

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

Exposito, Frank, "Ross Bleckner/500 Words." *Artforum.com* (October 22, 2012).

ARTFORUM



View of "Birds & Brains & Flowers," 2012.

New York-based artist Ross Bleckner is known for painting a spectrum of subjects—from pulsating lines in his resurrection of Op art in the 1980s to the magnified cellular structures of autoimmune diseases in the 1990s. In his new exhibition, "Birds & Brains & Flowers," which is on view until December 15 at Jablonka Galerie in Cologne, natural memes dissipate in auratic light from deep within their figurative skins. Bleckner speaks here about homosexuality as a conceptual model for the correlative conditions of exterior familiarity and interior determinacy.

OBVIOUSLY, THERE ARE A LOT OF GAY ARTISTS, especially the younger ones from my generation, like Felix González-Torres, who addressed this feeling of being marginalized romantically and sexually, through longing and despair, joy, and generosity. There was a whole conceptual element to it. But when you look at his work, there's something that's really heartbreaking. The way those candy piles twinkle, it's incredibly beautiful—the awe of something that's distant.

I was thirty-two when it happened. I was scared that I would be dead within ten years. There were no tests back then so I had just assumed. AIDS brought a total paradigm shift in consciousness, a rupture. I was lucky. I was going through my needlessly monogamous phase, not because I believed in it but because it just happened. I'm glad I had a boyfriend.

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For a long time, I was falling in love with straight male artists and it was a nightmare. It was so much about yearning. What became logical for me in the '80s was this sense of loss and its commemoration in a rupture between representation and abstraction, between my stripe and figurative paintings. How do you keep yourself engaged when everything that passes, from experience to memory, always constitutes a loss? It's like a photograph. This thinking led to paintings that have a distant, near, real, and literal light—a landscape light. I made them and then I would ask myself what they were about. Were they stripes? Were they optical?

The experience of making a painting is very important to me—its physicality and its visceral connection to an engaged truth, which is determined by the reference to how an idea accords. I became an artist at a time when painting was “dead”; this was really the predominant ideological discourse in art back then. So much of postmodernism has to do with what is skill-less. Naturally, that was good for me because I already felt a little marginal to begin with. I didn't feel like I was part of the neo-expressionists that came right before me, even though they were my friends. Julian Schnabel was kind of a big father-bear type. I always used to kid around and say we were like the two sides of a coin. He was the security and I was the insecurity; he was the self-assurance and I was the self-doubt. I found his ability to project inspiring. But much of the neo-expressionist work is heterosexual; there's a bravura ethos about its masculinity. It got to be too much because it was repetitive. They were trying to subvert representation from within but couldn't.

My work is more elliptical. I think it's more sensitive to being open to different kinds of relationships, all the various routes that are possible to find a solution. Admittedly, there's a hardness in some of the work too, and if I were heterosexual, that would be it. But then a softness arises that even repulses me sometimes because I think it might be too decorative. I know that's kind of a pejorative term in the art world, but the idea of beauty has always been fascinating to me, because it can be like skin with its different levels of decor—a jewel, a piercing, a tattoo. But once I do something on the outside, I must investigate the image from the inside. Sometimes that can be frightening, like the overexpression of cells that mutate and become something they're not supposed to be. It's necessary to have X-rays done to see if everything is working internally.

So I did paintings of blood cells and the AIDS virus and cancer cells. I never said they were realist, but they totally were. I wouldn't have done it if my paintings, which I make in a contemplative arena, didn't point out to me that the world of our parents and of progress was broken. The can-do ethos of industrial optimism had been replaced by fears of early mortality.

Since then, I've really internalized that sense of mortality. I don't want my paintings to be alike. Even in this show, there are flowers, brains, and birds. I begrudgingly call some of these my “flower paintings” even though they're not really flower paintings. They *were* flower paintings. I first paint them really carefully, like a still life. Then I scrape off all that paint with a palette knife. A flower has such a short life span; it blooms and it is so majestic at its height but then it just falls away. I find pleasure in painting them and then seeing what happens when they become just a trace of something left. I've always been amazed by what's not there anymore.

I've also always been obsessed with obituaries. Everybody worships something, but you can choose what it is you worship. Actually, David Foster Wallace said that, not I. Your artwork looks like your personality in the end. I've always said that. I've tried to develop a signature style. Perhaps some of the paintings have been more about real life than anything else.