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ROSS BLECKNER
Lehmann Maupin/ Mary Boone Gallery

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The mainstream of today's taste in abstraction calls for allover patterns rather than, say, a figure/ground dichotomy (too stodgy) or a single-color field (too academic), a highly refined sense of surface, and the kind of untouched-by-hands technique that inspires wonder. People these days like their abstraction impure, for instance, if as an image it echoes some previous stylistic phenomenon (whether emotionally charged or just piquantly quotidian) or suggests an origin in some other medium, like TV or photography. Such associations allow for overtones of nostalgia without breaking the barrier of cool.

This style originated, pretty much, with Ross Bleckner's work of the 80's, and it has been adopted in varying degrees by a wide swathe of younger painters. Two concurrent shows of his recent work suggests that now Bleckner in turn seems to have been spurred by the challenge of his young admirer-competitors to push himself to develop an even slicker, more eye-catching technique, which has (perhaps surprisingly) resulted in some of his strongest and most expansive paintings. Unlike the work of most of the young pretenders, though, the best of Bleckner's new paintings are huge - 10 by 9 feet - as if challenging the spirits of precursors like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko as well. And if Bleckner's intention was to prove that, contrary to all we've ever been taught, slick can also be sublime, he's pulled it off, at least intermittently.

The AbEx masters were often concerned with the establishment of a distance and its breakdown. Rothko spoke of seeking an effect of intimacy, and the same thing is implied in the notice Newman posted at one of his exhibitions: "There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance." The intention was not to overpower the viewer but to create a habitable space of color and light; the same is true with Bleckner, only his means are different: Instead of broad, open fields of individual colors, we have vast accumulations of tiny cellular dots, dark at their centers but shading into brightness at their edges like the shapes in a solarized photograph. In some of the paintings these cells simply clump together in such a way that their individual variations in size or ratios of light to darkness create zones of uneven density. More often, these tiny units are bunched up so as to

create a second order of organic structures, which may even have nucleus-like centers of a distinct color. In either case, the multiplicity of minute, irregular patches endows the embracing pictorial field with a strong feeling of mobility and plasticity, as well as an implicit tactility quite distinct from the more "optical" expanses of pure color espoused by Newman or Rothko.

The best of these paintings are near-grisailles, with just a single color, usually yellow, added to gray and white of varying shades. (Yellow is an interesting choice, since it evokes both gladdening associations with solar light and warmth, and dismal ones of illness and warning.) In the somewhat smaller paintings shown at Mary Boone Gallery, in which Bleckner threaded a number of colors through and around his cellular conglomerations, the effect was disturbingly arbitrary, and the cell imagery was articulated in too literal a fashion. And it was misguided to show some weak photo-works based on newspaper appropriations à la early Sarah Charlesworth (seen at Lehmann Maupin). Yet in some of his new paintings Bleckner achieves a unique blend of authority and sweetness, reaffirming the scope of his project by continuing to change while remaining true to his beginnings.