Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, "A History of the Painter's Heart An Interview with Ross Bleckner," *Border Crossings,* September 2019.

A HISTORY OF THE PAINTER'S HEART An Interview with Ross Bleckner

Interview by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh

Ross Bleckner admits that the idea of beauty has always been a personal fascination, and the result of his compelling interest is the production of bodies of work that aspire towards and achieve the condition of the radiant and the sublime. At the core of his expression is a profound affirmation of the human spirit, and one of its deepest manifestations is a spiritual dimension that has little to do with conventional religiosity and everything to do with an unwavering humanist epistemology. His most recent exhibition, "Ross Bleckner: Pharmaceutria" at Petzel in New York, included 15 paintings, all large oils on linen, that, taken together, are a measure of where he sees himself and the medium that has been his primary focus from the time he left CalArts with his MFA in hand in 1973 and returned to New York.

Bleckner sees these paintings as addressing his awareness of time and mortality. *Pharmaceutria* is Latin for "sorceress," and there is something irresistibly seductive about the body of work that carries this name. One of the screens through which it looks at painting today is the history of painting in the past. The surfaces of these new works include visual echoes of painters he has admired, including El Greco, Claude Monet, Édouard Manet, Emile Nolde, Odilon Redon and James Ensor. There is a rich layering, and an equally rich taking away in the "burn paintings," that is everywhere evident on the painted surface. For Bleckner, painting is like a skin, so what happens on the painting's body is a reprise of what has happened on the human body.

Of course, using painting as a vehicle for an investigation of death is one of the things for which he is best known and properly admired. Beginning in 1985 with *Hospital Room*, a memorial to a lost friend, he began a process of painting through the AIDS crisis and over the intervening 34 years developed a singularly personal language that mourned the devastation of the illness and celebrated the resilience of the gay community that was its principal victim. His visual expression of the epidemic's effect reached a high point in the "Memorial Paintings" in 1994, but his commitment to recognizing its presence never stopped. Bleckner became the articulate voice, in image and through social activism, of the AIDS movement. "The meaning of being an artist isn't about going to my studio and choosing a little more white or a little more blue," he says in the following interview. "The meaning is what's going on in the world and bringing that into my studio and into my work. ... I'm also an artist and a citizen and I'm a gay man and I

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Ross Bleckner, *Untitled*, 2018, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Image courtesy Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto.

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have to bring all those into the dialogue." The complexity of the dialogue in which he is engaged is traceable on the skin of his paintings: "My best paintings are about the things that an artist refuses to talk about."

Bleckner is also capable of pulling out all the stops and painting a gorgeous still life, like *Untitled,* 2018, a work that will be included in his upcoming exhibition at Paul Petro Contemporary Art in Toronto. But it's worth repeating his awareness that "beauty is a subterfuge" and that even when he is the most sensuous, he will strike a more sombre chord; the radiance of his floral still life is emphasized by its impenetrably dark background, just as the delicate floating shapes in paintings like *Crowd,* 2016, and *Nearer, Deeper, Firmer,* 2019, are seductive transformations of the Kaposi sarcoma lesions that were the surface of his AIDS-related paintings.

Throughout his work he has effortlessly moved back and forth between contrasting states, the inside and the outside, the microscopic and the telescopic, the absent and the present. Perhaps nowhere is his skill in this shifting visual architecture more apparent than in his portrayal of light. His intention in all his paintings has been to produce a persistent, internally generated light. He told *Border Crossings* that he has been "trying through all the chaos to find the space of light and clarity." Elsewhere he has said, "The main thing for me is how the image is disembodied, almost vaporized, into this continuous pulsating glow that emanates from something." Bleckner will admit that he doesn't know how he achieves this disappearing presence, but it is one of the singular achievements of his painting. He has been able to make visible the absent, to embody the disembodied. It is a paradox of considerable depth and it has resulted in paintings of—and we go back to where we started—radiant beauty.

Ross Bleckner was interviewed by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York on June 14, 2019. "Pharmaceutria" was on exhibition there from April 24 to June 15, 2019. "Ross Bleckner" will be on exhibition at Paul Petro Contemporary Art in Toronto from November 15 to December 21, 2019.

