In 1958 Georg Baselitz, then a 20-year-old art student recently arrived in West Berlin from East Germany, attended a touring exhibition of contemporary American painting staged at his university. “Until then I had lived first under the Nazis, and then in the GDR,” he explains. “Modern art just did not occur so I knew almost nothing. Not about German expressionism, dadaism, surrealism or even cubism. And suddenly here was abstract expressionism. Paintings by Pollock, De Kooning, Guston. Still and many others, in the very buildings where I took classes every day. It was overwhelming. And not just for me. Even the professors had not seen this sort of work before.”

Baselitz recalls that the artist he most admired from the exhibition was Jackson Pollock, but the one he understood best was Willem de Kooning, “because he was European”. It was a distinction that would characterise his wider response to the show, and point towards the idiosyncratic road his career would take.

“The exhibition was a great shock not just because of the art,” he says, “but also because while we knew that the British, the French and the Russians had something like culture, we didn’t expect it from the Americans. For us the Americans were just show-offs who had absolutely nothing to offer intellectually. But now they had not only won the war, they also had the culture. This show was meant as an educational event for us misguided Germans, after which art, and artistic society, was meant to find the correct way. And most of my fellow students really did take something from the American exhibition and became integrated into the entire thing.”

But for Baselitz the show marked the beginning of a different path. “I had to make a decision what to do with this new information. I knew that we had lost the war, and that we were lost. And I now also realised that I was not welcome in this culture because I was not a modern person. What I wanted to do was something that totally contradicted internationalism: I wanted to examine what it was to be a German now. My teachers were the first to tell me that I was wrong. They said it was anachronistic. We had lost the war, but now we were free and liberated and there were wonderful times ahead in a wonderful world. But I disagreed. I had another view.”

In truth Baselitz had always been going his own way. He had been forced out of East Germany after being accused by the authorities of “political immaturity” at his first art school. Five years after arriving in the west, his debut gallery show attracted the attention of the police and he was fined for displaying an obscene picture that apparently depicted a masturbating dwarf. In the years since, both Baselitz’s art (a 1980 Venice biennale sculpture was accused of representing a Hitler salute) and his comments (last year he was quoted in an interview claiming that women artists “simply don’t pass the test”), have caused controversy. But now, over half a century after that Berlin exhibition, and his refusal to join in with the artistic orthodoxy, Baselitz has returned to Willem de Kooning in an exhibition entitled Farewell Bill, which opens in the Gagosian Gallery in London this week.

The new paintings are a marked departure from recent works. Described as Remixes, these involved a riffing - apparently at great speed - on some of his most renowned previous paintings, and were greeted by a decidedly muted critical reaction. In contrast the De Kooning paintings - part self-portraits part homage - are large and attentively worked and, in a rare synchronicity of timing, form just one of three exhibitions in London over the next few months that feature different aspects of Baselitz’s career. In
March the Royal Academy will stage
Renaissance Impressions: Chiaroscuro Woodcuts from Baselitz’s own
collection, an important influence
on both his style and subject matter.
And Germany Divided: Baselitz and
His Generation has just opened at the
British Museum, featuring works
on paper from 1960 to the late 70s
from the collection of Count Christian
Duerckheim, who has recently
donated to the museum a significant
quantity of work by Baselitz, as well as
by other German artists such as Markus
Lüpertz, Sigmar Polke and
Gerhard Richter.

All three shows cast light on Baselitz
as simultaneously an international
artist and an intensely German artist,
reflecting the way his place on the
global scene is always linked to his
own past. “The German title of the De
Kooning show is ‘Willem raucht nicht
mehr’,” says Baselitz, speaking in his
vast lakeside studio, designed by
superstar architects Herzog & de
Meuron, just outside Munich. “It
literally translates as ‘Willem no longer
smokes’, which also means in German
‘is no longer alive’.” The individual
painting titles are anagrammatic variations
on this phrase. “Sometimes
they sound like children’s language,
or sometimes they sound like old
German,” he says, but as the catalogue
essay notes, you might need to
understand the Saxon dialect of his
birthplace to get all the references.
This is a very typical touch from an
artist who says: “While I have always
moved around a lot, I’ve always taken
materials from that place with me.
That’s been important.” One of the
most important of those materials he
carried around is his own name.

Baselitz was born Hans-Georg
Kern in 1938 in the Saxon town of
Deutschbaselitz. As an art student in
West Berlin he adopted the name of his
home town, where his father was a
primary school teacher and Nazi party
member, and from where Baselitz can
remember seeing Dresden burning in
the distance after the firebombing of
1945. A few weeks after that event his
family were sheltering in the basement
of a building just outside the town
when it was hit by artillery. During
a pause in the shelling — “which we
thought was a ceasefire, but was in fact
just a breakfast break” — his mother
loaded a handcart and set out with
her children to escape the Russians
advancing from the east. Smoke was
still coming out of Dresden’s destroyed
buildings as they passed through the
city, just one family among thousands
of people trekking on foot across the
country. “We wanted to get to Bavaria
because we were told that the
Americans were there. But we only
made it to a village just to the south of
Dresden when the Russians arrived.”

By the time he was a teenager it was
clear that Baselitz was not fitting into
the GDR system and, after being
expelled from art school, he effectively
became an economic refugee. “When
I stopped being a student I stopped
getting vouchers that would allow
me to buy groceries. I was told if I
worked in industry for a year I could
return to art school as I would by then
have the right mindset. But I knew
that would destroy me and so I chose
to go to the west.”

