodgkin. All up in that Imaginary Museum in my mind.

DB: What do you think about what museums are doing these days?

H: They need to flee from hipness and the current notion of art as fun, and ditto for artists, galleries, and collectors. Museums are the big news these days, as their actions and changes deeply shape the art world. There should be a critical examination of such things as their reorientation toward mass entertainment and the scale of huge, and the expanding power of their education departments and their pervasive audio tours, which seem to churn out like-minded fact followers rather than observant eyes. Whatever happened to the museum as a place of study, aesthetics, and the subjective, or the quiet time wandering about a museum deep in thought or ecstatic with emotion? Perhaps museums should institute one silent day weekly. Also, why are museums collecting works by artists who have had fewer than three or four one-person exhibitions? And finally, curatorial positions should be created for those with training outside academia.

DB: Speaking of academia, do you have any advice for the art student?

H: Hand in hand with the museum issue is the art school: the making of professional artists who are busy with positioning themselves in careers. These years, it's probably better to develop out of art school. It's quite odd now that art-school graduates expect immediate affiliation with a gallery, believing they are already artists of some development. Generally, it requires five or so post-graduation years to disengage from the teacher/school influences and create one's own effort. At this point I've stopped attending graduate and undergraduate art-school exhibitions as a way to remain in touch with younger artists and art. I'm looking outside the box.

DB: It seems we could all use some of that.

H: Exactly. There are many ways to get outside the current commodification of art. For collectors, I'd say, turn your back on the obvious, and favor collecting art as a passion, a curiosity, or for discovery. I even think that collecting art as decoration seems more interesting than as investment. Investment

collecting is seriously changing art in a bad way. Critics could be less agenda-oriented, and artists more severe with their editing and more honest with their selection of style and subject matter. Galleries should avoid art made for easy consumption. We should all pay less attention to the salesmanship and showmanship of auctions and fairs, and, of course, be more aware of the not new or hot. And lastly, stop running around trying to see everything everywhere, and spend more time with the richness that is close to home.

DB: It's always struck me that you show work that runs somewhat counter to what's on view in other commercial galleries. Is this conscious, and if so, can you describe how you bounce off the status quo?

H: The exhibitions at Feature are not intentionally organized to counter something. They develop out of what I am most attracted to, and my decisions are far more intuitive than intellectual. On some level I see most of Feature's exhibitions as participating in the current trends, although from a personal or oblique perspective. Generally, I prefer art that is complex and multi-focused. Such work is, and probably always has been, out there, yet because it isn't an easy read, or easy to explain, it rarely functions in the market in a very big way.

I once overheard two critics chatting about an artist, and the more noted critic mentioned that he loved the work being discussed, yet he would not write about it, as he found it too difficult to explain! To me, that seems all the more reason to write about it, or in my case, to exhibit the work.

DB: Usually your selections and exhibition groupings anticipate or make more concrete certain concepts that artists are reaching for. Does the sense of trend interest you at all?

H: It is the artists who lead the way. Watch what they are doing and you will see what is happening. Trends do intrigue me, yet because of my hands-on approach, I usually assimilate or reject trends quite some time before they become pervasive. These years trends are so swiftly advertised and assimilated that it seems obvious to stick to one's own guns. For me, a glut of anything diminishes its power, and when that occurs, the desire for something else itches. Different people reach their saturation point at different times. Also, much depends on what understanding—art hysterical, social, and other—one brings to the evaluation. And sometimes over-saturation, the stay-and-play syndrome, may lead to something most unexpected and interesting. The process is not cut-and-dried. If one has a gallery committed to trends and sales, then surely following the cresting trend is most important. Should one have a personal gallery, one based on the owner or director's vision and ideals, or even a specific commitment to art and artists, then one follows some thread or intuition regarding the matter of when to grasp and when to let go.

DB: So Feature is a personal gallery, and your selections are primarily intuitive. Do you ever fear that your intuition could be reactionary?

