

OKTP

## ROSS BLECKNER

04.01.11

**R**oss Bleckner's work moves between representational and abstract, sometimes in the same piece. He is unafraid of traditional subjects, like flowers, and explodes them into maps of the moment of change. Flower to firework to abstraction. Recently he became the first artist named Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations. He worked with young people painting in Uganda to express their stories.

—*Kenneth Caldwell*

**Paulson Bott Press:** Tell me about going to Uganda.

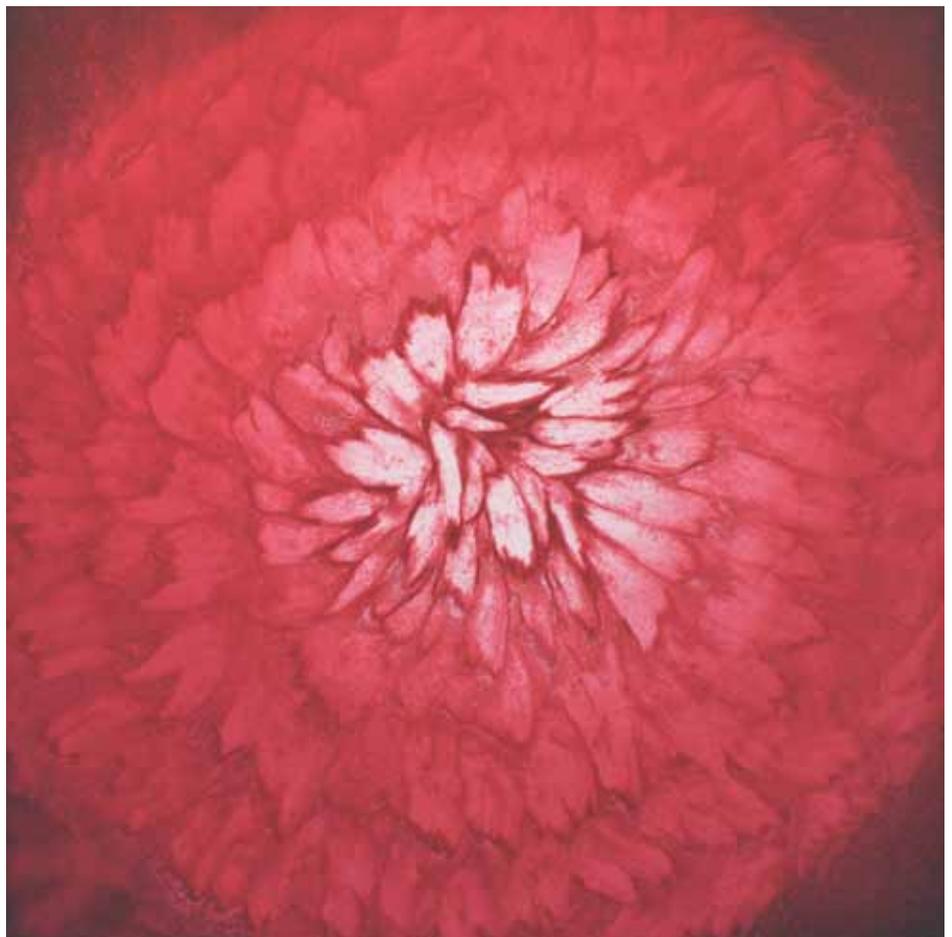
**Ross Bleckner:** The UN asked me to help them with the rehabilitation of former child soldiers and sex slaves. The UN wants to bring attention to the issue of human trafficking.

**Q:** Had they ever approached a visual artist before to serve as a goodwill ambassador?

**A:** No. They wondered if there was any way that art could help in their rehabilitative efforts. And I thought that, in terms of the kids telling their stories and expressing themselves, it could be very useful.

