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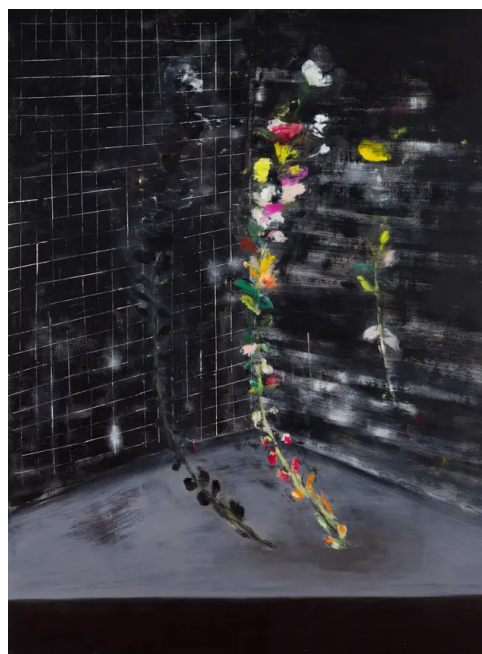
Riad Miah, "Ross Bleckner: Never The Less," September, 2026.

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Ross Bleckner: *Never The Less*

By Riad Miah



Ross Bleckner, *Burn Painting (Rooms Combined to Cheer)*, 2020. Oil on linen, 96 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

The exhibition *Never The Less* at Guild Hall in East Hampton, New York, presents 185 small paintings (measuring 10 by 8 inches or vice versa) and ten large paintings of varying sizes by Ross Bleckner. This contrast in scale highlights the exhibition's central focus. While the smaller paintings form the conceptual and visual core, the large works demonstrate what happens when these explorations are expanded.

Spanning over four decades from 1984 to 2026, the smaller works are displayed in six horizontal rows on a single wall. Bleckner and curator Melanie Crader have arranged them to create a visual sequence where association replaces chronology. Images and shapes evolve from one painting to the next. Dots become lozenges, then cells, which transform into flowers, birds, or organic forms. Rejecting linear chronology is central to the exhibition's

520 W 25th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212 680 9467 Fax 212 680 9473 info@petzel.com www.petzel.com

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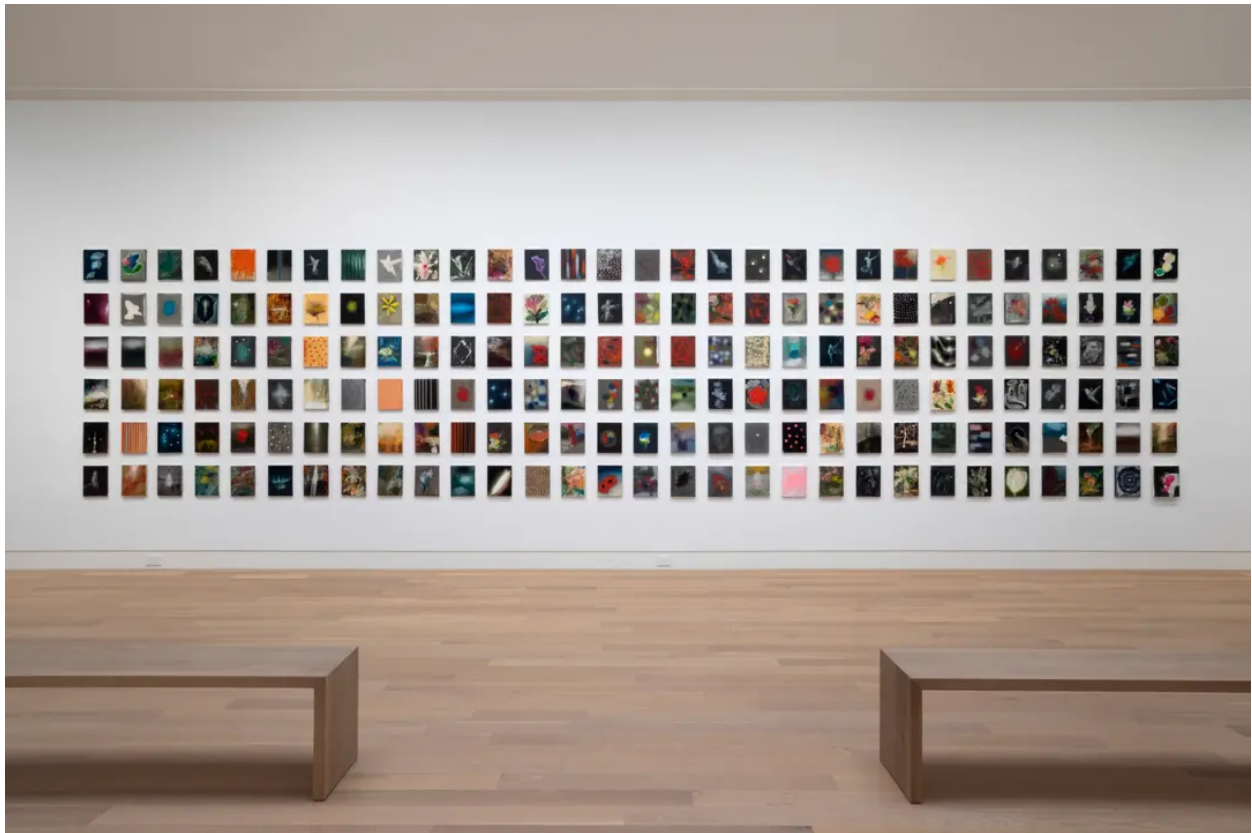
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visual architecture, inviting viewers to identify recurring forms, gestures, colors, and subjects across decades. As Crader notes in the catalogue, "Bleckner begins by making his own paint and testing it on sheets of black paper ... From there, he produces a series of larger paintings, beginning with the eight-by-ten-inch canvases and moving incrementally," an indication of how the exhibition blurs the line between "study" and "finished" work.

