

# KENNEDY MAGAZINE

## ISSUE 8

### DIKE BLAIR

by Paige Silveria

On a typically arctic spring day in New York, I pushed my way through the combatting winds to join artist Dike Blair in his Chelsea-based studio. We'd met years ago at an exhibition, featuring a large selection of his gouaches, that Karma presented in their previous space on Great Jones. He had given a brief talk and then answered questions from a rather sizable audience, which was neatly lined up in rows of white, wooden folding chairs. After the Q&A, I'd shyly requested a moment to capture his portrait for a magazine I was freelancing for. I remember noticing that the assuming air and intensity that artists of his stature often emit felt oddly absent- there was just a pleasant and calm curiosity about him as he happily obliged my request. Years later, the open friendliness was still there, though my timidity was increased by the pressure of taking up an hour of his time rather than a mere moment. We discussed his fairly recent admittance of oil painting into his daily schedule, which is predominantly comprised with creating artwork, the taking up of the studio we were in for said paintings, as he prefers to keep each practice separate, and of some entertaining forays into other art practices from years ago.

#### HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN THIS SPACE FOR?

Eight or nine months. I'm subletting from an artist who has another studio down the hall. I just started oil painting a little while ago and wanted to keep the chemistry out of my apartment, where I work on my gouaches.

#### AND YOU HAVE A SPACE UPSTATE FOR YOUR SCULPTURES AS WELL?

Yeah. I need to get up there and do that. I've changed my idea of how I want to approach the sculptures, and that involves making things for specific situations. I have mixed feelings about that. I did a show at the Secession and made three large-for-me-sculptures there. I designed them here and they started the fabrication there, and then I went for a week before the exhibition to make final decisions and paint them. I had no idea if it would work out or not. But it did. So that was a new way of working for me. One of the things that I've always liked about doing the sculpture is that I make decisions in the process of making them, unlike with the paintings, where I establish an image. I just have to sit and produce it. Of course, there are painterly decisions to be made in that process, but those are not so much formal or structural. I do have some ambivalence about orienting the sculpture toward more pre-design and fabrication, as I'd lose some of that in-the-moment decision making.

## WOULD THAT WAY OF WORKING BE MORE EXCITING?

Perhaps more stressful. If I fabricate something for a certain situation, then I get there and realize it's not working, there's not a lot I can do. When I'm making something solely in the studio, I can have a plan, make something, and look at it. If it's terrible, I can change it to what I want it to be. That's a more familiar process to me than, say, a more architectural approach.

## SO YOU DON'T LIKE THE VARIABLES - HAVING TO PROBLEM SOLVE ON THE SPOT.

Well my point is that one can't solve many problems on the spot if the object is already constructed, and days away from opening. Unlike many artists I know, I don't like making things under pressure, including making things with a specific exhibition in mind.

## WHY DO YOU KEEP EVERY PRACTICE SEPARATE?

They sort of developed separately. With the oil painting, I didn't want to live with fumes and messiness in my home studio, and I wouldn't have had room for the gouache. My friend Wayne Gonzales had some space he wanted to rent, so boom. I'd love a large studio in the city in which I could do everything, but I shy from the money and time and obligation that would involve.

## HOW'S THE OIL PAINTING GOING?

Good. I really enjoy it. My dealer, Brendan Dugan of Karma, suggested I try it, but I was reticent at first. I was resisting because I was afraid; I didn't want to make bad stuff. Then I thought, that's not really a smart way to approach art and life, just try it. Some of Brendan's interest was financial, naturally. But he also wanted to challenge me and see what it would look like. So I'm grateful he was a little persistent and I enjoyed it from the get-go. Oil opened up a different kind of materiality for me. They're the same subjects as the gouaches but they're meatier. There are so many different techniques and chemistries to learn. I have elements of surface and materiality not available for my gouaches, which have a uniform surface. And just the palette and knife, the mashing of the colors together, is a lot more sensuous - it's gooey, whereas gouache is dry.

## YOU HAVEN'T MUCH PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH OIL PAINTING?

In some older, multimedia work, I did small oil painting on a much larger plane. But I felt like I was faking it. In college, I made only a couple on canvas. So now I'm teaching myself how to do something I might have learned in my school years.

## DID IT COME EASILY?

It came more easily than I had imagined. I thought I was in for six months, at the very least of stuff that I could never let out of the studio. But the first batch ended up being okay and interesting, at least to me. Karma liked them enough to show the very first ones, and that encouraged me.

## YOU PAINT MOST DAYS?

Yeah, most days, but sometimes life gets in the way. Tomorrow I'm going to visit my mother. She lives in western Massachusetts. She's 95.