**Q:** Did the experience influence the way you want to tell your stories?

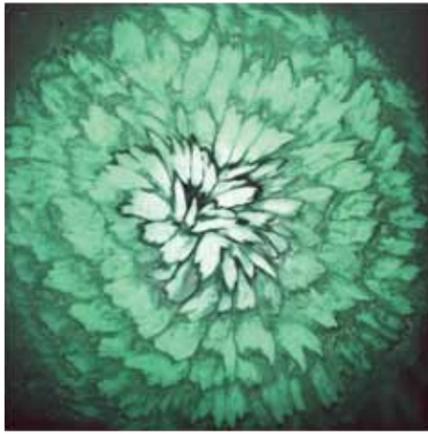
**A:** Why does anyone tell a story? It has something to do with faith—faith that



(above) **(ON) GATHERING, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
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(left) Ross Bleckner in the Paulson Bott studio.



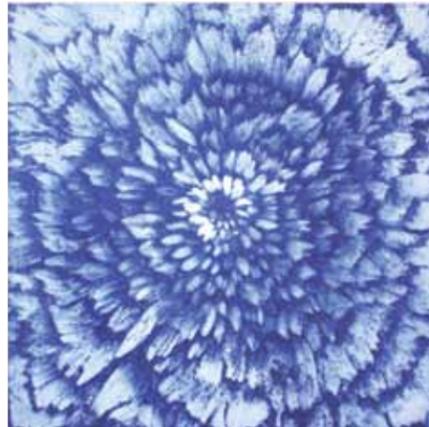
(left) **(ON) DEDICATING, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



(right) **(ON) BLESSING, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



(left) **(ON) SPEECH, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



(right) **(ON) MERIT, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



(left) **(ON) TRANSLATION, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
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(right) **(ON) SURRENDER, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



(left) **(ON) LEADING OUR LIVES, 2010**, Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



(right) **(ON) OTHER'S GOOD QUALITIES, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40

the universe has meaning, that our little human lives are not irrelevant, that what we choose to say or do matters.

**Q:** The last time we chatted three years ago, we were talking about flowers and their meditative quality, which is quieting. But going to Uganda is not quieting.

**A:** There's no real difference between what's quieting and what's disquieting.

**Q:** There's no real difference?

**A:** I think that the path to helping and knowing yourself is really helping and knowing others.

**Q:** So did that experience have impact on the kind of work you're doing?

**A:** It makes you realize that life is very fragile, very arbitrary, in the sense that there's not that much time to be wasted. It helps you to understand people more, to understand different points of view, and that helps me be more expansive with my ideas and imagery so that the work can be more approachable.

**Q:** More immediate?

**A:** Less mediated, more direct.

**Q:** Does this have to do with seeing these kids express themselves?

**A:** Yes. It's just their experience, their ability to express themselves, how they direct their energy, the sanctity of their creativity.

**Q:** Are there specific images that you found yourself working with since going to Uganda?

**A:** My work explores a shifting perception between interior and exterior, the kind of negotiated space between being here and not being here, that arbitrariness, whether it's a flower or light.

**Q:** I've seen some images of clocks in your recent work.

**A:** A lot of my paintings now have to do with time, and the kind of fragmentary quality of movement, again, but more as it relates to the ever-present ticking away.

**Q:** Is that a more recent concern?

**A:** No, that's always been something I'm concerned with, maybe a little more concerned with now that I'm getting older. It comes from the meditation paintings, the idea of time connecting and moving apart.

**Q:** In these exploratory prints, I see a number of flower-like images.

**A:** I use the flowers as a kind of starting form; they're more like abstract flowers. They're representations of things moving, things alive, then fading. And they also have so much geometry. They have a lot of things going on, formally and metaphorically. The clocks are like a commemoration of a flower.

**Q:** What about the images that look like fireworks?

**A:** They relate to etchings of flowers. Again, it's that transformation of an image of nature into a kind of cultural trope. It has to do with consciousness. It's like that place between, where things become one thing and lose their identity and become another thing. In art, that's what abstraction is, that place where those changes can occur.

