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Ross Bleckner, Ryan Sullivan, "Ross Bleckner: The Toad Chapters," Artforum, October 1, 2026.

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ROSS BLECKNER: THE TOAD CHAPTERS

By Ross Bleckner, Ryan Sullivan



Ross Bleckner notebook pages, 2009–23. Detail, 2022.

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IN THE SUMMER OF 2005, I graduated from art school and moved to a loft in a Brooklyn warehouse. Lacking rent money, I cold-emailed a number of artists whose addresses I could find online in the hopes of being hired as a studio assistant. Ross Bleckner replied. I’d seen one of his paintings a few years prior at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC—a concise image of white birds falling in indigo space dated 1994–95. In an unpunctuated, all-lowercase message, he told me that he was away for the summer but could meet if I was willing to come to Long Island.

I took a bus out east. We ate lunch at a diner before visiting his studio. At the time, Ross lived in a saltbox house he’d purchased from the estate of Truman Capote, and the studio was in a barn around the corner. Low benches lined the airy space. Propped up against them were colorful large-scale oil paintings of orbs floating against blurry color fields. It was a stark departure from what I’d seen at the museum, and at the time it was still novel to me that the same artist could produce two such different bodies of work.

Ross and I didn’t often discuss his work directly, but early on I had the chance to look through the sketchbooks he kept on his desk—a pile of curiously ordinary marbled “Composition Notebooks.” At the centers of the flimsy student-grade pages, he’d affix newspaper clippings with tape and glue. Drawn from the *Times* or local rags, the cutouts sometimes included images; others were just bits of text from the news or obituary sections. As I looked through, it became evident that the blurry paintings around the studio, the ones I’d been so surprised to see, had their basis in out-of-focus backgrounds from the sports section. As the camera focused on a star player making a touchdown or a slam dunk, the faces of the fans behind them would coalesce into a colorful, murky abstraction.

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Over my three years working in Ross's studio, I looked through his entire cache of notebooks, dating as far back as 1980. Not only do they provide a codex to the artist's development, they link the private, internal world-making of painting to an ordinary daily act: reading the news at the kitchen table. Throughout his sketchbooks, the outside world meets the inside one. The earliest ones are filled with clippings that picture grand chandeliers or trophies or urns. Largely these images are black-and-white, with an emphasis on the chiaroscuro light effects that punctuate the plaintive, nocturnal paintings he made during that period of the AIDS epidemic.

Flowers began to trickle into the books in the early '90s and remained for years to come. Cheerful images of daisies and sunflowers, culled from hardware store seed packets and perfume advertisements, sit alongside micrographs of cells and other elements invisible to the naked eye. In paintings like *White House*, 1994, and *Sea and Mirror*, 1996, the flowers are transformed: stripped of their stems and of their original contexts, whether gardens or bouquets—just the flower heads stamped into vast, emotive space.

This past August I visited Ross's studio once again and looked through the sketchbooks he's made in the nearly twenty years since I worked with him. The drawing practice remains resolutely homespun. In one spread from 2022 (p. 121), a view upward of the sky—as if looking up from a blanket in a park—is collaged with pieces of black paper; white brushstrokes sit proudly in the foreground, like clouds looking back down at the viewer. As is usual for Ross, the subject seems related to absence: ground more than figure, space more than what it contains.