H: Definitely. For example, my current moratorium on photography, especially art-directed snapshot-quality images of low life, especially when class, gender, and sexuality are pictured. And I very much avoid the current notion of the largest possible photographs, particularly when laminated to Plexiglas. I remember traveling through the MoMA's Gursky exhibition thinking that this guy makes great postcard images and that many of them actually would be more significant at that scale and in that form. Yet if an artist presented me with photographs, or even large photographs laminated to Plexiglas, that riveted my attention, my current position would go down the drain. Even when deep in a saturated trend, there is always room for something extraordinary and more defining.

While I do make intuitive decisions regarding my selection of artists, remember that I cart around

undergraduate and graduate art training, a MFA in painting, and ten years of performing as a dancer and performance artist, and I have viewed thousands of studios and slide packets. I have 20 years of visiting at least 50 or so galleries per month in the capacity of a gallery owner, and my ten years prior to Feature were spent as an administrator and curator in the not-for-profit sector.

I love what art does and we grok it in our hearts and minds. Aesthetic and socio-political decisions are more interesting to me than business decisions.

DB: In the early '80s you were the director of Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago. How did you come to that? How did that shape your philosophy?

H: The director of the gallery headhunted me to develop a performance, live events, film, video, and music program. At the time, late '70s early '80s, I was president of C.A.G.E [Cincinnati Artists' Group Effort]. That organization's curatorial and administrative approach at the time is fixed in my mind as an extraordinary model for the administration of not-for-profit, artist-oriented arts organizations—very socially unencumbered, free, direct, accessible, and responsive.

Also at that time, I had begun my administrative involvement with NAAO, the National Association of Artists Organizations, which provided me with a national overview of artists' organizations and their programs.

The '70s and '80s not-for-profit sector partially developed out of the closed system of the existing commercial galleries and its lack of reaction to the new, expanding artist communities. That helped create the format whereby an organization generally worked with an artist once, or perhaps a few times over many years. After shuffling too many artists through my programs, I realized that a lessening in my standards was endemic to the constant search for the new. (One can see how this format could encourage the development of art as entertainment.) The high turnover also made it difficult to foster the development of certain ideas or aesthetics, which seemed more important to me than a diverse, constantly changing program. So I became interested in working with fewer artists over a longer period of time, and the commercial gallery format seemed a way to economically support my thoughts.

DB: So I imagine that's why Feature Inc. came about? When was that?

H: Feature opened on April Fools' Day in 1984, with an exhibition of Richard Prince rephotographs. The gallery name was chosen as a way to deflect a personality from the gallery, an attempt to let the exhibitions be the focus. And the structure of having several galleries simultaneously show differing exhibitions was my move against stardom and a push for pluralism and multiplicity.

DB: Your reputation is as an artist-friendly gallery. Your practice of looking at artists' slides and responding with a written note is legendary. How, when, and why did you start doing this?

H: Sometimes those notes, which I've written since day one, cause a backlash. The most oppressive response yet, and it truly shook me, questioning my making any comment at all, was "So who the fuck do you think you are—God?"

Artists put their ego, and then some, on the line when they solicit a gallery for representation. It's an embarrassing if not demeaning process, and it's even worse if the gallery being approached is one of the artist's favorites. My concern has been to look at the work in terms of my interests and its possibility for exhibition at Feature, and ever so briefly and candidly respond to its form and content, execution, and its potential to evolve. With some frequency I request an update in a year or so. One artist presented me with work for nine years and each year it was closer and more ready, and then finally—shit happens. Now he is affiliated with Feature and having a visible success.

DB: How do the sheer number and intensity of these exchanges not overwhelm you?

H: The lack of a wall between my office and the gallery's exhibition space is a joy but also a problem that I've not been able to resolve. So far my best solution has been to partially obstruct the entrance to the office area with a bookcase. The back of the bookcase, which faces the exhibition space, is an inoperable door. This hints at privacy while allowing for easy access to the office and the storage space behind the office. Yet it hasn't at all worked well in creating much privacy. Visitors are frequently interrupting my work with mundane questions, or unaffiliated artists' needs drive them to introduce themselves, something I find annoying as I am almost always quite obviously working. If I were leisurely sitting around, all that would be quite different. The artists who intrude don't seem to ask themselves why I would care to meet them while knowing nothing of their work. I usually attempt to disarm the intensity of the situation with a bit of friendliness and an off-the-cuff remark.