He describes himself as very
“impatient” when he arrived in
West Berlin. “I wanted to see results
immediately and didn’t start out
reasonably, I started out radically.”
He wrote manifestos, one of which
culminated in the line “All writing is
crap.” He found inspiration in the
Prinzhorn Collection of art made by
the inmates of a mental institution —
some of which had figured in the Nazi
Degenerate Art exhibitions — and he
embraced the psychologically extreme
work of Antonin Artaud. Although he
says it wasn’t his intention to upset
people, when his painting The Big
Night Down the Drain was seized by the
police in 1967 he also realised “it was
fun to do something that people
would be upset about. But I also wanted to do
something extraordinary and serious
and I felt very privileged to have the
artist’s power to contradict. You feel
like you are the founder of a new
religion, even if your congregation
is only your wife and kids.”

Baselitz had married Elke
Kretzschmar in 1962 and they have
two sons. He says that throughout
most of the 60s “the chances for an
artist, let alone an artist like me, to
impose yourself and to make a living
from your art was nil”. But during
this period his art made remarkable
progress. Rejecting the orthodoxy of
what was called tachism - the Euro-
pean version of abstract expressionism
- he not only introduced figures into
his work, but began to use specific
German archetypes, motifs and
folklore. But Baselitz’s shepherds,
woodsmen, hunters and so on were
not conventionally heroic - although
the paintings would later be called the
Helden (heroes) series. Rather they
were bedraggled, broken and
shambolic figures rendered in messily
desolate landscapes.

“In hindsight I think those pictures
are complete pieces of art. But at the
time it felt very chaotic and mixed up.
I thought ‘this can’t be all’ and I had to
come up with new ideas.” He set out
on a series of strategies to disrupt both
the work, and his making of the work.
He painted with the canvas on the
floor. (The floor of his studio closely
resembles Jackson Pollock’s on Long
Island, with the difference that Baselitz
doesn’t insist that you wear protective
shoes.) Then he started to “fracture”
paintings into sections, with obvious
echoes of a divided Germany, before he
adopted the technique for which he is
best known today, painting his motifs
upside down - which directs both him,
and the viewers, attention to the
abstract aspects of the figurative work.
He began to use his hands instead of
brushes and when he moved to
sculpting in wood he opted for the
crude attack of the chainsaw over the
precision chisel.

It was the row over his wooden
sculpture at the 1980 Venice
biennale that first brought him to an
international audience. “I was in the
German pavilion with Anselm Kiefer,
another provocative artist, and it never
occurred to me that my sculpture
was doing a Hitler salute. But when a
German TV channel reported on it they
played the “Horst Wessel Song” [the
Nazi anthem] to accompany their
story. It was outrageous. But within a
week I was getting approaches from all
over the world to collaborate.”

He says just being a German artist
in the wider world could be contentious. “You sometimes felt that people were standing over you. Some of the prejudices that existed towards Germans were justified, but there were many prejudices. My work was also not really American-oriented, as Richter’s is for example, and is instead very German and sometimes a bit obscene. Add that to being a kind of loud artist and then you will have encounters. Many of my advisers, especially my wife, say that I am too bold. But what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to make statements that are politic? Am I supposed to be friendly? That’s just not who I am.”

No surprise then that he hasn’t changed his mind about women artists. “Following the uproar I did think about this and it is a fact. I used to be a professor and 80% of my students were women. So there is a possibility for women and girls to study art, but they are less successful than the men. You can count and the numbers will prove me right.” And he also casts a jaundiced eye over contemporary Germany, claiming it is rife with “injustice, vanity and dominance by the politicians” and hasn’t yet properly dealt with its own history in terms of the Third Reich and the GDR. In 1990 he was not surprised to learn that the Stasi held a file on him, but was shocked that it wasn’t for his correspondence with artists in the east when he was an adult, but his activities when at school. He is equally disillusioned with the stream of public intellectuals, such as Günter Grass, who took decades to acknowledge their membership of the SS. “These people dominated our culture. They were role models. They were mentioned in school textbooks. It is very depressing. It shows that no one is really free.”

But for all his provocations about women artists, two of them played important roles in his return to De Kooning. “I saw Tracey Emin’s drawing at the biennale. I like her very much, and as I looked at her drawings I thought here was De Kooning. I had also seen De Kooning in a Richard Prince exhibition at the Guggenheim. Cecily Brown, another artist I like, also gets inspiration from De Kooning. This was all very interesting. When I look at the new art scene I find there is a lot of direct occupation — that is, not a copy, but it seems as if the art of the past has become the foundation of the present. And so I said I’m going to paint like De Kooning.”

Baselitz turned 76 last month and still works every day in the studio: “I used to be able to paint all day and all night, but these days it is only for three hours in the morning. Working the wood is especially hard work, but two trunks have just been delivered from the Black Forest, so there is more to do.” His current work in progress is a series of six, four-metre high, nude self-portraits. “Every now and again I do a self-portrait, and always in quite a strange manner. There are many models for the nude self-portrait: Lucian Freud, Schiele, Stanley Spencer, whose painting I don’t like, but I did see a pencil nude portrait that was interesting. In a way it is a move away from De Kooning, I knew I had to do something enormous and silly.”

Farewell Bill is at the Gagosian Gallery, London WC1, until 29 March. gagosian.com. Germany Divided: Baselitz and His Generation is at the British Museum, London WC1, until 31 August. britishmuseum.org. Renaissance Impressions: Chiaroscuro Woodcuts from the Collections of Georg Baselitz and the Albertina, Vienna is at the Royal Academy, London W1, from 15 March. royalacademy.org.uk.