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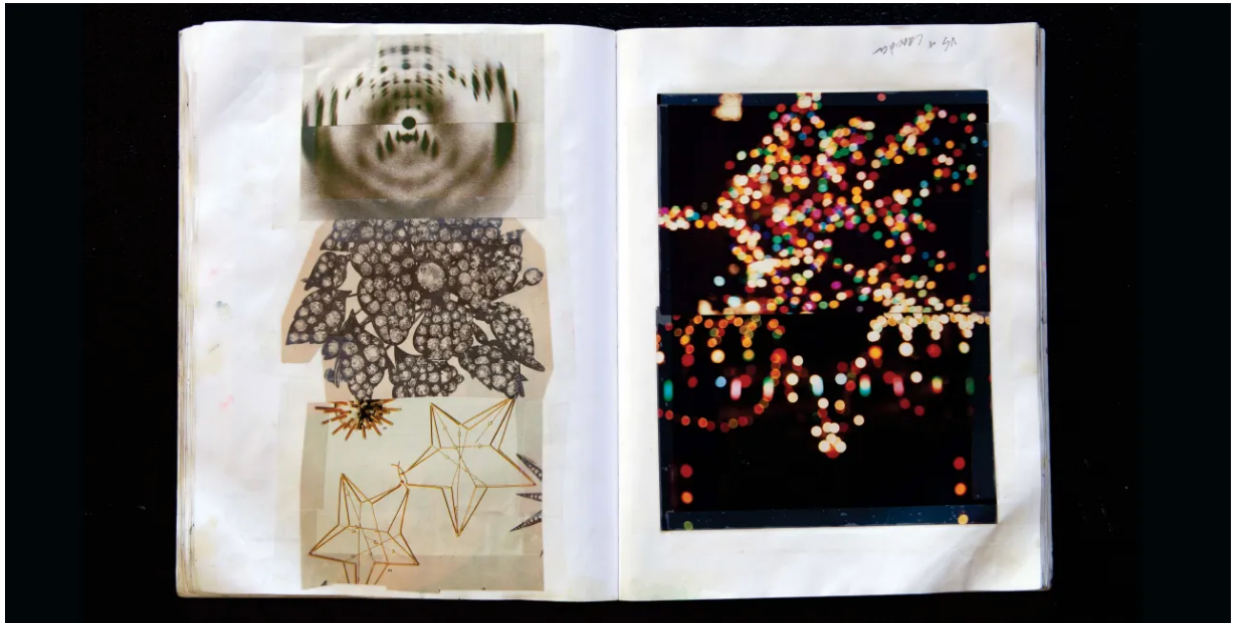
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But maybe the absence is of a different order now. Over the course of my visit we discussed Ross's use of 5-MeO-DMT, a compound excreted from the glands of the Colorado River toad. The drug induces a powerful loss of personal identity and a brief but total dissolution of time and space. In all of the sketchbook entries reproduced here, Ross seems to offer a bridge between the representation of emptiness and the lived sensation of it. He turns his attention to states of consciousness that contain no main character, no fixed perspective. Boundaries are fluid, logic-defying. When I asked Ross's permission to write about his use of the drug—an illegal one—he was emphatic with his "yes." In life as in art, he wants to say something about the human condition that by its nature can't be pictured or described, which I think is the reason he keeps trying.