## YOU'RE FROM PENNSYLVANIA AND YOU WENT TO SCHOOL FOR ART?

I went to a liberal arts university, the University of Colorado, and I ended up majoring in art there. My mother is a painter, so I had exposure to modern and contemporary art from an early age. We lived in the Rust Belt but my parents had a MoMA membership, so we'd have things like a Matisse catalogue on the coffee table - luxuries that many other artists I know didn't have growing up. However, I hear a story about an artist's epiphany at seeing their first painting at age 18 or something, and I'm a little envious.

## WHEN YOU WENT TO SCHOOL, DID YOU HAVE AN IDEA OF WHAT YOU WANTED TO FOCUS ON?

I drew from a very early age. I made cartoon t-shirts for my peers and sold them. When you're 12 or 13 years old and have some rendering ability, with the encouragement of your classmates, you can identify as an artist. The slippery slope starts there. When I went to college, I was hoping to stumble upon something other than art that would really excite me - maybe I'd become a scientist. Then I found out that I didn't have the discipline or the brains to do something like that, so I defaulted to art. My reasons for making art have certainly changed over time. When young I'd wonder, What is art? Could I make it? Would it be meaningful or any good if I did? How cool would it be to be a famous artist? So I tried all sorts of things. You imitate before coming close to making something that might be art.

## TELL ME ABOUT THIS FASHION SHOW I HEAR YOU DID IN SCHOOL.

How did you hear about that! That was 1974 in Boulder, Colorado. It was certainly student work, and something of an art department social experiment. I asked my peers to model these clothes I'd made out of paint and rubber and other things for a fashion show at a local nightclub. My painting professor, Jerry Kunkel, was the MC. It was fun. The pieces themselves were quasi-funky - it'd be an embarrassment to have them on this table now. There was a paint-and-human-hair bikini. I have some pictures on my computer I can show you.

## WHAT WAS BOULDER LIKE BACK THEN?

It was very hippie. It still had some remnants of Western culture, cowboy culture, but that was fading fast. IBM had just started up there, I think. I haven't been back in a long time and I know it's vastly different now. Back then there was still a lot of geographic separation from Denver. Now I think it's like an affluent suburb.

## WHY COLORADO?

I applied to a number of schools and that's the only place I got in. I don't know about you, but when I reflect on choosing where to go to school - it's like God, what was I thinking?

## AND WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO NEW YORK?

After my freshman year of college, I dropped out and ended up living here, partly because of a girlfriend. I'd visited the city quite a few times, with my parents and later on my own, and always felt at home here. I took a course at the New School with the art historian and writer Jeanne Siegel, and there was this moment when I realized, sort of understand this stuff and it's kind of sexy-I like this world. So I went back to school where I could have a sheltered place to try and see what I could make. I was 22 or 23 and I applied and got into the Skowhegan School in Maine. It was a great place. I was with 60 other students and young artists, and I recognized this constituted my family.

## WHAT WERE YOU MAKING THEN?

Large abstract canvases. They weren't very good. You need to make a lot of bad stuff- I mean, I needed to make a lot of bad stuff.

## WHAT WAS THE PATHWAY YOU TOOK TO GET TO YOUR REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING?

I suppose it could go back to this one time in the early 80's, I was on Shelter Island, looking at a boat in a bay and thinking, This is pretty; I'd love to paint it. Then hearing a voice say, You can't. Those are boats in a bay. You're too cool to paint that. And then I thought, That's a stupid voice. So I painted it, enjoyed painting it, and thought it was interesting. I started plein air, maybe with pastel, and then I moved on to watercolor and gouache on paper, and then started using photos for source material. For a number of years I considered this as sort of a separate hobby-my Sunday painting-in relation to my more sophisticated work. Over time, the different mediums I work in have commingled and separated. It's something of a formalist dance.

## WHEN DID YOU FINALLY SETTLE IN NEW YORK?

In 1976, I was supposedly on an independent study from the Art Institute of Chicago working on video, but actually I was a waiter living in a small East Village apartment. I'd make some silly snapshots that I'd mail back to Chicago. Then I got into the Whitney Independent Study program. It was fantastic; I had amazing teachers and peers and a fair-sized studio in Tribeca. And I made more bad stuff.

## WHAT WAS YOUR SOCIAL LIFE LIKE?

Active. I didn't know that many people, especially before I was in the Whitney program. So I'd go out, and back then there were art bars. Lower Manhattan was a different place-it wasn't very heavily populated. For a little while I was working at a restaurant on Wooster Street and after work I'd go to art bars like Magoo's and Barnabus Rex. This is around the time that CBGB had just done its switchover into punk. So I'd swing by there on my way back to the East Village.

## AND YOU PERFORMED THERE A COUPLE OF TIMES, RIGHT?

Oh god. I must have been drinking when I said that before. How did you find me for this interview?

I MET YOU A WHILE BACK AT AN OPENING YOU HAD AT KARMA. TOOK YOUR PHOTO FOR PURPLE MAGAZINE.

Oh! I knew I recognized you. You should have told me.