ROSS BLECKNER: Aging is freaking me out. I'm serious. It was not a surprise, but it played a lot into these paintings. I had the idea that I should leave the city for a while and rethink things and do a body of work that's about mortality and life and the situation that we live in, and that's unlike the cartoony, very pop art paintings that I see in the art world all around me. It's almost like everything has to be visible for an instant at an art fair. I want to do the opposite of that, make paintings that deal with the way your mind works, not a style of painting necessarily but the way consciousness works, which is that it goes off in many different directions. It is dark and it's light; it's lyrical, it's serious and melancholic. It's not just a way of finding a strategy to make formal marks or make paintings that look good. That also should be something that they do, but that's just one of the functions. But the beauty in them is a subterfuge to bring you in to what I feel is a more complex narrative.

BORDER CROSSINGS: Beauty is the seduction? That's how you seduce the viewer into the apprehension of the work?
Yes. I've always had an anxiety about the difference between the bigness of ego and the dissolution of ego. I want my paintings to be more about its dissolution into this ethereal and ineffable 'other' space. But I also want them to be a body of strong paintings that say something and that have an identity. But I don't know what my identity is.



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1. Installation view, "Pharmaceutria," 2019, Petzel, New York. Image courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

2. *Untitled*, 2018, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 inches. Image courtesy Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto.



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But of the painters of your generation, you have been able to develop a pictorial language that seems entirely your own. And it has a lot to do with the tension between spectral dissolution and then the appearance of something. Was a lot of that strategic in the way you made pictures?

No, it wasn't. I see a lot of paintings that I think are terrific, but to me they look like the layering of strategies to make a terrific painting. Especially now, where you start with, let's say, a printed background and you get some images from Photoshop, and then maybe you spray on something. And on top of all of that you create a drop shadow. That is a pop culture-oriented modality that you see very often. My problem with it is that I couldn't care less about pop culture.

But you had an early interest in the tropes of Op Art.

It's the way perception works and I still have an interest in that aspect. That has to do with what I was saying before about the ineffable. It's the space in consciousness where something makes sense to the eye and then dissolves and it does both those things simultaneously. An image is there and fades right in front of you and you can't quite locate what's going on. What I felt I was bringing to the idea of perception wasn't the pop culture thing; it was actually the science thing. When I looked at a lot of Op Art, I was trying to give it some reason to be other than just being art for art's sake. So, for me, it was connected to science and perception, but the problem was it was very mechanical.

The story goes that you were 15 when you saw the "Responsive Eye" at MoMA in 1965 on a school trip and were knocked out by it. That show included Bridget Riley, Victor Vasarely and a beautiful stripe painting by Morris Louis called *Number 33* that must have hit your optic nerve.

That's what it did. The idea that things can hit your optic nerve is a foil for their going deeper into your body. So your relationship with the painting isn't in you and it isn't in the painting. It starts to become a circular space between you and the painting based on vibratory energy. That's what fascinated me then and I am still fascinated by the idea that painting can actually have a vibratory energy.

What's extraordinary about this exhibition is the way it keeps confusing you. *Wanting to Fall* (2019) is overloaded at the top, and as you move down the compression changes, and by the time you get to the bottom of the painting, it opens up. As a result, you're always trying to find the right distance from the painting to properly read it.

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I take that as a compliment because I'm not smart enough to think through something as evolved as that. Actually, all that is, is me trying to find my way through the painting; it's a lot about not knowing. I have that Zen thing about not knowing.

What you end up saying is what you don't know?
Yes. I'm making the painting and then I'm erasing the painting, and I'm scraping the painting. And then I'm burning the painting. I'd done that in the past and because of the atmosphere in this country, and also in the world, I started doing it again. I first burned a painting in the "Examined Life" series in the '90s. They were black paintings but very perspectival. Rooms and layers and places that were deep and then far and close.

They have a strange and sometimes spectral quality that makes me think of Odilon Redon and Gustav Moreau.
I guess you process it all. I still basically think of the same handful of artists. As much as I live in the world and see myself as political and pragmatic, I also have this utopian sense of possibility. And something that people don't talk about, including me, because they don't know how to talk about it properly, is spirituality. But that was mostly what Rothko and the abstract expressionists were about. It was about trying, through all the chaos, to find this space of light and clarity. That always appealed to me. Rothko appealed to me a lot. He's an artist whom I certainly go back to because of the spirit and the feeling and the aspiration.