While I am at Feature I dive into the thick of things. By the end of the day I require alone time. Rarely do I socialize in the evenings following the closing of the gallery, and when I am home I maintain near silence until I return to Feature the following day. No newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, phone, video—however, sometimes music, and always cooking delicious meals.

DB: Do you ever consider altering or suspending your slide viewing practice?

H: No, reviewing slides is important to me. I do learn many things about art and artists from the experience. And I just could not send back a package without some kind of acknowledgement, as that seems too cold, too corporate. This current, impersonal corporate model, with the invisibility of gallery staff other than a receptionist, which continues to dominate our field, is not for me. Mom-and-Pop operations charm me as a form, but that doesn't mean that I do not appreciate organization and exactness.

DB: Speaking of modest operations, I think that the artists you work with, almost across the board, make or fabricate their own stuff. Does that sound correct? Is this simply a matter of your taste or is there a politic involved, or both?

H: That's correct, but it developed over time and without deliberation. My experience has been that most artists' work cannot withstand out-of-house production. Essential things, the things that let an object live, that make it art, become lost. There are few instances when the artist's intent is so transparent to the produced objects that out-of-house production works. Usually a sense of hand allows the eye and mind to more readily linger and engage in the object and its resonance. The viewer is also vaguely reminded that a person is involved. Most outsourced production results in more attention to the surface; the object becomes a shell, and the read of that shell or surface is fast. I am more interested in the idea of being arrested by the object. The qualities brought about by the out-of-house production most often re-represent and deflate both content and meaning. Yet, again, there is room for everything, and certainly inherent to art making is an attitude that one may successfully do what was not possible before. That is a laudable and worthy attitude, one that contemporary art currently depends on.

DB: Do you think Chelsea gallery architecture has impacted the art?

H: Well, I wouldn't exactly call it architecture.

Again, in scale, administrative layout, and personality—the suits—we see business at work, the corporate model, which I don't find rewarding or wish to encourage. Distantly related, and interesting to me, is the manner in which the galleries, perhaps due to the overabundance of concrete floors, seem to have become an extension of the sidewalk, almost as if there were no door. And so we have a further

breakdown of public and private. Casual strollers, rollerbladers, carriage pushers, cell phone talkers, shoppers, lunchers, et al. move in and out of the galleries, traveling at a near consistent speed. While the democracy of that seems a good thing, somehow the art and the possibility for involvement with art suffer. With that type of situation, how may one have much of an internal experience, though there is more and more art that doesn't want or need that manner of experience? Generally, exhibitions at Feature are about interior experiences, and for some time, to encourage that sensibility, I've been contemplating installing parquet floors in the gallery. There would be an anteroom for shoes, bags, carriages, packages, etc., felt slippers for all, and relative quietness, of course, and only five or six people would be allowed in the gallery at a time. All that is scary, as it reeks of the genteel privacy against which so many have rebelled, myself included. Yet it seems right for the time, especially as it is not the dominant mode.

DB: Feature really caught my attention in the early '90s, when you showed at least some erotic art. This was a time when political correctness had fused with identity art, but you allowed for pleasure. Can you describe what you were responding to and creating at that time?

H: Political correctness is a bad thing. It's shortsighted and encourages repression and polar reaction, rather like Shakespeare's lady: she doth protest too much. For me, art is about the mind, and the mind is an arena in which anything goes. One learns there to distinguish between the personal and the public. Morals develop as one moves through all the possibilities. Discernment is a must.

I am proud of having presented late-'80s and early '90s exhibitions of rather extreme sexual work, and especially the numerous exhibitions of the drawings of Tom of Finland. He remains a master draftsman and a major influence on so many minds and bodies and artists. Inserting his work into the discussion put the hidden agenda of the repressive politically correct, which then glutted the galleries, on the table. It's sad that Tom of Finland drawings should remain outside of art. Even to this day the dominant art worlds, especially the American versions, remain so afraid of the representation of sexuality.

