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The Art Detective pro

The Guggenheim's 'Kiss of Death': How a Career High Can Spell a Market Low

Ross Bleckner reflects on the impact of his 1995 retrospective at the museum—and the lingering myth it set in motion.

An exterior view along Fifth Avenue of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2009. Photo: Stan Honda/AFP via Getty Images.

by **Katya Kazakina** April 11, 2025

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I heard something that sounded crazy the other day. A prominent art dealer told me that a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York is like "the kiss of death" for an artist's market. That gave me a pause. How could an achievement like that have such a terrible outcome?

So, I did what I always do when I hear shocking art market statements: I ran some searches in the Artnet Price Database. Indeed, in several cases, artists' markets contracted dramatically following their solo shows at the Guggenheim. Some have not yet recovered. Take Richard Prince, whose auction sales are 56 percent down since his "Spiritual America" in 2008, or Christopher Wool (82 percent down since 2014), or Danh Vo (67 percent down since 2018), or even Alex Katz (35 percent down since 2022).

The art advisor Michaela Neumeister de Pury thinks that this trend began with Ross Bleckner's 1995 retrospective. The 1980s star painter was 45 when he became the second youngest artist to be crowned with a big show at the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed landmark. (Brice Marden was 37 when he got the honor in 1975). At the time the AIDS epidemic raged and Bleckner used his paintings to probe the themes of death and politics.

An installation view of Ross Bleckner's mid-career retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1995. Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

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"It was like Icarus," Neumeister de Pury said. "He was at the top of the top. And then it got very quiet. And people associated this with the Guggenheim show."

The *New York Times* art critic Michael Kimmelman described it as "the most ballyhooed exhibition in months," noting its glamorous and powerful sponsors such as David Geffen and Hugo Boss.

"With 268 paintings and drawings, the exhibition looks absurdly overblown and it has the effect, which retrospectives are supposed to have, of shifting one's opinion of his art—but in this case, for the worse," Kimmelman wrote.

Artist Ross Bleckner. Courtesy: Petzel Gallery

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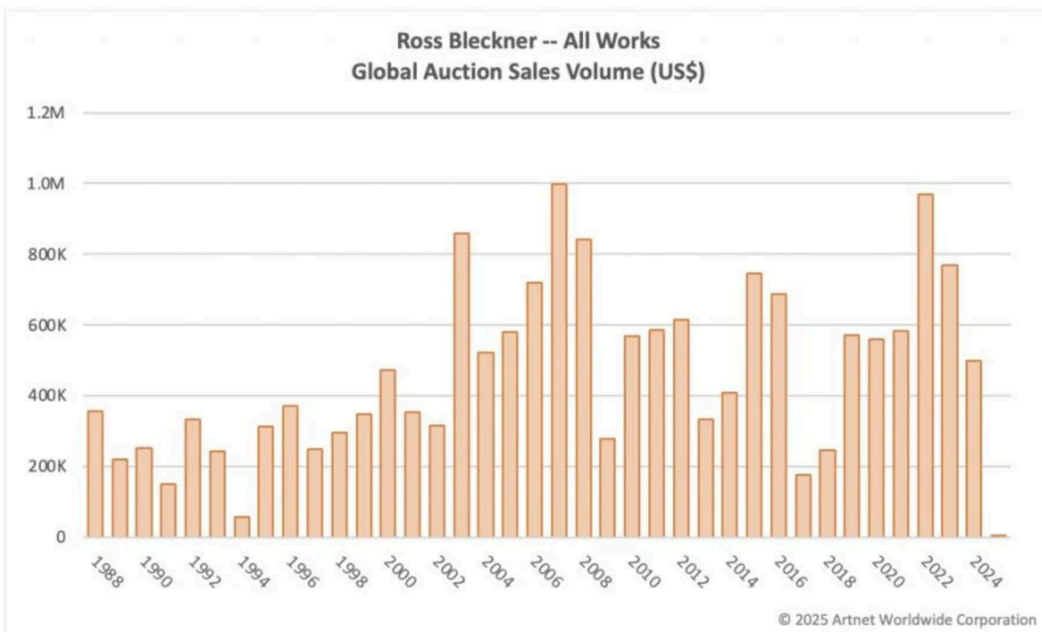
By the time of Bleckner's Guggenheim coronation, he'd had 10 other solo museum exhibitions. His market was booming, too. In 1988, his very first painting at auction, *One Wish* (1986), fetched $187,000 at Christie's, having initially sold for $30,000, Carol Vogel reported in the *New York Times*. (Adjusted for inflation, the auction result would be about $475,000 today.)