One of the things that fascinated me in reading through the criticism about your work is that nobody has pinned down your relationship to irony. Peter Halley calls you an "ironical transcendentalist." He's trying to characterize you as a painter who aspires toward spirituality at the same time that you're aware of the irony of being a painter at a time when the medium is distrusted.
I hate to say it, but there is not that much irony. The irony that I do feel has to do with the cosmic awareness that we're here for such a short time and that we take all this bullshit so seriously. That in itself is ironic, that our system has created our minds and our minds are geared toward competition, things my better self wouldn't want to be involved with. I don't want to know who's better, who's not better, who's selling more, who's selling less. Does it matter? So you have to take a breath and try to find this other place. It's really the projection of these places. I could never be out of our system because you can't be outside something that you're inside. You could look at it, you could analyze it for yourself, you can express your feelings about it, but we're all stuck because we've been articulated and conditioned through propaganda from when we're tiny, tiny children. It's all geared and structured, so that it puts us on a path that leads us to be complicit and complacent with our political system and be quiet and be good consumers because that's what keeps everything running. I don't want to be any of that but I am. But you can have feelings about it and sometimes there's a little anger, sometimes a little melancholy. Why did it have to be like this? Things could have been arranged differently; we could have inherited a different mindset. Everybody knows that it's unsustainable as it is now, except the politicians.

When you do *Burn Painting* (2018), the rest of the title asks the parenthetical question, "How did this happen?" Is that question political, socio-economic, aesthetic? What does it address?
That's where the irony fits in and that's how I respond and react to things—it's both self-reflexive and outward questioning. I did that painting right after the nomination at the Republican convention and I was so frustrated and so off-balance that the painting kept changing. It was an incoherent mess and I realized I was channelling the incoherence I was feeling. So I'm either going to put it away and work on it when things are different, or I'm going to say, "How did this happen? How did this mess of a painting happen?" It's a rhetorical question, a kind of self-criticism. I could ask that about every one of my paintings.

Are you being sincere when you say you have no virtuoso techniques?
I've learned to accept that I'm always afraid. When I was working on these paintings, I wasn't working on them for a show. I actually didn't want to have a show. I had this idea to make a body of work and see where it would go and not make plans for anything. And I realized I was afraid of so many things. I can't draw well. Compare and despair. I'm not David Hockney, okay? But then the point of being an artist is trying, through all the restrictions, through all the systems, through all the indoctrination, to find spaces where you can free yourself up and maybe even communicate that little bit of freedom outside of yourself. I thought, what does it matter if I know how to paint a figure? I'm not Eric Fischl. I don't give a shit if I paint the figure this way or that way. I actually had the idea to paint a painting where people appeared from other centuries.

In *The Centuries* (2018), the woman who is second from the right looks like Gorky's mother from his famous self-portrait called *The Artist and His Mother* that he worked on from 1926 until 1942.
It isn't, but now that you say it, I can see it. I looked at paintings from the 17th to the 19th centuries and the figures from the 21st century represented artificial intelligence. For me, the trans-human offers some hope. What has evolved is not sustainable and what supercedes us may not turn out to be specifically human, but it may be smarter, better at solving problems and may have more compassion. In 500 years people are going to look back and think, "They were so primitive; they didn't even have a cure for cancer." People will think we were actually at the end of the Dark Ages because of the way we've lived, fighting wars and building idiotic boundaries and borders and walls.

***Palms, Handwriting or Faces* (2019), like *The Centuries*, looks like a different kind of painting.**
The Centuries was the Western version and I thought of *Palms, Handwriting or Faces* as the Eastern version because it was all from Hindu imagery. I saw this picture of a statue of Vishnu and I thought, oh my god, that's exactly what I want to do.

You think dialectically, but you cut the edges off the dialectic and blend them one into the other? You seem always to

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The Centuries, 2018, oil on linen, 72 x 108 inches. Images courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York.

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1. *Burn Painting (How Did This Happen)*, 2018, oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches.

2. *Petition*, 2018, oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches.

3. *I Met a Man*, 2018, oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches.

4. *Your Map of This Place*, 2019, oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches.

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1. *Wanting to Fail*, 2019, oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches.

