The Circularity of History
Daniel Sturgis on Ross Bleckner at Capitain Petzel, Berlin

Ross Bleckner demanded as a young painter that art objects had to connect to a "larger psychological, social, and political reality."#A1 In "Transcendent Anti-Fetishism" he argued that painting needed to address emotional as well as aesthetic demands. Written when he was 30, this text can be characterized as a call for a return of content after the supposedly arid feeling of much of the minimalist and post-minimalist works being made at the time. The essay was published in 1979, the year that Bleckner had his first solo exhibition at Mary Boone, and when his work also had its first international outing in London, at the Hayward Gallery. This exhibition – "New Painting – New York" – curated by Catherine Lampert following advice from the painter John Walker, pitted Bleckner's paintings not against work by his close colleagues, such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle, whom Bleckner had featured in his article, but rather against "stubborn painters" whom Lampert felt "had assiduously and knowledgably […] drawn guidance from masterpieces of the past."#A2 These artists included Jerry Zeniuk, Joe Zucker, and Elizabeth Murray, all older than Bleckner and more upbeat in their work. Bleckner exhibited *Kristallnacht* (1978), a painting that responds allegorically to the horrors of the Holocaust. In doing so, the work draws from the artist's own Jewish heritage, as many of Bleckner's works have done, and seems a far cry from the pick-and-mix appropriation that "divorced form from content" in the works of Salle, Schnabel and other artists associated with neo-expressionism. Bleckner's attachment to content – both historical and allegorical – is one of the things that differentiated his work, then as it does now, from that of his peers.

It is tempting to see this impossibility of equivalence at the real heart of Bleckner's practice. It is like a Greek tragedy: the futility of the exchange between painting and experience, or the "Quid Pro Quo" of his current exhibition's title at Capitain Petzel in Berlin. That Bleckner has a need for painting to address a weight of historical and experiential content owes much to the influence of a generation of important women painters. Artists such as Pat Steir, whom he met at Cal Arts in the 1970s, or Joan Snyder, who in her text "It Wasn't Neo to Us" (1992) demonstrated how through feminism women had opened a door for a more nuanced understanding of expressionist painting to document lived experience. A door that swung shut for her and her female contemporaries after the neo-expressionists had absorbed what they needed and marched through.

However, Bleckner's expressionism is complex. For Peter Halley, it is also infused with irony and quotation, as he suggested in his much-quoted text from 1982, "Ross Bleckner: Painting at the End of History."#A3 That year, Bleckner's paintings had taken a turn and started becoming more optical, referencing hard-edged Op art within their soft-brushed surfaces. In paintings such as *The Arrangement of Things* (1982) Bleckner seemed to trap light and color – pulsating and blemished – behind slightly blurred dark vertical bars. For Halley, Bleckner's reference to Op was theoretical and, like his own paintings of cells and conduits, a device that through appropriation allowed modernist painting to critique late capitalist culture.

At Capitain Petzel a splendid series of new, far more pared down optical paintings are being shown. The paintings are made in a pragmatic and matter-of-fact manner, with a palette knife smoothly applying paint to a flat stained surface. Hard-masked edges delineate each color that sits true and just above the smooth linen. The paintings are large and all employ a similar color scheme incorporating a graphite grey, a bright red, and the raw linen.

Although graphic and clean, small inflections and drips disrupt the simple geometry of the four-panel work *After/All/These/Years* (2020) and the related canvas *Ram Dass* (2020). The sequence of colors in these works acts like a breath or pulse, functioning as a rhythm and speaking metaphorically to the circularity and continuums of Bleckner's project.