It would take almost two decades for that auction record to be eclipsed. In 2006, a painting titled *Oceans* (1984) sold for $192,000 at Christie's. Bleckner's auction market remained rather uneventful for another 16 years. Then, in 2022, the evening sale of the collection of the gallerist-siblings Thomas and Doris Ammann included a 1988 abstract canvas that established a new record, $277,000, surpassing its presale estimate of $50,000 to $70,000. (Of course, that was still well below his inflation-adjusted result in 1988.)



Total annual auction sales of art by Ross Bleckner flirted with $1 million in 2007, and then again in 2022. Source: Artnet

It's easy to make the case that Bleckner remains relatively undervalued. The Ammann auction set records for Ann Craven, at $680,400, and Mary Heilmann, at $945,000; a painting by Urs Fischer, who was born in 1973, the year Bleckner got his MFA from CalArts, went for $2.85 million.

Mary Boone, who represented Bleckner for almost four decades, said in a phone interview that "his work was sought after" post-Guggenheim.

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"Ross's trajectory was very much consistent with almost any artist," she said. "There's always a push in the market that culminates in a peak around a museum show. There's always a dip in the market following the show. There are ebbs and flows with any artist's career. Trees don't grow to the sky. Bob Mnuchin always told me that."

Mary Boone and Ross Bleckner in 2012. Photo ©Patrick McMullan.

But auction results are only one part of an artist's market—and one element of a lifelong career. I thought it would be interesting to get Bleckner's perspective on the impact of his Guggenheim show on the eve of yet another high-stakes mid-career retrospective at the museum: "Rashid Johnson: The Poem for Deep Thinkers," which opens on April 18.

We spoke by phone last week, a couple of days before the closing of a his latest solo exhibition at Petzel Gallery. It comprised eight domestically sized flower paintings, both sumptuous and melancholy. (Each was priced at $40,000, and most sold.) Our conversation has been edited and slightly condensed.

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Can you think back to your Guggenheim retrospective and say what impact it had on your art and your career short-term and long-term?

You don't really know the impact it has, although I am sure it does. The career is your career. In the end, it's a very personal experience. I was just happy that my parents were still alive. And that was the meaningfulness that I took away from it. Everything else just kind of gets subsumed in the ongoing of time. You get back to work. Life goes on as it did before.

There's no way to register what it did or didn't do vis-à-vis your career. Every career has ups and downs. My work changed. That's what I was looking to do after a big show like that. You feel like you still want to engage with an audience, but your work has to grow.

An installation view of Ross Bleckner's mid-career retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1995. Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

How do you recalibrate following such a career high? Maurizio Cattelan famously announced he was done making art after his Guggenheim show in 2012. Of course he didn't stick to his plan, but still.

Everything is a letdown from something like that. That's just human nature. For me, I just continued working, continued having shows. I actually tried not to think about it so much. You have to compartmentalize things like that. While it was going on it felt like an out-of-body experience.

Can you explain what you mean by that?

One of the pinnacles of acknowledgement is the show at the Guggenheim. That's what makes it so profoundly moving and also so unreal. Let's say your show opens. You enter the museum. You look around and it doesn't feel real. All these people are here to see… my work? Is this really happening? You have to pinch yourself a little.

I can imagine that.

The opening is full. It's crowded. There's a line around the block. I don't know them. Why are they here? Are they interested in art? They heard about it? There was press. It doesn't feel like it's about you. Everything stops and it's like in slow motion. It's a little dizzying. You have the euphoria of it.

In the end, it all boils down to the fact that my mother was there. She was alive and she said: "All these people are here for my son? I can't believe it!" That's what I remember the most.

She was so proud of you.

Yeah. All those years of me talking about being an artist and kind of understanding but not really knowing what that meant. And then they see: This is what it is! I think the Guggenheim show gave them a fuller picture.

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An installation view of Ross Bleckner's mid-career retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1995. Courtesy: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

Was the space challenging to deal with?

The space is great. First of all, the museum had the Charles Gwathmey building [which was added in 1992], so there are very large rooms that can accommodate a viewing experience that's very discreet.

The rotunda—there are limitations in terms of size. But the way it's organized, it sets up a chronology. So, it lends itself to a retrospective viewing. It starts in the beginning, and it unfolds as a story. That kind of plays into a narrative aspect of how your work develops.

I counted at least 10 solo museum shows on your CV before your Guggenheim retrospective. What did the Guggenheim mean to you?