2. *Burn Painting (Crossing the Border)*, 2015, oil on linen, 96 x 72 inches.



be bringing things together rather than recognizing their separateness.
Not recognizing separateness is a very good objective. Just in terms of living our lives, there is the hope that we can somehow bring things together.

When you talk about portraits, I think of *The Centuries* and *I Met a Man* (2018), where you run through a whole series of basic physiognomies, a set of mask-like faces. That painting made me think of James Ensor. Is he one of the painters you were looking at in thinking about that painting?
It actually was. You're very good with your history. I used a torch and I burnt through that painting to get the eyes.

You take an acetylene torch to the surface and essentially burn the pigment away?
Exactly. For that one the whole thing is painted dark blue. Then I work into it by painting a little with the brush. And then I lay it on the ground and if I want to make an eye, I take a torch and where I moved the paint away, it opens up and fuses. It's unpredictable. What I liked about it is that it's very organic. And the paintings are kind of ruined, but then I have something to work with. It started out with the idea of the heads and then I wanted to see what would happen.

There's a ghost mask on the surface that is almost invisible.
That's where I either scraped something out or burnt it more. I burnt some of them so much it was as if I wanted them to disappear.

You did the same thing with the flower paintings. Is that a reflection of the short life of the subject matter, or is something larger and psychic going on?
It certainly has to do with the fragility of an object, but it's also about the transformative energy in things. You know, they're really there for only a very limited amount of time and then they disintegrate or wilt or they die. I never put flowers out. Pictures of them, fine. I can keep busy looking at the glass flowers of Manet.

You take that extraordinary painting by Manet with the glass-knobbed vase and do your version of it in a 16 x 20 format and then you also do bigger flower paintings.
Yes. A lot of these things are a ruse to expand the painting vocabulary. Even though they hold onto an imagery, they hold onto it so tentatively. I needed it to be grounded in something real before I went off into this space that's outside of the real. It's a way for me to deal with chemistry, and chemistry is a very important thing for me. I am not going to invent a new way of painting. I don't have that kind of talent or intelligence. The only way it could ever happen would be accidentally, so what I can do is try to set up the conditions for the accident to occur. That accident, just like in our body, will occur through mutation. I make a lot of my paint and so I keep thinking if I boil it, or put this in the pigment, or if I change the liquid or the proportion, maybe something will come out of the chemistry of making a painting.

When you talk about chemistry and science, you're talking about alchemy and the belief that you can transmute base substances into something great.
Yes, I'm trying to take this lumpy stuff and if I combine it enough different ways with enough different other stuff, maybe some new little thing will emerge.

You make a lot of your own pigments, mix your own colours, you work with encaustic and wax. Is opening yourself up to different technical apparatuses a way of getting more out of the language of painting?
Absolutely, because the chemistry comes in where I make mistakes in putting things together. The reaction they have to

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each other creates their own imagery. I'm always looking for the imagery that's happening on the side, whether it's the paper or in the palette, or wherever it is. It's not at the centre of my mind, but that stuff always creates peripheral vision. I realize that's like a thing I'm not thinking about, but the not-thinking about it is a way to make it fresh. To try to make something fresh, as a goal, is already not making it fresh.

You do French flowers but you've also done German flowers. There are a couple of your floral paintings that look a lot like Emil Nolde.
Well, after Manet I got into Nolde. I remember a painting called *Red Poppies* from 1908 that I was specifically taken with.

You do your own Monets, but you don't do Fantin-Latour. You seem to pick the painters you want to emulate.
Maybe I do. I just love to look at the way other painters paint, and if I can, I'll try to capture a moment somewhere here and somewhere there and put it together. But I've never called myself an appropriation artist, although I've been doing what you've been describing since graduate school.

You're pretty omnivorous in your taste. There's no governor on who you'll look at.
It's a cross-cultural, cross-time dialogue. That's what all artists do: have a dialogue.

In a painting like *Photosynthesis*, you're clearly riffing on Matisse's *The Piano Lesson* (1916). That arabesque is clearly a deliberate echo.
Absolutely. I love that painting. I think about the painters I think about, and I keep thinking about them. I'm still trying to paint the kind of light that Rothko paints, but paint it and not have it necessarily look like Rothko. The way I think of it is that it's a lightness out of dark. And that's how I actually think of all Monet paintings. I actually feel that my best paintings have a lot of space and light in them. Layers between space and the light that emanates from somewhere inside the painting. Maybe in multiple places, but the light comes through the dark.

