



Bleckner, Ross (b. 1949)

by Richard H. Axsom

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American neo-abstractionist artist Ross Bleckner typically draws upon and plays with earlier traditions of abstraction, frequently by integrating his private experience as a gay man to public concerns surrounding gay identity and, especially, the AIDS crisis.

Born in New York City and raised in Hewlett, a prosperous Long Island suburb, Bleckner received his B.F.A. from New York University (1971) and his M.F.A. from the California Institute of the Arts (1973). He gained early recognition with his inclusion in the 1975 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

When he was invited back for participation in the 1987 and 1989 Whitney Biennials, Bleckner had since received critical acclaim and was associated with avant-garde currents of the early 1980s. These developments included a revival of figurative art, earlier modernist styles, including abstraction, and a return to importance of painting, all of which carried a retrograde quality given the pluralism and rise of experimental media during the 1970s.

A rash of "neo" movements appeared: for example, neo-expressionism, neo-surrealism, neo-pop, and neo-minimalism. Critics also coined a new descriptive term "appropriation" to refer to artists who borrowed media and styles, deemed outmoded, with which to make contemporary social critiques. Bleckner's art was at the center of these events.

Although Bleckner makes prints and works as a photographer, his primary medium is large-scale oil painting. His paintings draw and play upon earlier traditions of abstraction, particularly the high modernist styles of postwar Abstract Expressionism and 1960s formalist abstraction.

Into these styles, which had been read by critics at their time of ascendancy as pure form without extra-pictorial meaning, Bleckner incorporates representational elements that allude to the personal and political. In his blend of abstraction and the social, Bleckner stands among an important group of contemporary artists of the 1980s known as neo-abstractionists.

His ironic use of traditional oil painting and styles linked to the heroic period of American abstraction (1950-1970), which was dominated by heterosexual male artists, lies in his integration of gay issues. As was the case for another contemporary gay artist, Félix González-Torres, Bleckner weds his private experience as a gay man to public concerns surrounding gay identity, most especially the AIDS crisis.

A painting from 1986 typifies the tone of Bleckner's art, which continues to the present. *8,122+ As of January 1986* is characteristic of the "image paintings" or "nocturnes" of the early 1980s. Cutting through a darkened atmospheric ground, points of light suggest a celestial sky dotted with constellations and shooting stars. A horizontal cut rose hovers above the illuminated outline of an urn.

Flowers, urns, doves, fruits, chandeliers, and streaks of radiant light figure prominently in Bleckner's

elegiac use of an iconography of death and mourning. Borrowing from the past, Bleckner evokes the Dutch tradition of still life paintings that served as *memento mori*, a reminder of life's brevity and the inevitability of death.

Bleckner conceived the paintings in this group as "memorials" commemorating the loss of life, most hauntingly in their allusion to the tragedy of AIDS. In *8, 122+ As of January 1986*, the numerals 8, 1, 2, and 2+ each appear respectively in the four corners of the painting. The reference is to the count of those who had died of AIDS at this point in a history that, horribly, has continued to number the deaths of thousands more in the subsequent years.

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