There's nothing as special as when the artist has a show in the city where they live. You have to admit to yourself, that after all the hard work, and after all the self-doubt, and, after all is said and done, there's a recognition. Whether people like it or not—it's out of your control.

But even somebody who is not prone to being feted, being celebrated, you can feel proud of yourself that you've done something actually. And you've done something that you've set out to do 30 years before that.

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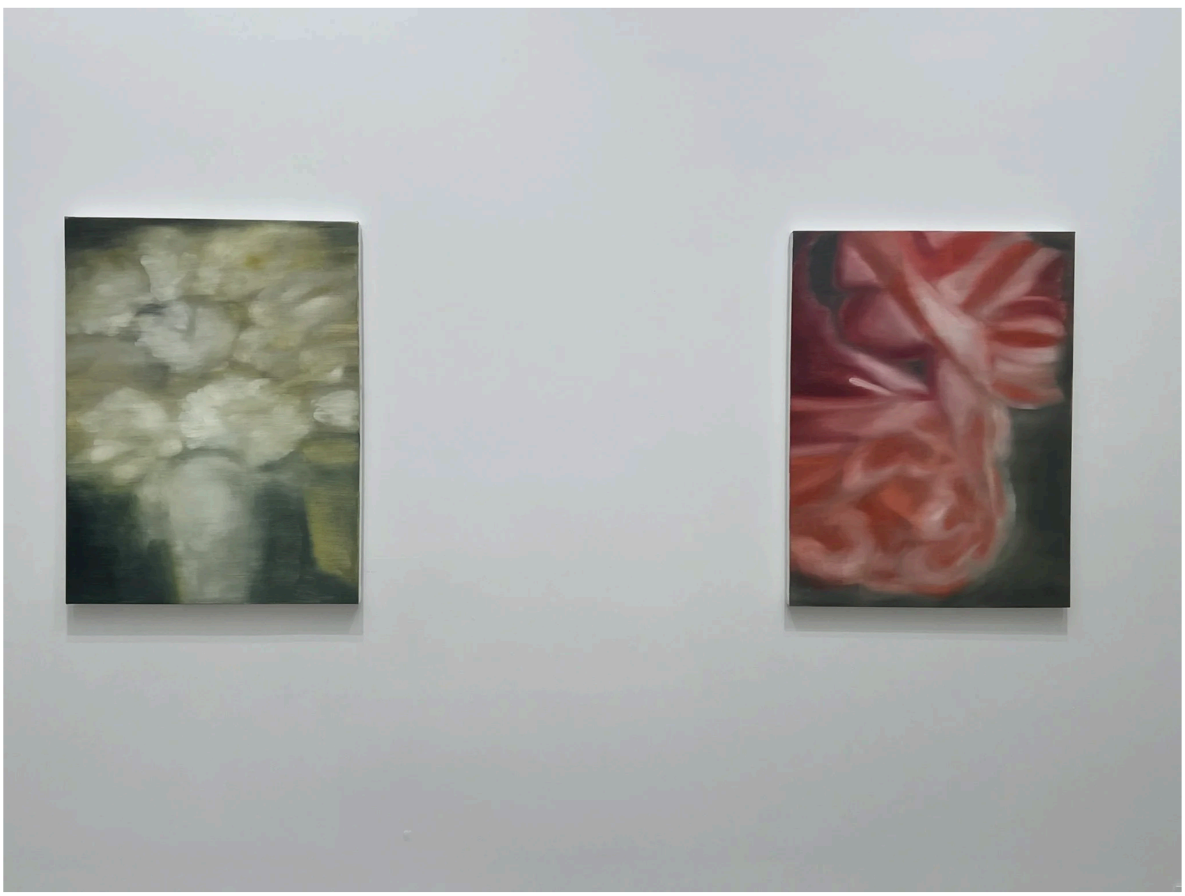
And then you get back to work and life goes on.

An art dealer told me recently that a Guggenheim retrospective is like "the kiss of death" for an artist's market. Do you agree or disagree?

That's a metaphor and, metaphorically, it's true. Once you reached a pinnacle, there's only one place you can go. If anything, it kind of recalibrates your own ambitions about what you want to do.

I wasn't dissatisfied with what happened afterwards. Obviously, a career has its ups and downs. It's part of being an artist. Careers last 40, 50, 60 years. It's not going to remain constant. Change happens whether you like it or not. Your work changes. Some parts of your work are more popular than others. You'll lose some people and gain some people. I just always assume it's always going to be half and half. Half are going to like it, and half won't.