You've said there's no beyond in your work, but you seem to always be after something else.
What I'm after is what I'm not, what I can't do and what I don't believe in. I don't know how to describe it. So you paint what you wish for. You paint the change you want to see or the one you believe can happen. You find meaning outside yourself. I'm trying to make paintings that are not about me. I would like to make paintings that are ethereal and effusive enough that they're going to fall apart. But they're going to fall apart in the way that air circulates, in the way that we become different people as our lives change, in the way that we have different ideas at different times. That's following a line that is not linear. I've tried to deal with myself as a non-stylist stylist, as someone who is able to do all different kinds of bodies of work. I've done shows that looked like



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group shows. I could hear people saying, "What is this all about?" I could easily go over my body of work and have a show and you would think a different artist did it, because the truth is: I am different artists.

You said you wanted to find a signature style. Have you found it? Is there a Blecknerian style?
If it evolved naturally and I was really happy making that particular painting over and over again, in different variations and colours, I would do it. Like Peter Halley, Sean Scully and Brice Marden. I think they're three really good painters; but I'm a different kind of personality. I'm not as fixed. I always say if you want to be an artist, then you're really signing up for a life of uncertainty. People will ask, "Doesn't it get better as you get older?" and the answer is: not really.

One of the things I have always admired about Walt Whitman is that he would have a line about beetles rolling balls of dung, and then in the next verse paragraph in *Leaves of Grass*, his vision would be cosmological. Your interest in the inside and the outside and the dialogue that occurs between them means you can move easily from the microscopic to the telescopic.
That has to do with the cosmic irony that if you take an electron microscope and you look in the body, it's similar to looking up in the sky. And that's why everything in your body and in the sky works the way it's supposed to. It is the way it is, until it isn't. I always say we're one thin membrane wall away from a mutation and then suddenly everything is wrong.

Through the AIDS crisis you developed a pictorial language that was a way of representing the disease. Did you want to become the chronicler and interpreter of the AIDS crisis?
Well, I didn't know what other people were doing, but I wanted to understand the body and the disease, to understand it, to analyze it and also to commemorate. It was a personal position that I took because I thought that it had to do with what it means to be an artist. It's like Philip Guston's position: the meaning of being an artist isn't about going to my studio and choosing a little more white or a little more blue. The meaning is what's going on in the world and bringing that into my studio and into my work. So that's against the purely formal nature of painting. I wanted to deal with the subject that created a rupture when I was in my late 20s. I had always thought of myself as an abstract painter, but I realized that the rupture was so great that being an abstract painter wasn't going to cut it. I'm also an artist and a citizen and I'm a gay man and I have to bring all those into the dialogue.

You felt an ethical responsibility to bring together those various strings?
"Ethical" is too much. It was personal. I felt it was important to articulate those categories of things as well as make beautiful abstract paintings. But I wasn't doing agitprop. I was doing advocacy. I realized that I could do feeling in my work and the advocacy was going to have to be done outside

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my work. So I became an activist and then went on to make ACRIA, the AIDS Community Research Initiative of America, a very viable organization that did a lot.

There is a line from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" where he addresses the nightingale. He calls it "the darkling" and he says, "I have been half in love with easeful Death." Your work attempts to get at the complexity of what it is to live through a crisis, and in doing that you have to resurrect death through beauty. Were you half in love with easeful death in your work?
Well, I'm in that Buddhist tradition and all Buddhism is a preparation for death; it's about giving up the self. As an artist it's very hard to give up the self; you're supposed to have a self and an identity. So where's that fluctuating space between the two, the surrounding vapour? How can you paint things that aren't depictive, aren't representational, aren't illustration? That's something I'm trying to do. I don't think I've ever succeeded, because it's probably not possible, but you can only try to do your best. I've come to have peace with that.

Is that sense of peacefulness reflected in "Pharmaceutria?"
Absolutely. I think a lot of my work reflects failure, the failure of our generation. That's what *Burn Painting (2050: Not My Future)* from 2016 is about. It's "I fucked up. Now, here, you do something about it." The "you" are the kids who are the generation that will have power in 2050 when they're in their 40s and 50s. Not me; I'm dead. I'm out of here. We are all out of here and we did a shitty job. We should feel bad about it and try to live the best life we can and also be happy. How do you do all those things?

