

canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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PROFILE

DUBAI *DEBUT*

ROSS BLECKNER



Opening pages: (Detail) *Untitled*. Oil on linen. 45.7 x 45.7 cm.

Facing page: *Parallel Dome*. 2015. Oil on linen. 198 x 182.9 cm.

Laura van Straaten reports on it-boy of the 1980s and 90s New York art world Ross Bleckner as he heads to Dubai.

Painter Ross Bleckner was the youngest artist ever to have a major solo show in the rotunda of New York's Guggenheim in 1995. His first solo show in the Arab world on view now at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, though patrons of Art Dubai may have seen Bleckner's work in Heller's booth or in the booth of the Salzburg-based Galerie Nikolaus Ruzicska.

To those who were not part of New York in the go-go 1980s and 90s, Bleckner may be known less for his work than as a name-check in the society and gossip pages where once, according to *The New York Times*' Michael Kimmelman, Bleckner's name was mentioned "as often as his friend Bianca Jagger's" or for being a plot point in an early episode of *Sex in the City*.

In addition to the Heller show on view now, there's a Bleckner exhibit opening 1 May in Hürth-Kalscheuren, Germany and a show at the Parrish Art Museum in New York's Hamptons this summer entitled *Unfinished Business: Paintings from the 1970s and 1980s by Ross Bleckner, Eric Fischl, and David Salle*. It examines work by Bleckner and two of his peers, who met and became friends at Los Angeles' CalArts in the 1970s

and all gravitated to New York and Long Island's East End in the 1980s.

Just don't call all this "a comeback" for Bleckner. "I don't like to use that word," says his longtime New York gallerist Mary Boone, in an interview last month in her gallery overlooking a corner of New York's Central Park. Before Boone struck out on her own, she first showed Bleckner's work in 1977 at her loft on Bond Street and has mounted a Bleckner show every couple of years since 1983. Boone is able to do that because, through booms and busts, much like the city with which he has become closely identified, Bleckner just keeps working. And re-working.

Indeed, in the Dubai show *New Work*, which includes paintings that were not yet dry during a late winter interview in Bleckner's Chelsea studio – viewers will see artwork with deep roots in the last century, going as far back as the 1970s, from the *Dome*, *Stripe*, *Bird* and *Burn* series, as Bleckner calls them.

First there are half a dozen new *Dome* paintings, which build on the series that served as the cornerstone of Bleckner's Guggenheim retrospective 21 years ago. The artist has long described these large-scale paintings as inspired by religious architecture. For him that means

I pray to
feel complete
comfortable and calm
to not judge myself
happily and to
cultivate compassion
so that I can
understand others
and their suffering
I pray to
see the world as a
loving, giving, and
trusting place so
that I can open
my heart to
beauty, innocence,
amazement, and joy

I pray that in
this short time I
have to live I can
rise above insecurity,
pain, fear, greed,
envy, and any form
of conscious or
unconscious hate
or bigotry so
that I can
bring something
new, something
beautiful and
something filled
with light and love
into this world.



Dome. 2015. Oil on canvas. 269.2 x 233.7 cm.

the Pantheon and, even more so, the massive dome of Istanbul's Hagia Sofia, the former Christian basilica that with the changing tides of history became one of the world's most important mosques for nearly 500 years. He recalls first visiting what is now an awe-inspiring public museum in the mid-to late 80s. "Hagia Sofia had been the *modus operandi* of these paintings for a long time," he says.

The *Dome* paintings, through their scale and emphasis on flat, hand-painted surfaces, capture a feeling of the sublime (even, dare one say, the capital-D Divine) while also emphasising the artifice used to create its effect.

"There's an astronomy to it absolutely," Bleckner explained, pointing out details in the newer works in his Chelsea studio, even as they were being crated for shipment to Dubai. Since Bleckner's new technique involves using bleach to pare back the paint buildup, his newer *Dome* paintings appear more luminous and spatial, celestial, even spiritual in contrast to the more obviously architectural structures depicted in his earlier work.

"I knew of the *Dome* paintings and every time I went to the Hagia Sofia I thought of Ross," says the New York-based, Iranian-born Heller. "I had been planning the Dubai gallery for seven years, and so for years, showing him



Dome, 2015. Oil on canvas. 264.2 x 221 cm.

and his *Dome* paintings in particular was always in the back of my mind."

Spirituality and prayer also play into his newer *Prayer Rug* series, also on view in Dubai, which he began about three years ago. The rugs feature personal prayers composed by the artist rendered in his own handwriting in silk and wool. They are a departure for the painter. One reads: "I pray to feel complete, comfortable and calm to not judge myself harshly and to cultivate compassion so that I can understand others and their suffering // I pray to see the world as a loving, giving, and trusting place so that I can open my heart to beauty, romance, amazement, and joy." These are Bleckner's most obviously

personal works yet. "I don't like to reveal that side of me, but it comes out in your work anyway, which is always the interesting part," he says. "It's kind of an embarrassing admission of sincerity," he confesses, grasping at his chest. "There's always a give and take between being closed and opening yourself to things that even surprise you. And that's the journey of making art in the end."

Sceptics may sniff at the whiff of self-help but Heller says she thinks that the *Prayer* pieces and *Dome* paintings – which add up to just a fraction of the works at her gallery – convey a "universality" and Bleckner will do well in Dubai. She adds that she hopes in conjunction with her "very white and pure gallery

This page: *Dome*. 2015. Oil on canvas.
228.6 x 213.4 cm.

*Images courtesy the artist and Leila
Heller Gallery, Dubai/New York.*

with its 32-foot ceilings “the gallery might function as “a meditative space.”

Indeed, the art works destined for Dubai are rooted in Bleckner’s own spiritual and social practice, which both he and Boone cited as inextricably linked to his artistic practice, and something that distinguishes him from some of his peers who came of age and gained recognition in the same era. This includes Bleckner’s much-lauded advocacy for people suffering from HIV and AIDS and his tireless fundraising for AIDS research. But in a way, his social practice also comprises his commitment to young artists, especially those he has taught for more than a decade at New York University’s Steinhardt School.

“Artists that teach always stay relevant because they have a current frame of reference to work against,” says Boone. She adds that what makes certain artists “masters” is not just that they keep making, showing and selling new work late into life; rather, it is how, as members of the art establishment, they have a committed pedagogy and in “how many young artists follow them.” In fact, earlier this year Bleckner was included

in two shows in New York that illustrate her point. One, at Skarstedt Gallery highlighted multiple generations of painters, including Bleckner peers like Cecily Brown, George Condo, Alex Katz and Amy Sillman. Then, a show at Luxembourg & Dayan Gallery looked at how 30 masters like Bleckner – alongside Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg – have influenced younger generations.

Ultimately, in talking about the vagaries of Bleckner’s career, Boone leads the conversation toward his legacy. “Is Ross going to be a young, hot artist again?” Boone asks rhetorically. “No, but everything ebbs and flows and what all these shows around the globe are pointing to is that his work is still relevant for those who’ve enjoyed and collected it for decades, and it can have its own resonance for people who are just discovering it, as they will in Dubai.”

Ross Bleckner: New Work runs until 15 June 2016 at Leila Heller Gallery. For more information visit www.leilahellergallery.com

