

ROSS BLECKNER

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# NEW WORK

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14 APRIL 1988

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THROUGH 12 JUNE 1988

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SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM

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OF MODERN ART

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A SERIES OF

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RECENT WORK BY YOUNGER

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AND ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

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*"A painter is a person who makes meaning by making feeling."*<sup>1</sup>  
 —Ross Bleckner

For the last several years, a tremendous amount of new painting has been received with critical and popular enthusiasm. Yet, only a decade ago the view that "painting is dead" was confidently expressed by the vanguard artists and critics associated with minimal and conceptual art, the key American artistic directions of the 1970s. In retrospect, however, this sweeping judgement is not difficult to understand; neither of the painting styles current in the seventies—the enervated efforts of color-field artists and the conservative contributions of the "new realists"—seemed to represent progressive tendencies. At the same time, the American art world in general had remained almost blissfully ignorant of the astonishing achievements of a revitalized European art community in which artists like Joseph Beuys had succeeded in making an art powerful enough in its forms and its concepts to express and to criticize the condition of contemporary culture.

Out of this state of art world affairs in the late 1970s emerged a new generation of young artists in New York who hungered to do what was not then being done in America: to make paintings that conveyed and communicated authentic cultural content. Surveying the recent American art around them, they recognized the important accomplishments of minimalist and conceptual artists. However, they were also aware that minimalism—much of the best of which was sculpture—was an art of aggressive muteness, while the eloquent texts frequently incorporated into conceptual art were not consistently supported by a commensurate level of visual interest. They saw little contemporary painting they could respect; that which they could—the post-minimal work of artists such as Robert Ryman and Brice Marden—did not seem to match their particular aspirations.

In 1979 an essay written by the young painter Ross Bleckner entitled "Transcendent Anti-Fetishism" was published in *Artforum*.<sup>2</sup> On behalf of this new generation of artists, Bleckner articulated a longing for an art reinvested with meanings rooted in the larger psychological, social, and political reality. (This article was illustrated with the work of Bleckner's friends Eric Fischl, David Salle, Matt Mullican, Barbara Kruger, and Julian Schnabel, plus several more senior artists including Richard Artschwager and Vito Acconci.) Valuing the unmediated directness of painting and seeking to initiate a rupture with the conventions established by the preceding generation of American abstract painters, Bleckner set out to express in his art what he has referred to as "libidinal forces and flows" through the symbolic form of the visual image.

Bleckner's art is undeniably romantic. It is also deeply informed by a conceptual foundation that gives it the critical, questioning stance which elevates painting beyond formal concerns and sensuous appeal. While Bleckner's work has always had this conceptual basis—as in the work of Cy Twombly, a painter of an elder generation who has been a source of inspiration for Bleckner—he has recently reached a level of artistic maturity where the provocative ideas contained in his earlier work are joined with an extraordinary command of a painterly, formal vocabulary. The result is a highly charged art, at once full of ideas and at the same time unabashedly beautiful.



*Knights Not Nights, 1987*

Like a number of the most interesting painters of our day who are in reaction to artists' traditional obsession with inventing a unique or "signature" style, Bleckner works in several quite distinct manners and refuses to classify his paintings as either abstract or representational. In this exhibition his range is represented by three directions he is currently pursuing: "stripe paintings," "dot paintings," and "emblem paintings."

The stripe paintings—the most abstract, conceptual, and confrontational—have their origins in Op Art, a discredited chapter in recent modernist art. But they are not about 1960s formalist manipulation of optical phenomena; rather, more in the manner of the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still—an artist Bleckner studies and admires—they are concerned with the emotional psychology of thingstaking form in the consciousness, shimmering as they seek to come into focus, and evaporating like ice becoming steam. In paintings such as *Unknown Quantities of Light, Part IV* we see an art of light, atmosphere, and temperature whose soft-edged stripes have been exquisitely described by the painter Pat Steir as "fibrillating." Here, a complex meditation on light—the ingredient that, for Bleckner, is painting's essential element—becomes the illustrated subject in a work otherwise absent of representational forms, creating what Schnabel has described in Bleckner's work as "the sensation of the atmosphere as an emblem of an emotional state"<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps more than any other artist to appear since James Turrell and Robert Irwin, Bleckner has made light his expressive medium, employed to convey his ideas about loss, sadness, and