HAHA YEAH IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO. YOU WROTE FOR PURPLE AS WELL RIGHT?

Yeah. I was living in Paris. Elein Fleiss and Olivier Zahm were curators at the time. They were younger than I was, but they adopted me. They'd seen a show of mine in New York that they really liked, so they allowed me into their artists' cell. Toward the end of my stay there, they decided to do the magazine, Purple Prose. I had a column, "Squirts." I wrote about comic books and science fiction—really anything that I wanted to. I would try out different journalistic and stylistic possibilities. It was a great thing for me. I'd done a little bit of writing, mostly art reviews, and it was great to be able to pick different things to focus on. And then I started writing more, semi-professionally, I guess.

WHAT MAKES YOU A PRO?

I guess if you get paid. Purple didn't pay, but other magazines did, albeit not much. So much harder today with publishing. It was bad back then, and I imagine nearly impossible now.

LET'S GO BACK TO YOUR ROCK CAREER AT CBGB.

Well, I flirted with this art-rock thing. I wrote three chorus songs with moderately clever lyrics. Ahh, come on ... You already got me to talk about the fashion show.

WHICH WAS GREAT!

Anyway, I wasn't good. I can't sing, can barely play guitar, and had little charisma. The kind of pathos that generated was acceptable back then, but performing with no skills caused me so much anxiety that it was easy to quit, although I'm glad I did it. It cured my young-artist-rock-star-fantasy...

DID YOU PUT ON A SHOW FOR THE CROWD? OR WERE YOU MORE STATIONARY UP ON STAGE?

I tried. It involved some quivering, and the vocal style was indebted to people like David Byrne and Jonathan Richman. I was spotlit, alone onstage, with one large Marshall amp that I would rent, hoping for some visual effect. It couldn't have been much fun for my friends to attend, and they pretty much comprised the entire audience.

ANY OTHER EXPERIMENTAL FORAYS?

In some student work, pre-music stuff, I'd self-disguise for photos, à la very shallow Cindy Sherman, although I didn't know her or her work at the time.

HOW'D IT GO?

There used to be this A&P commercial campaign where they had two characters, both wearing butchers aprons labeled Price and Pride. Price was

this sort of bespeckled, little guy with a clipboard. Pride was a rotund, jolly guy. So I would dress up as those characters and take pictures of myself and make collages...

I'D LOVE TO SEE THAT TOO.

A couple of the Polaroids exist. They're mostly SX-70 things.

WHERE DO YOU COLLECT THE PHOTOGRAPHS FOR YOUR ART?

I usually carry a camera around, and now a phone. While I've done some still-life composition in the studio for imagery, more often the photos are snapshots of places other than New York, because one tends to look at things more carefully when they're not in their constant environment. But that being said, a lot of the snaps are taken in my apartment.

WHEN YOU NEED A NEW IMAGE, YOU JUST DIG THROUGH YOUR FILES?

Yeah, and for a lot of the oils, I decided it was fine to revisit things that I'd already done in gouache. It didn't seem illegitimate to revisit subjects. Plus there will always be cigarettes, ashtrays, cocktails, and certain kinds of landscapes.

MUST BE FEWER ASHTRAYS THESE DAYS WITH INDOOR SMOKING BAN?

I went to Japan and picked it up again, because you can smoke in bars, at least when I was there. Thinking back to the first concerts where you weren't allowed to smoke - things were wrong, the band was too clear. Everything was too clear. Now they kind of fog it up to diffuse the light more.

WHEN DID YOU GET INTO TEACHING AND WHY?

It was the early '90s and it must have been when I got back from Paris. I taught at a couple places in New York, and then started at RISD, in 1997. Teaching is a dream job for artists- at least, it was for me. As you know, when artists talk to each other about art, it's usually really art-world gossip. That's fine, of course. When I talk to students, I'm usually thinking about or sorting ideas about art making, as well as gossip. I've always been an adjunct professor, so I rarely had to do any grueling institutional work; I always got to do the fun part of teaching.

WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE INITIALLY? WAS IT NERVE-WRACKING OR WAS IT LIKE HANGING OUT WITH BUDDIES?

Different courses presented different relationships with students. Studio classes that revolved around individual studio visits were my favorite, and often felt a bit like visiting friends, relaxed but pedagogical. I'm good friends with more than a few former students, but I work to discard the pedagogical behavior. I taught a course on contemporary art and theory for a number of years, and I did find that stressful because I had to learn or relearn much of the subject matter. And a lecture course generates a much more formal teacher-student relationship.

WHAT DO YOU DO WITH YOUR FREE TIME?

Since almost all of my time is free - I stopped teaching about two years ago - I guess my answer is that I get a lot of studio time. I do work at home in the morning and here in the afternoon. But if I think of the studio as work, then my free time would start in the evening with a cocktail and playing gin rummy with my wife, if she's not working, followed by dinner and TV. Pretty boring and perfect.