

Ross Bleckner *Quid Pro Quo*

Capitain Petzel, Berlin 10 September – 7 November

In the 1980s and 90s, Ross Bleckner was the painter-laureate of the AIDS epidemic, and one mightn't have been surprised to see his austere semiabstractions of the era, with their references to blood cells, revived to address another era of contagion. But, as the all-new canvases here demonstrate, Bleckner increasingly conflates human fragility with aesthetics, which means an emphasis on stylistic change. Here, among the first things one sees is *Burn Painting (Rooms Combined to Cheer)* (2020), set in a black-tiled space, maybe a shower room. A trio of flower stems heavy with blooms float unassisted like ghosts – one blackened, one multicoloured, one vanishing – and, to finish, Bleckner has assaulted the canvas with a blowtorch in a vicious, impatient update of the

floral memento mori. It's one of a half-dozen stylistic modalities essayed here.

Melancholy unifies the show, counterweighted with acceptance: in the centrepiece four-panel geometric abstraction *After/All/These/Years* (2020), concentric grey diamonds are steadily invaded by a single red one, moving from edge to centre, bespeaking ominous transformation over – the title suggests – a lifetime. *Divided by Zero* (2020) floats colourful, smeared horizontal stripes, seemingly on their way to somewhere, over a greyish void with a glowing white centre that feels about as close as these paintings get to hope. Another canvas namechecks spiritual guru Ram Dass, suggesting that Bleckner, in the solitude of his East Hampton studio,

has found a Buddhist path in coming to terms with the inexorable nature of change, and has looked for ways to make static images – and, more largely, a body of work – convey impermanence. For this reason, Bleckner's show is a downer that lightly exhilarates; it pivots repeatedly on sadness, using it as energy. In one of the most darkly lovely works, *Love and Letting Go II* (2020), a cornucopia of flower-heads disperses freely across a brownish canvas, most glowing and some dead, in a conflation of Dutch flower painting and the 'all-over' approach of midcentury American abstraction. As is typical with these paintings, the longer you look, the more consolatory colour rises out of darkness.

Martin Herbert



Untitled, 2019, oil on linen, 77 × 77 cm.
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