In the late 1950s the London poet and art dealer Victor Musgrave began to champion optical painting, highlighting works by Bridget Riley alongside artworks from South East Asia, principally by artists associated with Indian and Pakistani modernism. Significantly, Musgrave understood that there were more than just formal qualities connecting these works. The positivism and newness of Op linked to modernist internationalism but was also held in tension by it, as South East Asian artists negotiated their own local and historical vocabularies and belief systems. Bleckner also recognizes this tension between modernism and the spiritual. In the painting *Ram Dass* he depicts a mandala-like abstraction moving through bands of color from an octagram to a more decorative and organic form. The composition is contemplative – a little trippy even – and, like his *Architecture of the Sky* series from the 1990s, is derived from a mosque's or church's domed ceiling. Though the work is flat, full-frontal, and centrifugal, Bleckner is also asking us to look up to the heavenly spheres – to look beyond the architecture or mandala. This is emphasized in the painting's title, which is taken from the adopted yogic name of the counterculture spiritualist Richard Alpert. In their straightforward materiality as well as in their iconography owing to both modernist and Eastern influences, *Ram Dass* and *After/All/These/Years* ask us to contemplate not just belief systems but, as with all Bleckner's work, whether we ourselves can "believe" at all: if we still have the ability to see and accept something without proof or reason.

One of the first flower paintings Bleckner made was *Hospital Room* (1985), a painting that at the time seemed shocking in its use of old-style figuration as a means to commemorate the death of a friend through an AIDS-related illness. It marked the moment when Bleckner could no longer be seen as an exponent of the new neo-geo movement in abstract painting; it furthermore seemed to ask whether figurative expressionist painting could still mean what it had meant in the past. Could it still be sincere? Or was it now only through a filter of insincerity and irony that sincerity itself could exist? Peter Halley had touched on this double meaning, seeing in Bleckner's work a trait he recognized in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg, which, in Halley's words, displayed an "ironical transcendentalism."#A4

In the current exhibition in Berlin there are a pair of silvery flower paintings: *Outside His Window* (2020) and *Outside Her Window* (2020). These are supremely satisfying works. Rather than depicting flowers as if arranged in a vase, whether nodding to Manet or the Golden Age of Dutch still life painting, as Bleckner has done in the past, the artist scatters the depiction of blooms evenly across each painting. The paintings are made simply – the effervescent whites of the flowers are brushed swiftly into the dark surfaces but inflected ever-so-slightly with greens, pinks, and golds. Fragility haunts these works, and as with Manet's flower paintings or Dutch 17th-century painting, death does too. The surfaces have a slightly worn-out quality. In places the paint seems to have been wiped off and removed, and through this process and their color they evoke the silver halide on an old photographic plate. This quality and their all-over composition give the paintings a bygone feel, and their floral excess and nostalgia evoke instability. The instability of decadence, light, and nature.

Bleckner has also created paintings by taking a blow torch to his canvases, inventing and finding compositions in their backgrounds in the process of stripping away paint with

heat. *Burn Painting (Rooms Combined to Cheer)* (2020) shows a bright band of flowers floating in a darkened corner of a room. The surface is well-worn, distressed even – as one might imagine, given the painting's own history. This bold vertical band of flowers is flanked by a similar erased band of flowers and a smaller single stem. They are held in suspended animation. Frozen in the melancholic darkness, but still glowing.

In 1962 the painter Ruth Kligman, famous for having been the lover of Jackson Pollock and surviving that fatal car crash, tried to introduce her friend Andy Warhol to Mark Rothko. Rothko was having none of it. He had no interest. He could not equate the new pop sensibility with all its blankness, appropriation, and irony with his own heartfelt romanticism and the need for painting to redeem history, particularly Jewish history, and indeed humankind. Perhaps part of the melancholia that stalks Ross Bleckner's work can be located also at the moment of this encounter. For unlike Rothko, or Warhol, Bleckner is an artist who understands both these positions fully – how the redemptive nature of expressionist painting was made futile by pop and postmodernism – and it is through dealing with *this* darkness that his paintings find light.

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"Ross Bleckner: Quid Pro Quo" at Capitain Petzel, Berlin, September 10–November 7, 2020.

Notes

1 Ross Bleckner, "Transcendent Anti-Fetishism," *Artforum,* March 1979, pp. 50–55.

2 Peter Halley, "Ross Bleckner: Painting at the End of History," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 56, no. 9 (May 1982), reprinted in Peter Halley *Collected Essays 1981-87* (Zurich: Bruno Bischofberger/Sonnabend Gallery, 1988), pp. 47–60.

3 Ibid.

4 *New Painting – New York: Jake Berthot, Ross Bleckner, Alan Cote, Philip Guston, Elizabeth Murray, Jerry Zeniuk, Joseph Zucker*, exh. cat., ed. Catherine Lampert (Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, London, 1979).