We live inside contradiction, so is the job of the artist to find a way to reconcile those contradictions, or just understand that they exist?
I think understanding that those contradictions exist and using them to create a space that describes who you can be is constantly evolving and changing. You're always somewhere on the spectrum. For some reason, and I don't know why, birds are the only thing I knew how to paint. I see people who can paint unbelievably, as if it were God given. I'm not that. I have to work hard to get to the place because I'm always confused about where the place is. And when I get to the place, the spot that I was ready to touch on, it's already moved. So you're always following the shifting parts. And painting should be about that elusiveness, the illusion that we are who we think we are.

And that doesn't engender a sense of despair in you? Is that the basis for your hopefulness?
It is. Sometimes I get a little despondent, but I set it up as a logic. I look forward to going to my studio because there's not a painting to paint; there's a problem to solve and I'm looking for the answer. I really think the answer will be somewhere in my studio if I look hard enough, or work hard enough, or think it through long enough.

In *Linkage Map* (2000), you seem to have all the objects of your pictorial vocabulary hanging in space. It's like the inside of your head, as if your visual imagination circulates stuff that is available if you determine that you want to use it.
Especially if I run out of ideas. So let me do one here and one there, like from a Chinese menu. It's funny because I don't have that much imagination. I have to have a picture in my hand. If I'm painting a flower, I can't paint a real flower, but I can paint a reproduction that I'm holding in my hand. Even if I'm not looking at it. And the painting I've been holding in my hand is a Manet painting. The first time I did a circle with flowers in 1985, it's the same dumb painting. I can be very OCD that way. The things around me and the things that I refer to are jumping-off points.

In your "Dream and Do" paintings from 1996, you go beyond Wayne Thiebaud. They're desserts. Some of the time they look like maraschino cherries covered in chocolate.
That's funny because I did those paintings right after I had a show at the Guggenheim in 1995 and when I looked at my show a few times, I realized my problem was I needed to lighten up a little. My solution was colour. I had done flowers and I thought that's where the colour is in my paintings, in these little spots of a flower, a wisp or a fragment, that used to be there. So then I did big puffs of them.

Your trajectory is interesting: you go to Cal Arts in 1972 and when you come back to New York in 1973, painting has been declared dead and you're a painter. Did you have any anxieties about painting's being an art form through which you could actually say significant things?
Painting will be irrelevant when people feel the need not to paint anymore. But that hasn't happened. As a matter of fact, the reverse has happened. There are more good painters around now than ever before. But the death-of-painting debate didn't matter to me. I'm not a theoretician. I'm not here to create or to refute theory. When you're young all you really have is the emotion and desire to do something you feel you need to do. And if you feel that painting is the thing that will help you relieve that desire, you're going to make the paintings. I don't think it's up to me to decide if they're relevant or irrelevant. I can't make that determination.

But in your 1979 essay called "Transcendent Anti-Fetishism," you declared that "artistic creation is the problem of madness and death." You came out pretty strong on the psychological side of things.
I was in analysis and I was trying to work out issues: Where is my sexuality in my painting; is it in it or is it not in it? Is there politics in it or not in it? I was still trying to figure out can I be an abstract painter whose abstract paintings convey a politics and a sexuality? I think that's where I got separated from a lot of my contemporaries, particularly when they were painting what people would now call hyper-masculine, heroic paintings. You know, big ego, big paintings. I was painting flowers, more abstract things, and I didn't want to be one of those people who is a gay painter. It's like a lot of women who don't want to be limited to being considered a woman painter. But I do think a straight man would not make the paintings that I make. There's a sensibility that allows both fragileness and sentimentality into the dialogue and the narrative.

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And you think that that's part of the queer sensibility?
I do because it's seeing more marginalized things a little bit from the side that may be a little more gentle.

As a way of being a painter and a man in the world, does that mean you look for a way to cultivate that marginality and that outsider-ness?
I've tried to make it into a strength by not making it the central focus, but being it and using it as a position of strength to make intense, strong paintings that happen to be made by a gay man with some fragileness and sentimentality attached to the imagery. I used to get criticized a lot for that. Do I get it now? I don't know.