The small paintings are neither purely preparatory nor fully independent; they serve as spaces where questions of material, image, scale, and perception remain open. Artists have long challenged the distinction between study and finished work, as Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings, Michelangelo's studies, Auguste Rodin's plaster models attest. Exhibitions like Hopper Drawing at the Whitney Museum of American Art have more recently elevated preparatory work to a central subject, but even Rodin's 1900 retrospective at the Pavillon de l'Alma included works at various stages of completion, making process integral to the display. These examples reflect a broader shift: the artist's process is no longer secondary to the finished piece. The trace of thought is now part of the work's meaning.

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Installation view: Ross Bleckner: Never The Less, Guild Hall, East Hampton, NY, 2026. Courtesy Guild Hall.

Our willingness to now value the process itself accounts for the shift. Contemporary art increasingly seeks authenticity in the studio. Audiences want to witness the artist's thinking: the brushstroke before it becomes a mark, the sketch before it forms an image, the failed attempt before it succeeds. The preparatory work serves as a backstage pass. Despite this, Bleckner's small paintings are impressive because they are not merely preparatory drawings; they are complete works. Their surfaces are scraped, layered, stained, obscured, and altered. While their size suggests intimacy, their substance resists being reduced to notes. They are not "studies for paintings" but paintings where the act of painting remains visible.

Bleckner's exploration of abstraction and representation is particularly effective. Throughout his career, he has worked in the space between recognizable images and their dissolution. Flowers, birds, architectural forms, biological cells, grids, dots, and atmospheric

