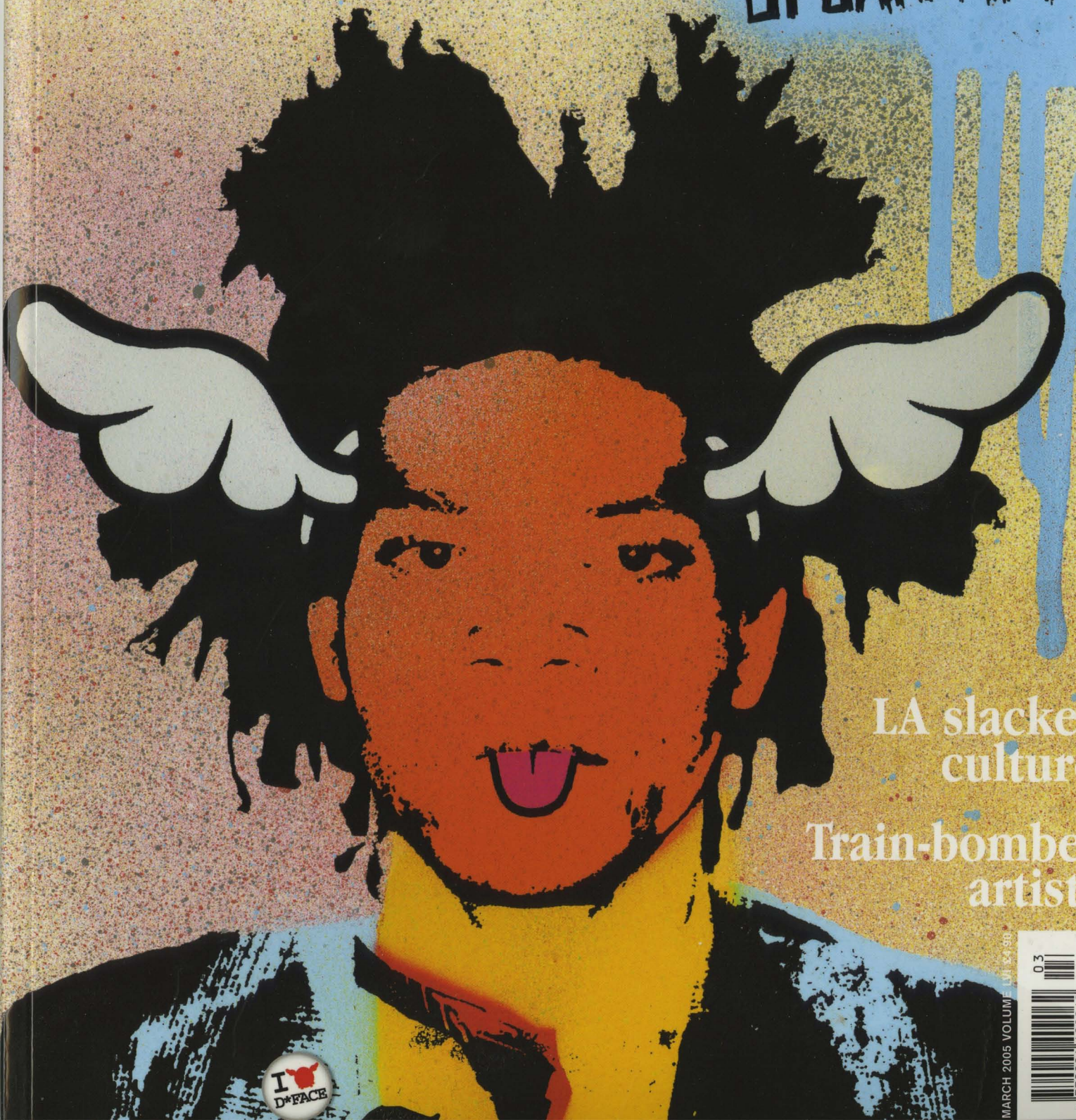


PLUS THE ARTREVIEW 25: EMERGING US ARTISTS

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INTERNATIONAL ART & STYLE

URBAN ART



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Window on their world

Dike Blair has always surfed his own wave – from performing solo in New York bars to painting the sort of realistic watercolours that ‘a hip young artist shouldn’t paint’. He compares notes on life apart from the ‘others’ with one of his favourite artists, **Richard Prince**

Right: Dike Blair, *Untitled (G-05-03)*, 2003, gouache and pencil on paper, 61 x 45.7cm

Richard Prince: I was trying to remember when we met. Was it when you were renting the basement of the first Metro Pictures gallery on Mercer Street?

Dike Blair: We’d met before. I’ve figured 1978 at the Mudd Club. And we certainly talked about your work at Artists Space in 1979. At one point we figured out that we both worked at the same restaurant in SoHo at the same time in 1976.

You were an artist who I thought always had an inside track. Like you had privileged information, that know-it-all attitude, a kind of take-it-or-leave-it point of view where you could maintain the perfect ride on the third set of perfect waves. Kind of like *Tapping the Source*. An outsider who was maybe too far in for your own good... Catch me if you can kind of thing.

Well, the work I was making, the artists whose work I was closest to, missed the wave, or the wave missed us. In fact we were on a different beach. We were a cell of abstract artists that included Steve Keister, Nancy Arlen, Taro Suzuki and Frank Schroeder. It was like we were trying to get the no-wave sensibility into a plastic form, and we were pretty incidental. When you’re not happening you can either be bitter, which is self-defeating, or carry on with dignity. I guess the latter accounts for my attitude.

What made you want to come to New York? Was it difficult when you first arrived? Did you make friends?