You made *Hothouse* in 1994 and while it's the name of that particular painting, it also strikes me as describing the nature of your imagination. You seem never to run out of ideas. Is it that one painting always generates another painting?
That's what I mean by waiting and investigating the mutation. I probably should have done groups of paintings consecutively. When I was working on the Dome paintings or the Dot paintings, something happened and I said, "Oh my god, I have to stop making the painting right away, because I'm going to forget if I don't do it now. I'll come back to the Dot paintings, let me do these other paintings now." But you don't really do it like that. Like right now I'm painting flag paintings, like that grey painting called *Petition*. I had a show in Vienna and I painted a red one that was really intense. A long time ago, I painted *Throbbing Hearts*. It was kind of Rothko, red blobs, very fuzzy edges, very optical so when you looked at it there was a little bit of a pulsation. I looked at that painting in a book and I thought, "It's time to start appropriating a few things from my own work. You've done it, so use your own vocabulary." But I didn't want to make it the same. So when I saw a picture in the paper of a demonstration with people with different coloured flags, I said, "Oh my god, that's it." That's the painting called *Petition*.

As you walk across that painting, it literally disappears and then it comes back into focus. That's what I was getting at in the elusive quality of the work in the show. It never settles for you as a viewer; it always keeps moving.
Well, in that particular painting I used different pigments that respond to light in different ways.

One quick thing about the Dome paintings and the *Architecture of the Sky*: Was that a conscious attempt to shift the perceptual frame? Looking at those paintings is like being under a vaulted ceiling and looking up at a magnificent piece of architecture. It seems both contained inside a space and yet at the same time it seems to be escaping the idea of contained space. Is that the tension in the work?
Actually, that represents the skin. To me, it's almost like the architecture is the border crossing between the micro and the macro.

So is your work involved in the threshold between those conditions of inside/outside?
It's between the micro and the macro. It's not just about the body, although sometimes I made paintings that were very realistic, those paintings of cells and stuff. They're hyper-realism. But then I wanted the light and the air, the wind and the stars. It's like asking: Where do you look every day? Do you look at things; do you look at space; do you look at people? And when your mind follows your eyes, it generates a lot of thoughts and some of those thoughts lead to feelings, which is how I would describe "consciousness." Consciousness is the thing that trails along.

In 1997 you did a wonderful black painting that is called *The History of the Heart*. And that's a particular name for one painting, but if I were to say that your whole trajectory as an artist has been painting the history of the heart, would that be pretty close to what the gig's been about?
I love it. It's a little bit sentimental and maybe slightly trite, but the thing that's interesting is that my best paintings are about the things that an artist refuses to talk about. Once you get put through the system, your way of talking and interacting changes. If I said certain things to you as a critic, you would laugh me out of the room. For example, I wanted to paint black Monet paintings. I got fascinated with just one water lily and I wanted to paint it in a different way. I wanted to contemporize the environment, which was darker to me because of pollution and environmental disasters. So it's not these pretty ponds anymore: it's messy, dark, black ponds. But they still had reflections; they still could be beautiful. So that's the lyrical and decorative side of my work. Then I feel there is a much tougher, more conceptual and idea-oriented side to my work, and these paintings go from one to the other. Some are really tough and others are very soft. But it would be comical to ask, "What's wrong with making beautiful, decorative paintings that are about spirituality and love?" Trust me, you're not allowed to say that in the art world.

My sense is that beauty is more accepted now. It's no longer the word that can't speak its name.
But you can't talk about spirituality. You can't say something is "transcendental." That's Ab Ex stuff and it's all used up.

But words like "sublimity," "radiance" and "immanence" inescapably come to mind when I look at your work. I don't have any problem describing your work as "sublime."
It's too vague. It's like me saying, "What I'm really looking for in a painting, and the paintings that I like the best, are the ones that have soul." What exactly do I mean by that? Well, to be honest, I actually don't know. I can see it and feel it, but I can't really describe it.

When Tintoretto painted light, he was painting God's grandeur and he could accept the larger spiritual connection. What do you connect with when you paint light?
They had an easier time because that's who they were and that was their belief system. Our belief system is based on doubt.

So your painting of light is an attempt to get at something you'll never get, that is always elusive?
That's the reason I keep painting. ▮