

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

the *arts* desk

Georg Baselitz, Gagosian Gallery/British Museum
Late self-portraits after de Kooning and early graphic work confronting the legacy of Germany's recent past

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'Willem raucht nicht mehr', 2013, from Farewell Bill at Gagosian Gallery
© Georg Baselitz; photo Jochen Littkemann; courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Georg Baselitz, the veteran German artist who likes to bait, provoke and raise hackles, most recently with an interview in *Der Spiegel* in which he said women artists couldn't paint (he mentioned the few exceptions, which was generous of him), is enjoying a triple billing in London.

His new paintings at the Gagosian Gallery adopt the Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes and bright palette of Willem de Kooning, while the British Museum displays prints from the early Sixties and Seventies, alongside the graphic works of five postwar German contemporaries. The third outing opens this week at the Royal Academy with a selection of 16th-century Renaissance and Mannerist chiaroscuro woodcuts from Baselitz's personal collection, a collection that's had a big influence on the artist's own style and printmaking technique.

The Gagosian's display, *Farewell Bill*, is part de Kooning homage, part wildly witty riff. Due to the hugeness of the paintings, it takes a while to see how the loose, fat brushstrokes in each of the 15 canvases coalesce to form an upside-down head, true to Baselitz's signature inversions. Though they're easier to see in reproduction, you won't necessarily detect these sad-eyed, bubble-gum-pink cartoonish heads when you're up close to the real paintings – unless of course

you've read about them beforehand – so this actually feels a bit like a spoiler.

Part of the original point of adopting his inversions was to allow the viewer to see the paintings as a dynamic surface of marks rather than as merely descriptive. In other words, to present them as paintings, in which formal relationships are played out, rather than as illustrative pictures. This was a time, in the late Sixties, when abstract painting was still the dominant force in Europe.

Baselitz's unique method of training our gaze may still be seen by many to be little more than a gimmick, but it's one that works: it does what he wants it to do, while allowing the work to retain a foothold in the world outside the artist's studio. This in turn has allowed him to explore elements of German identity and Germany's recent past and its continuing legacy. Baselitz was born and grew up in up in East Germany, to a father who'd been a member of the Nazi Party. As a young adult, the prevailing artistic culture was Socialist Realism. Being kicked out of art school for "political immaturity" prompted his move to the West in 1958, three years before the Wall went up. Baselitz not only encountered a very different sort of painting there, but was soon to encounter a formative exhibition: the work of the Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock and de Kooning, had a profound impact.

But Baselitz is also an artist deeply rooted in German experience. And as for his figure inversions, however effective as an initial means of concentrating an appreciation on gesture and surface, this doesn't mean that such a distinctive trope doesn't eventually fall into the trap of appearing gimmicky. It does. But I've come to think that this, too, is part of Baselitz's complex relationship with his work. It's deeply serious, yet aggressively mocking. It's mock-heroic, yet emotionally fraught. It's heavy with the weight of history, yet, unlike the work of Anselm Kiefer, it's lightened by tremendous wit. One looks at a Baselitz and finds all those oppositions and more – and one no more so than the opposition between abstraction and figuration.

The Farewell Bill paintings – even the title of the exhibition is comic-book jokey, yet guilelessly tender – are, in fact, self-portraits. They are rather gormless, goonish, blank-eyed self-portraits in which Baselitz is seen in a white baseball cap clearly bearing the slogan Zero. He has told the story of how he once went into a shop and noticed a baseball cap with the word Zero on it and was rather taken by that. Zero happens also to be the name of his paint supplier, while the phrase "Zero Hour" (Stunde Null) marks the immediate aftermath of Germany's capitulation in the Second World War.

But whatever the genesis of the Zero of the paintings, it also suggests that they may even be read as a kind of memento mori – not just a belated farewell to a spiritual mentor but a self-reflective meditation on the artist's own death as he settles into his eighth decade. The presence of the artist buried beneath the jaunty chaos of paint becomes itself a metaphor.

At the Print Rooms of the British Museum there are two related exhibitions. The first is a room containing works on paper by Baselitz alongside those of Gerhard Richter, Blinky Palermo, Markus Lüpertz, AR Penck and Sigmar Polke, each an East German who ventured across the border to make a life and career for himself, while the second room focuses on works by Baselitz alone. Here one gets a deeper sense of Baselitz as a German artist, particularly through his ironically named series "Heroes" (also called A New Type) of drawings and woodcuts – a print medium associated in Western art with German art and its more expressive, "primitivist" tendencies – of the mid-Sixties.

We encounter the lone, distorted figure of the German soldier in a devastated landscape. (Partisan, 1965). He is seen falling, his outstretched arms rigid and elongated. Or else he is mutilated, and, in one drawing, he's apparently masturbating. Other drawings depict farm animals that resemble sketches from the early Northern Renaissance: tethered oxen, dogs strung up by their hind legs, creatures that appear alarmed or simply unsettled.

There is one monstrous yet clearly pathetic creature who appears to be half man, half slug, with its slug's head bent in sorry abjection (Untitled, 1965). Then there are jagged linocuts of flying eagles, that heraldic bird of the German Empire and of Nazi Germany. There's one that's barely decipherable, splattered on a flag in the colours of the German Democratic Republic.

The 90 or so prints in this exhibition are from the private collection of Count Christian Duerckheim, a German collector who was forced with his family, as a child, to flee Saxony as the Russians marched west in the winter of 1945. Thirty-four have been given as a gift to the British Museum. These politically charged yet deeply personal works are a powerful addition to the museum's graphic holdings.