hope. The dot painting *Knights Not Nights* may serve as a paradigm of Bleckner's poetic concerns with the expression of melancholy and with redemption. In it, dots of white impasto emerge from a background darkness made even richer and deeper by a varnished surface to create the effect of brilliant beams of starlight coming into view after having raced through the cosmic depths of the night sky. As these points of luminosity appear out of a fictive depth, some are caught and held by graceful hands (inspired by the elegantly attenuated hands seen in the religious paintings of El Greco) while others slip through the grasp and continue their fall through space. *Knights Not Nights* is a painting lamenting the death of those lost souls represented by the uncaught beams of light while, at the same time, it is a celebration of the enduring hope that lives can be saved.

This is elegiac painting; it deals with the ideas of death and survival, of the sublime, the ineffable, the unanswerable. Responding to the issues it raises, a complex combination of emotions are evoked, including despair; terror, awe, and joy. The issue of epidemic, especially the current health emergency, has affected the artist deeply; a number of his paintings, including *Remember Them*, have been memorials to victims of AIDS. The younger painter Peter Halley has written about Bleckner's response to a modern era touched so deeply by the tragedy of holocaust, nuclear warfare, and epidemic, observing, "His work represents a mood of questioning in the wake of this troubled history, and a realization . . . that knowledge may be doubt and that doubt may be light — that the reality of disillusionment may also offer the possibility of transcendence"<sup>4</sup>

Bleckner considers western culture to be in crisis. In part, he sees this as the crisis that comes at the end of a millennium, revealing a sensibility acutely aware of death. Emblem paintings like *Memoriam*, containing such funereal imagery as urns, chalices, and flowers, reflect the influence of *fin-de-siècle* nineteenth-century Symbolist art and its decadent but richly elegant poeticization of death. Another aspect is more specifically related to the end of a century in which American civilization was originally perceived as nurturing and positive, but has recently metamorphosed into an entity altogether meaner and more cynical. Bleckner feels that our once idealistic and benevolent notion of democracy has mutated, becoming a front behind which "to do things."

It is Bleckner's sense that today people are looking for something in which they can have faith. He believes that art can be a healing and redemptive force; that it can function as an agent of change, providing leadership by posing fundamental questions. He does not himself believe in any conventional notions of religion, yet he feels the need to challenge his own disbelief in spirituality, acknowledging that things have an "inner glow." His art, expressing simultaneously "a sense of wonderment and a sense of disbelief," universalizes a condition that seems very much of our moment.

John R. Lane  
Director

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of the artist were made in conversation with the author on 15 January and 19 February, 1988.

2 Ross Bleckner, "Transcendent Anti-Fetishism," *Artforum*, vol. 17, no. 7 (March 1979), pp. 50–55.

3 Julian Schnabel, *C.V.J.* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 181.

4 Peter Halley, "Ross Bleckner: Painting at the End of History," *Arts Magazine*, vol. 56, no. 9 (May 1982), p. 133.

## **ROSS BLECKNER**

born in New York City, 1949

Lives and works in New York City

### **EDUCATION**

New York University, B. A., 1971

California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, M.F.A., 1973

### **SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS**

1975

Cunningham Ward Gallery, New York

1976

John Doyle Gallery, Chicago

1977

Cunningham Ward Gallery, New York

1979

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1980

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1981

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1982

Patrick Verelist Galerie, Antwerp, Belgium

Portico Row Gallery, Philadelphia

1983

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1984

Nature Morte Gallery, New York

1985

Boston Museum School

1986

Mario Diacono Gallery, Boston

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

1987

Mary Boone Gallery, New York

Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

### **SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

1975

*Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

1979

*New Painting/New York*, Hayward Gallery, London

*Four Artists*, Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York

1981

*Tenth Anniversary Exhibition*, California Institute of the Arts, Valencia

1983

*Mary Boone and Her Artists*, Seibu Gallery, Tokyo

1986

*End Game: Reference and Simulation in Recent American Painting and Sculpture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