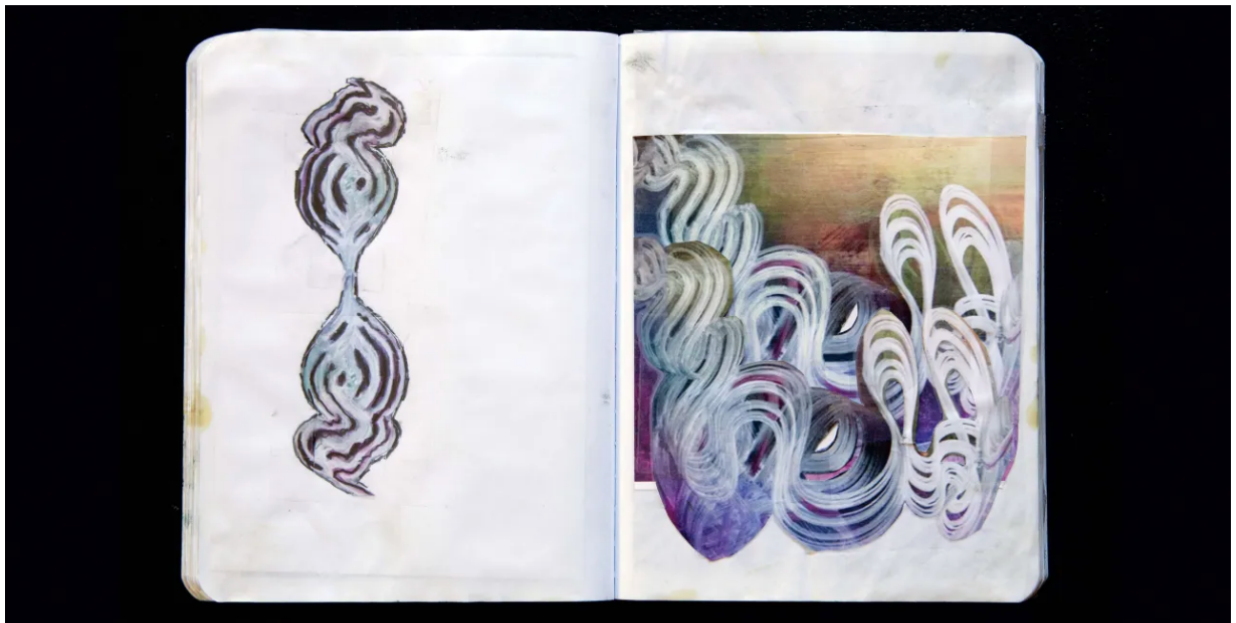
Ryan Sullivan is an artist living in New York City. He opens his next show at Galerie Gisela Capitan in Cologne, Germany In November.

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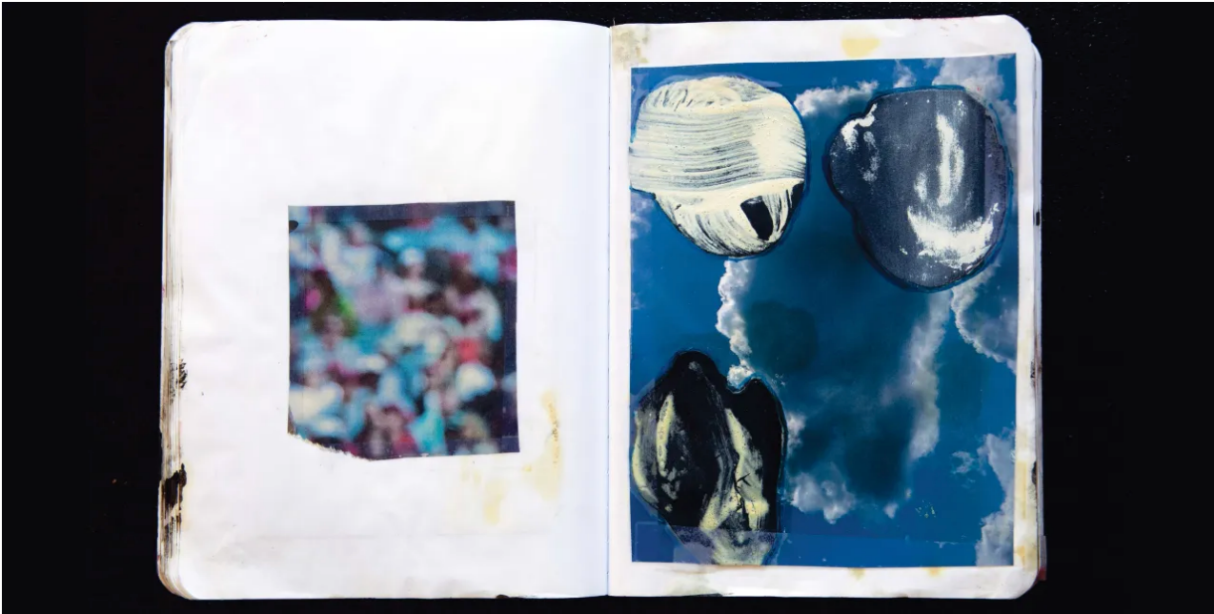
Ross Bleckner notebook pages, 2009–23. Detail, 2009.



Ross Bleckner notebook pages, 2009–23. Detail, 2023

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