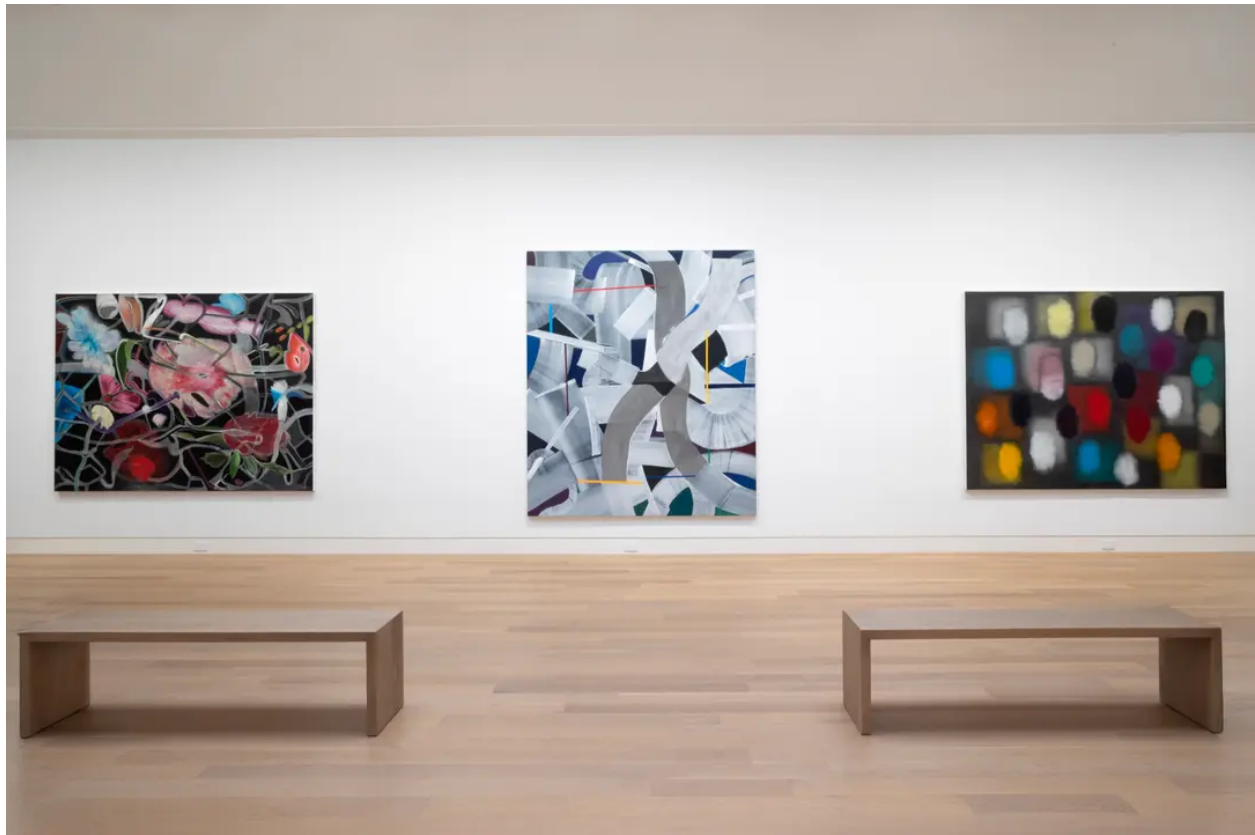
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fields emerge and disappear within the paint. Representation is never fully established, nor is abstraction complete; the image remains in flux. This is especially evident in the smaller works, which foster a close relationship between viewer and surface. Examples include two untitled studies dating from 1984 and 2008. The earlier work's dominant characteristic is scraped-away marks that leave an atmospheric pocket. Meanwhile, in the later work, a similar process is utilized in its making, yet the net result is what might be construed as flower and foliage. Viewers must look closely to discern details, only to find the image receding. The paintings do not simply depict objects; they present the act of recognition itself.

This situates Bleckner within a modernist question: how can painting remain representational while retaining material independence? His approach differs from Clement Greenberg's formalism, which emphasized two-dimensionality, optical quality, and materiality. Instead, Bleckner allows representation and materiality to influence and blur each other. The flower is paint, and the paint becomes a flower; neither category remains fixed. Gerhard Richter offers a useful, though imperfect, comparison. Richter's work alternates between photographic representation and abstraction, embracing contradiction rather than resolving it. Bleckner similarly refuses to choose between image and abstraction. However, while Richter often emphasizes the tension between photographic illusion and painterly gesture, Bleckner's imagery is more biological, atmospheric, and suggestive. His forms seem to emerge from the material itself. Labeling Bleckner as the "American answer" to Richter is too simplistic. More importantly, both artists use uncertainty as a generative principle, building their paintings around the instability of perception.

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Bleckner's paintings on black paper, on exhibit at the Madoo Conservancy in nearby Sagaponack, further extend this exploration. In these works, blackness is more than a background; it is a space where forms emerge, are absorbed, and vanish. They seem to arise from darkness rather than rest on a neutral ground, and further frame the small paintings at Guild Hall as fragments of a larger pictorial ecosystem.

Never The Less succeeds because it does more than display Bleckner's working method; it centers the method itself. The ten large paintings become secondary, illustrating what happens when the careful investigations of the smaller works are expanded. The usual hierarchy is reversed: the study becomes the main event, and the completed painting is its outcome. This approach challenges the traditional art historical belief that an artwork is

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most successful when uncertainty is resolved. Bleckner instead suggests that unresolved forms, tentative gestures, and unstable images may best reveal artistic intelligence.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2026/09/artseen/ross-bleckner-never-the-less/>