During one Tom of Finland exhibition, when Feature was on Broome Street, a busload of people visited the gallery next door and a few wandered into Feature. A woman, say in her sixties, came in, carefully looked around, left, and soon returned with a male/female couple of a similar age. They were in the gallery for quite some time. On their way out, as they passed by the office, they were quietly speaking among themselves, and the woman from the couple mentioned that she thought she had just seen pornography, and the other woman replied, "Yes, but did you see the way they were drawn?" Overhearing that left me floating.

DB: Many consider your spaces eccentric.

H: Part of that, I think, comes from the fact that Feature presents multiple exhibitions simultaneously. The current Feature uses its tiny mezzanine space as a discrete exhibition area, and we have an inoperable door space on West Twentieth Street known as "The Wrong Gallery." There are so many interesting artists whose work should be seen and injected into our art discussions and art markets that no space should be left unused. It is the responsibility of the galleries to challenge and broaden the market, not to acquiesce to it. One goes to art for expansion, striving, and perhaps for some experience of an Other. I'm rather opposed to art being made or presented to further satisfy more of the same.

Recently I heard a rumor that a collective of the larger contemporary art museums was considering commissioning artists to create large works, which would then tour all their spaces. You can see the dollars and careers at work luring the artists to produce works that fit within the content restrictions and scale opportunities of the museums. Given that so much is at stake, you can be assured that such a program will provide us with yet more products of fine entertainment—or is it fine products of entertainment? Art is such a fragile thing, so easily perverted, and in the long term, commissioned

works are generally lesser works.

But to get back to the spaces: I believe your observation comments on the lack of experience we have with making or appreciating personal spaces, or spaces or buildings that are designed for a more particular system or idea. This is again what I see as a reflection of the dominance of sameness, the corporate mentality. All of Feature's exhibition spaces have been quite normal, if not conservative: floors, walls, ceiling, and lighting in the usual places and of typical materials. The furnishings however, are more personal and fanciful. I enjoy that in my office and my home. I am always finding more effective and interesting ways to enjoy space and furniture, and if I had my way and the time, I'd continually be renovating my home and gallery.

DB: I've never really known your spiritual beliefs, but I think you meditate, and you might be Buddhist? And I've always sensed that you're attracted to an art of the mind and to alternate realities. What are your thoughts about reality?

H: I don't follow any specific ideology or religious belief, and I'm not a Buddhist, although I wish I had a better understanding of Buddhism. And while I have strong spiritual interests, I also keep at least one foot in the carnal garage. For about thirty years I have happily engaged in a form of contemporary, secular meditation, one that requires neither a master/student relationship nor any need to be part of a community, yet I also wander alertly around, sampling a bit from here and there. I consider making and appreciating art a spiritual endeavor. It is generally about bringing life to some otherwise inert thing.

As for the use of the mind, well, I don't much see how not to use it when engaging with art. Not that it is the only cognitive factor involved. Internal dialogue deeply interests me.

The notion of alternate realities goes hand in hand with that. It seems to me that the world is faceted into and/or out of many realities. An examination of one's cross-cultural experiences or drug experiences sophomorically begins to expose such things, and the power of the belief in a single reality then begins to fall away. Yet I am too scientifically uninformed and experientially limited to venture any evaluation of the fullness of life. My lack of comprehension of the probable pebble of what we/I believe to be the human experience is humbling. Yet I do rather like keeping it all vague-ish, ever changing, and adaptable.

DB: In closing, and very generally, what has your experience as a gallerist taught you?

H: One of the great things about aging and having the gallery for twenty years is that the cycles by which things come and go and return yet again become humorously obvious. The notion of the new appears in a more realistic perspective than we are generally willing to acknowledge, one involved with novelty, fashion, and style. As a result, art with deeper levels of personal meaningfulness have become increasingly important. In terms of artists, those with sincere, personal investigations hold greater magnitude, regardless of much else. It's all very freeing to be rid of this new thing, and as the urgency for mapping or recording this immediate moment decreases, a much larger world is open to appreciation.

DB: And if you weren't a gallerist, what might you be doing?

H: Chef for a tiny restaurant. Gardener. Sanskrit scholar.