Ross Bleckner's paintings based on Cy Twombly's photos of flowers at Petzel this month. Photo: Katya Kazakina

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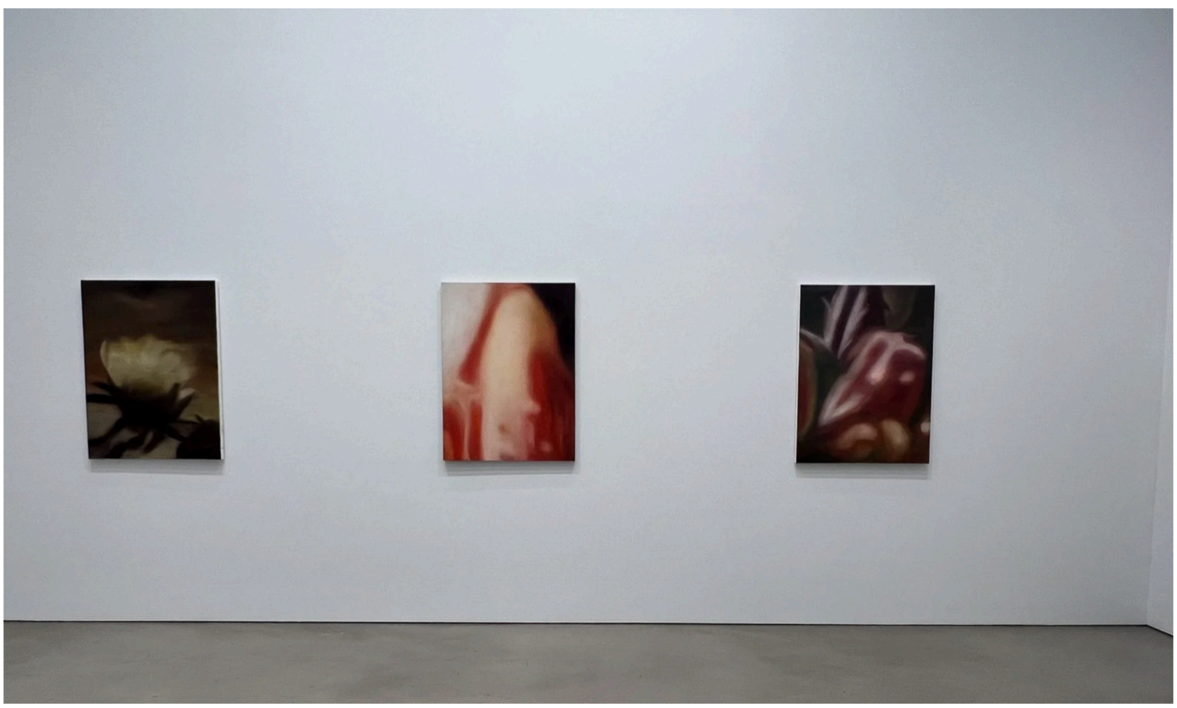
Rashid Johnson's mid-career show at the Guggenheim opens next week. Do you have any advice for him?

Advice? Of course! Keep up the good work. Don't believe the press. You have to discard all the noise and just keep with your vision. Keep with your story. Keep with your focus. Which is, actually, easy because it all comes and goes pretty fast.

In 2019, your longtime dealer Mary Boone closed her gallery. That same year you started showing with Petzel. How did this transition happen?

Before Mary closed, I thought I needed to make some kind of a shift. I'd been there a long time. I liked Petzel's program a lot. I like that Friedrich has a conceptual orientation, and yet it's very open and varied and in the end it's a really good painting gallery.

It's about art and not being part of a corporation. There's a personal interchange. I am not really the kind of artist who wants to have a factory or staff to make things to fill spaces.



Ross Bleckner's paintings based on Cy Twombly's photos of flowers at Petzel this month. Photo: Katya Kazakina

Your current show at Petzel consists of a group of flower paintings. Flowers are very much in vogue. But you've painted them forever. What draws you to flowers?

I started painting flowers in 1985. But I don't really paint flowers—like I don't go and buy flowers and then paint them. I paint pictures of flowers. And one of the main pictures I have always used is from the book, *The Last Flowers of Manet* (1986).

Those are incredible pictures, which he made literally on his deathbed. There was one painting from the series at Sotheby's last May and, to me, it was the painting of the entire auction season. It was extraordinary. Did you see it?

I did. They are all extraordinary. They've always blown my mind. They are kind of my default position. I never have to worry about not having an idea. I can always look at those paintings and they give me ideas. In cosmic time, we are here for so short. And flowers express that. They do everything we do in a matter of days.