I am trying to capture the moment of change, where one thing could actually become this other thing that you hadn't thought about before.

**Q:** Let's talk about what you do here at Paulson Bott Press. Do you erase a lot of what you do on these plates?

**A:** I do. I like the pentimento, chiaroscuro, the layered evidence.

Like they have a past. They have a life. I like the old-fashioned thing here. It's like a couple of hippies from the 1960s doing etchings. No one does that anymore.

**Q:** You mean everyone's all technology?

**A:** Yeah, it's very sweet. I feel like I'm in a time machine when I come back here.

**Q:** In working with the plates, is there something you do here that's unlike what you do when you're back at home working with paintings?

**A:** All the processes here, I don't do any of these things. I don't know what they're talking about. There are ways you erase a painting, but when it comes to the actual physicality of working in etching, it's interesting, because it's accumulative. No matter what you do, there are traces someplace.

**Q:** So when you erase, you are actually adding?

**A:** Yes, you're adding the erasure. That's what I like about it. You're always layering and taking away, and it's always showing, even if only in parts.

**Q:** With printing, are you plotting the result, or is it more improvisational?

**A:** It's both. It's almost like that thing with sculpture, like it's in the plate, but you just don't see it yet. So you start with something, and then you play around. It's a lot about light and dark, where the light is and where the dark is. I like that.

This time I really closed in on the flower image so that they became like spirals, like abstract versions of themselves. They are a vehicle to express light and dark. ✱

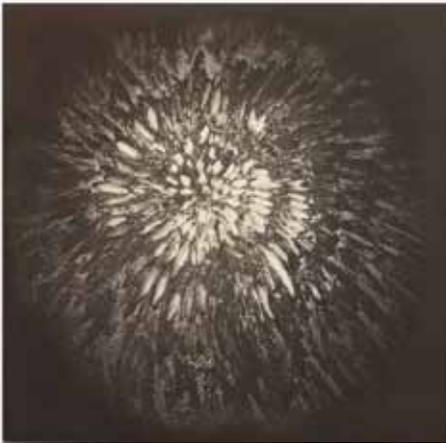


PAULSON BOTT  
PRESS

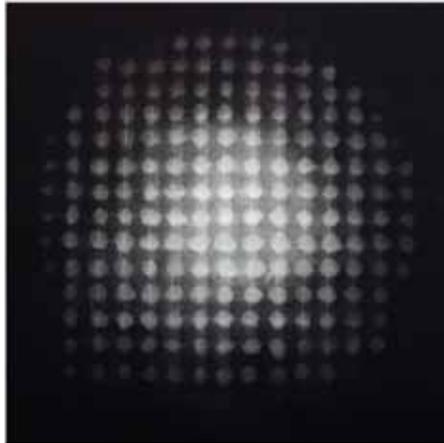
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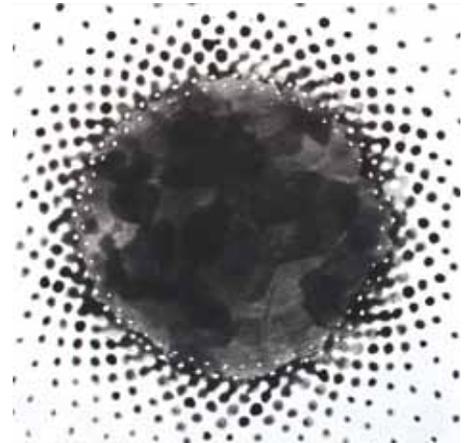
DESIGN: MICHAEL OSBORNE DESIGN



**(ON) SHADOW, 2010**  
Color Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



**(ON) ECLIPSED, 2010**  
Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
Edition of 40



**(ON) SPINNING, 2010**  
Aquatint Etching; 22 1/4" x 22"  
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