

**Art & Auction**  
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Bleckner at Mary Boone and Lehmann Maupin  
BY STEVEN VINCENT

NEW YORK—Ross Bleckner's paintings synthesize, sometimes uneasily, two major themes of modernism: high moral seriousness and ironic sensuality and artifice. Like those of the Symbolists a century ago, his earlier paintings transformed old-fashioned imagery—chandeliers, urns, bouquets—into nostalgic meditations on memory and loss. Since the early 1990s, Bleckner has moved from objects to decorative, biomorphic patterns made up of dots and flowers to convey an urgent melancholy.

In his most recent paintings, showing at the Mary Boone Gallery (745 Fifth Avenue) and at Lehmann Maupin (39 Greene Street) through December 19, the artist's urgency reveals itself as a concern about mortality, evidenced in representational depictions of cells, corpuscles and protozoic creatures. Bleckner describes this as the "molecular structure that lies beneath the skin of my images." In muted colors, the large-scale works, priced at \$90,000 to \$135,000, resemble a series of petri dishes, each containing strikingly beautiful, abstract life-forms.

*Overexpression*, shown left, initially resembles mossy stones in a streambed; on closer inspection, the shapes reveal themselves as cells—at least one of which appears to be carcinogenic. "I'm concerned with mutation," Bleckner says, "and the idea of something beautiful, like a cell, mutating into something treacherous." Indeed, the painting is disturbing and mesmerizing, like a portentous medical report.

For this viewer, that portent is AIDS. But Bleckner also sees his work as addressing other issues: diseases that come with aging and, ultimately, death—in effect, what baby boomers have always felt exempt from. "I want to deal with the beauty and fragility of our lives—how vulnerable we are," he says. The Symbolists, in their time, were fascinated by the aesthetics of mortality. Bleckner, carrying on that tradition, presents us with a bracing memento mori for our times.