I once interviewed this incredible Belgian floral artist and designer, Daniel Ost. And I always remember what he said: Once you cut a flower, it's already dying.

It's dying, but it's also at its peak of beautiful. You have this conundrum of living and dying together. At the peak of its power and its moment of beauty, it's already fading. It's an idea that's very potent, very much about our lives and ourselves. I always thought using flowers as an image was a very impactful way to express those things that I wanted in my paintings.

I use them in a very abstract way. The chemistry of paint is just as fascinating to me. You put all these things together and they all tell a story. And you get a painting. And hopefully it has an emotional impact and brings some beauty into the world, some light—especially now.

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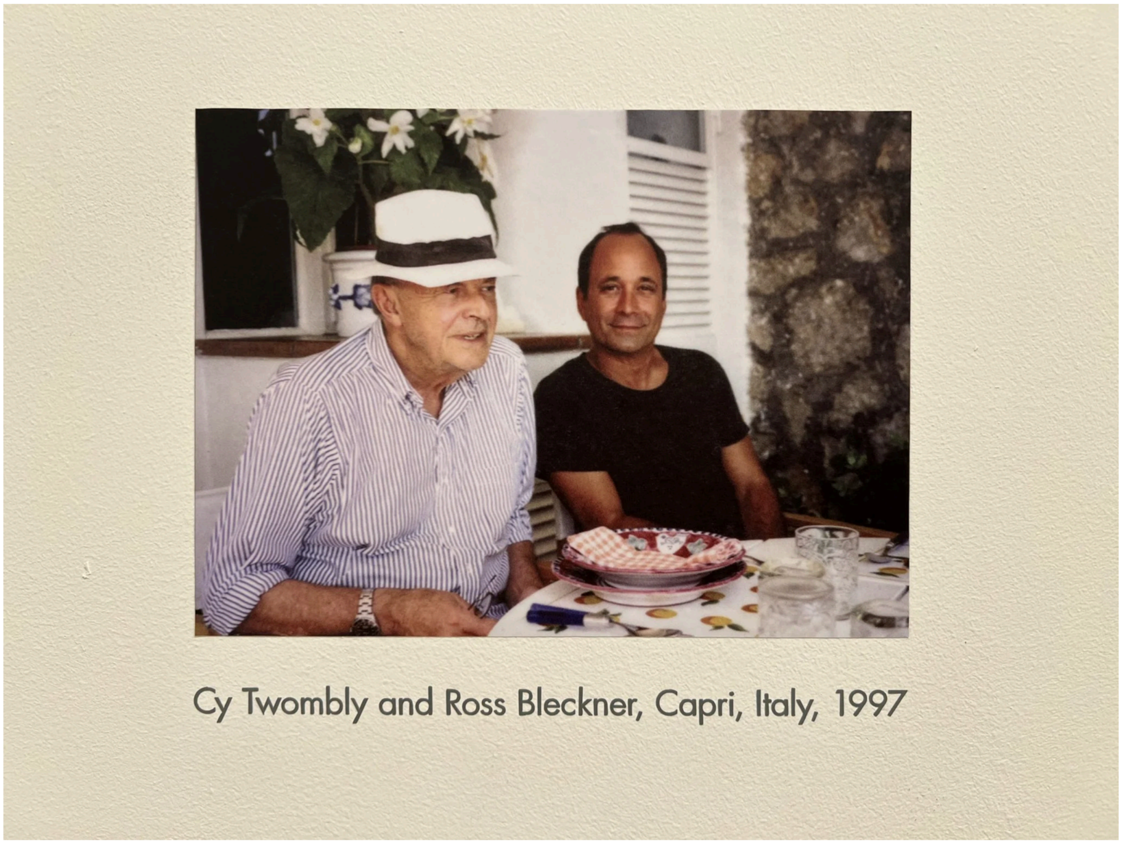

A photo of artists Cy Twombly and Ross Bleckner on view at Petzel gallery in New York this month. Photo: Katya Kazakina

But this exhibition isn't' about Manet, it's about Cy Twombly.

Cy took beautiful photographs of flowers. And I painted from those pictures. We also were good friends. So, there's a bit of a dialogue and a remembrance and an homage.

I always kid around now that I don't need to have a deadline for a show. I have a real deadline now. I don't know when it's going to come. But it comes.

You have to do the work you need to do before your deadline.

https://news.artnet.com/market/ross-bleckner-guggenheim-retrospective-2628005