I wanted to participate in the art world, but I barely knew a soul when I arrived. There was an art bar called McGoo’s and I got to know older artists like Garry Rich, Ree Morton and Jeff Way. I met Steve Keister and Nancy Arlen there. There were other great bars like Barnabus Rex and Mickey Ruskin’s Lower Manhattan Ocean Club. I went to CBGB’s many nights of the week. In the fall of 1976 I entered the Whitney independent study programme, and that was instant peer group.

What was your relationship to music at this time?

I was friendly with the no-wave bands like Mars and DNA, and I was interested in a kind of concrete manifestation of that. I’d idolised Brian Eno while in art school, then in New York I met him through mutual friends and he encouraged me on a couple of projects. I’d say that Eno was one of the most influential and important artists of that time, and his influence remains. I took him to Coney Island once, and that’s about all I ever gave him. He gave me an entire sensorium.

So how did you find yourself on the stage at CBGB’s?

I was writing songs under the influence of the Ramones, Television, Talking Heads and the Modern Lovers. Three-chord songs with art-schoolish lyrics. I rented a huge Marshall amp and did talent night at CBGB’s a couple of times. CB’s liked me because there was little set-up and my friends drank a lot. I had massive stage fright, absolutely no musical aptitude. There I was, in the spotlight, guitar and Marshall, no band and no talent. It was a self-inflicted nightmare.

Who were your favourite artists?

Of my generation I’d say you, Salle and Keister. ▶



'Entertainment, retail, corporate environments are embedded in every aspect of our lives. I think there can be a soul in the jelly donut of our hyper-reality'

◀ You're one of the few artists I know who collect other artists' work. I mean, why not? We have such great inside information. We come to it first. Before the 'others'. Why do you think other artists don't collect other artists' work?

Most artists don't think they get enough support, so don't support others' work. Some artists are too involved with themselves. Some are too poor, although I've got to say that despite buying some things, almost everything I have comes from trades. I remember trading my capital improvements in the Metro basement for one of your early works. You were really cool about throwing in the two other pictures that belonged to the triptych. I collect less now, and that has a lot to do with storage.

In the 1980s everybody was using photography or paint and canvas. You were using glass, toxic resins, commercial paint and 'sprays', a kind of symphony or matrix of exotic substances. You parlayed the representational and the abstract into the seamless world of Ben and Jerry's, Trump Tower, the opening credits of Scorsese's *Casino*, MTV's *Real World*. Is there a VH-1 *Behind the Art of Dike Blair* ready to play?

I like that reading of the early stuff. I'd like to show that work again. I wanted those things to have special effects, to compete with TV ads and early computer animation, and still be deeply personal.

When did you start making your watercolours? Did you always have that kind of skill? Was it something God-given? I've always liked the God-given in the artist. It's hard to acknowledge but we who have it ultimately give into it. And when we finally do, it comes out beautiful.

I had some skill at rendering as a kid and I learned to paint better over the years. I suppose there might be a talent there. In the early 1980s I was at the beach and saw boats in a bay, a scene I thought particularly beautiful, and I wanted to paint them. Of course a hip young artist shouldn't paint such things, at least not in earnest. So I set about painting this scene as earnestly and well as I could. That started my ongoing practice of painting realistic gouaches that runs parallel to my more 'sophisticated' work.

You use, at least to my mind, low-tech, sub-pop materials such as Plexiglas, industrial carpets, extension cords, plywood, glue and light bulbs to create a kind of pre-fab abstract low-rider freshly-washed-bed-sheet environment. I'm wondering if you've ever considered using... lettuce. Just kidding, but not kidding. I guess my question is: how did you arrive at such a choice of materials?

The first sculptures – from around 1995 – were a reaction to a series of installation shows I'd been doing. It's always desirable to totally control the environment, but I thought it more economical and reasonable to try to control the environment in a more compact fashion. So I

compressed the elements – light, image, carpet and colour – into discrete sculptures. But the materials are more or less true to the earlier environments. I don't want the materials to be particularly exotic because I want them to recede as one contemplates the piece.

The transparency of the materials goes well with the watercolours you hang on the walls of these 'environments' – watercolour being transparent. Has that been a difficult fusion – combining the 'new' (carpet, Plexi) with something traditional like gouache on paper?

I guess so. Through everything, I hope one feels transparency and light. It's taken me a long time to get to the place where the sculptures and the gouaches cooperate as well they do now.

Would you describe your installations as acoustic or electric?

I'd love for them to be described as both. I eschewed using music in the sculptures in order to force me to make greater acoustic space. To some degree, music would have been illustrative. I use electricity to achieve a literal luminism.

What about the surface of your work? It seems to be like a domestic Times Square, if there could be such a thing.

I like 'domestic Times Square'. Entertainment, retail, corporate environments are embedded in every aspect of our lives and certainly embedded in the sculptures. I say 'embedded', but maybe everything is glazed with this information. I also think there can be a soul in the jelly donut of our hyper-reality.

What would be your favourite place to install one of your works?

My paintings are domestic and I love seeing them in homes. The sculpture is more problematic. I prefer empty rooms. I suppose I'd like to install one in a meditation room at an airport.

Do you have a favourite museum?

The Noguchi Museum in Queens. Louisiana in Denmark is also pretty impressive.

Do you have any interest in the new MoMA?

Yes. I hear they're using Janovic's Super-White semi-gloss paint in the galleries. That's my favourite wall paint.

Dike Blair is featured in 'Tableaux-Ecrans', 12 March-16 April, Galerie Les filles du calvaire, Paris (+33 (0)1 42 74 47 05, www.fillesducalvaire.com); and in 'Vanishing Point', 21 May-14 Aug, Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (www.wexarts.org)

Left: *Untitled (G-01-03)*, 2003, gouache and pencil on paper, 61 x 45.7cm