1987

*Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

*Awards in the Visual Arts 6*, Grey Art Gallery, New York

*Post Abstract Abstraction*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut

*CalArts Skeptical Belief(s)*, Renaissance Society, University of Chicago

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- Pincus-Witten, Robert. "Defenestrations: Robert Longo and Ross Bleckner." *Arts Magazine*, vol. 57, no. 3 (November 1982), pp. 94-95.
- Schjeldahl, Peter. "A Visit to the Salon of Autumn 1987." *Art in America*, vol. 74, no. 12 (December 1986), pp. 15-21.
- Schwabsky, Barry. "The Persistence of American Art." *Awards in the Visual Arts 6*. Southeastern Center for Contemporary Arts, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1987.
- Smith, Roberta. "Ross Bleckner at Mary Boone." *Art in America*, vol. 69, no. 1 (January 1981), pp. 124-25.
- Steir, Pat. "Where the Birds Fly, What the Lines Whisper." *Artforum*, vol. 25, no. 9 (May 1987), pp. 107-11.
- Zinsser, John. "Ross Bleckner" (interview). *Journal of Contemporary Art*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 45-55.

## CHECKLIST

### PAINTINGS

*Memoriam*, 1985

oil on linen

48 x 40" (121.9 x 101.6 cm.)

Collection of George A. Katz and Frances R. Katz, New York

Untitled, 1985

oil and wax on linen

96 x 72" (243.8 x 182.9 cm.)

Collection of Julian Schnabel, New York

*Gate #2*, 1986

oil on canvas

120 x 84" (304.8 x 213.3 cm.)

Collection of Norman and Ira Braman, Miami

*Fallen Object*, 1987

oil on linen

48 x 48" (121.9 x 121.9 cm.)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Woods, Jr., Los Angeles

*Knights Not Nights*, 1987

oil on canvas

108 x 72" (274.3 x 182.9 cm.)

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Purchase 97.93

*Remember Them*, 1987

oil on canvas

111 x 85 1/2" (281.9 x 217.1 cm.)

Collection of James and Linda Burrows, Beverly Hills,

California

*Unknown Quantities of Light, Part IV*, 1988

oil on canvas

108 X 144" (274.3 x 365.8 cm.)

Private collection, New York; courtesy Mary Boone

Gallery, New York

*Nights With Knights*, 1988

oil on canvas

108 x 72" (274.3 x 182.9 cm.)

Private collection, New York; courtesy Mary Boone

Gallery, New York

*Nights Without Knights*, 1988

oil on canvas

108 x 60" (274.3 x 152.4 cm.)

Private collection, New York; courtesy Mary Boone

Gallery, New York

### WORKS ON PAPER

Untitled, 1987

watercolor and ink on paper

16 x 12" (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)

Collection of Lawrence and Mickey Beyer, Chicago

Untitled, 1987

watercolor and ink on paper

16 x 12" (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)

Kern Family Collection, New York

Untitled, 1987  
watercolor and ink on paper  
16 x 12' (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)  
Kern Family Collection, New York

Untitled, 1987  
watercolor and ink on paper  
16 x 12' (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)  
Collection of Ray Leary, New York

Untitled, 1987  
watercolor and ink on paper  
16 x 12' (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)  
Collection of Gordon Locksley and George Shea, Paris

Untitled, 1987  
watercolor and ink on paper  
16 x 12' (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)  
Collection of Gordon Locksley and George Shea, Paris

Untitled, 1987  
watercolor and ink on paper  
16 x 12' (40.6 x 30.5 cm.)  
Collection of Byron Meyer, San Francisco

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watercolor and ink on paper  
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Collection of A. J. Rosen, Ramsey, New Jersey

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*All works on paper courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York.*

Ross Bleckner is the third exhibition in the "New Work" series, a program featuring recent work by younger and established artists.

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Photograph by Ben Blackwell