

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# The Daily Telegraph

## 'You can seduce with colour'

The great German artist Georg Baselitz speaks to **Chris Harvey** about surviving the Nazis and turning art upside down

It is February 13 and the great German painter Georg Baselitz is standing in the Gagosian Gallery in London's King's Cross surrounded by a series of large upside-down self-portraits in pinks, whites and yellows with dramatic smears of black. He's an imposing figure: bulky, powerful-looking in a grey suit with a red silk handkerchief in the top pocket. His close-cropped hair is white against a whiter skull. Sunlight pours into the gallery. It is a beautiful day. It is February 13, the anniversary of the Bombing of Dresden.

Baselitz is 76 now. The angry provocateur who helped to forge a new identity for German painting after the Second World War is still taking risks; the painter who saw works from his first solo exhibition in 1963 confiscated by the authorities for their grotesque sexual imagery is still challenging the viewer. The new self-portraits are part of his exhibition at the Gagosian - *Farewell Bill*, in the artist's words a "declaration of love" for the paintings of Willem de Kooning. It is one of three exhibitions of the German artist's work and influences in London this spring.

Baselitz's journey has been extraordinary, from the time at the end of the war when he was a seven-year-old boy sheltering in the basement of the village school of Deutschebaselitz as the Russians closed in. He was still Hans-Georg Kern then (later he replaced his name

with that of his home village). He tells me about that day.

"They bombed the building to pieces, on top of us. And then we had breakfast - it's funny how people do that; then we gathered our belongings - my mother and the children (my father was a soldier) - and we joined the trek, heading with the refugees towards the southwest. We thought the Americans were coming to Bavaria, we wanted to get there. But it was too far. We walked through the bombed-out Dresden - it was the end of February,

***'I wasn't drunk when I did those paintings,' says Baselitz, 'I was very sober'***

and we saw the destruction; it stank and it was ugly."

The scenes in Dresden would find their way into his work. "My paintings, the ones I remember, are of course unpleasant paintings, because the degree of destruction I've seen, which I've been surrounded by, is no longer comprehensible. It was so absolute. Today you'd ask: how could it even happen? But that was my time."

Baselitz's work from the Sixties includes images of body parts, bloodied stumps of feet, disembodied

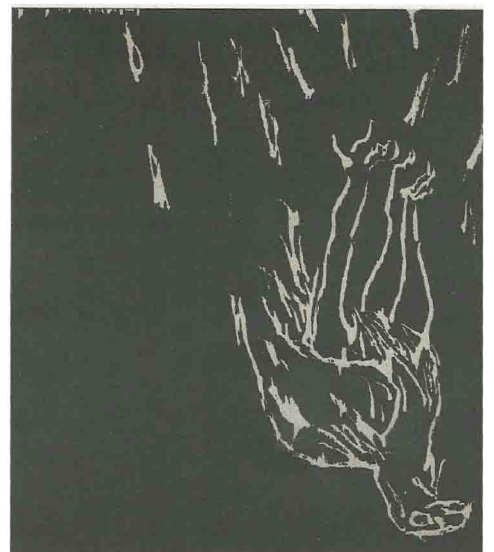
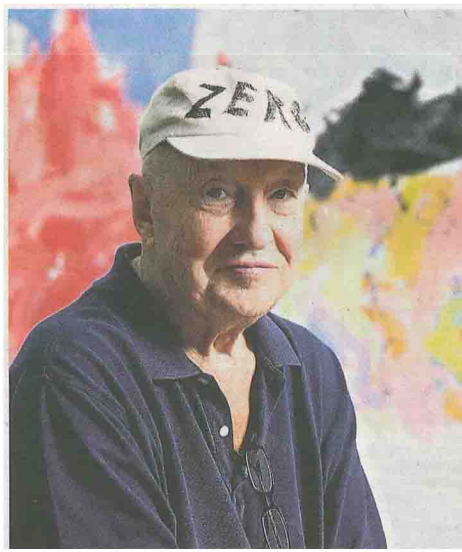
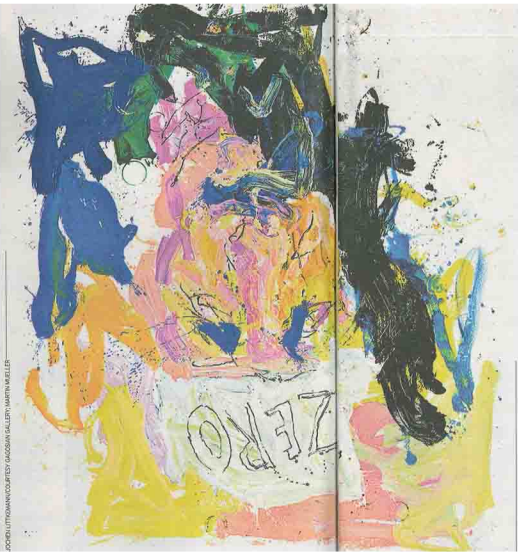
upright hands with their fingers frozen into the earth. Some of these are in the British Museum's new exhibition, *Germany Divided: Baselitz and his Generation*, which sets the artist alongside five contemporaries: Gerhard Richter, Blinky Palermo, Markus Lüpertz, A R Penck and Sigmar Polke.

Baselitz remembers how it felt to be working when all sense of artistic tradition had been destroyed. "There was an insane pressure to simply do something. You didn't have time, you couldn't try this or that, instead you had to do something, had to, and the chance of succeeding didn't exist. There were no galleries, nobody wanted paintings."

All of the artists featured in *Germany Divided* grew up in the Soviet Zone. Baselitz's family set up home in Kamenz in East Germany. Baselitz remembers their life as "a patchwork existence", from the shoes they wore to the food they ate. This patchwork approach found its way into his paintings.

"Everyone nowadays has all the information they need. I had nothing, we had nothing. There were no libraries that hadn't been cleansed, no museum that hadn't been cleansed, there were no teachers that hadn't been cleansed - everything was always linear, politically linear, ideologically linear - and you had no choice. You had to be content with what you had. And I was always fighting it."

Baselitz was expelled from the GDR's Academy of Art in East Berlin in the mid-Fifties, for "political immaturity", so he applied to the School of Art in West Berlin, and relocated there - still possible in the



**Inverse proportions:** Above, a Baselitz self-portrait (2013) and extreme right, his 1981-82 woodcut 'Eagle'

days before the Berlin Wall. He said later that he had been "thrown out" of the GDR, that he still believed in socialism and was shocked by the West's obsession with cleanliness and consumption. But when I ask him now if he feels anything of value was lost with the fall of the Soviet Union, he responds vehemently. "Absolutely not. Nothing is lost, it is a huge gain. It was a terrible time."

He has strong opinions on Nobel Prize-winner Günter Grass, who kept quiet about his involvement with the Waffen SS and opposed reunification. "There are quite a few intellectuals in Germany, most of all Günter Grass, who I hate because they're defending something [East Germany] out of pure selfishness, and that's why I don't like them, and especially as they have retouched their past, or rather concealed it. This conflict has not been resolved in Germany."

Among the images in the British Museum's exhibition is a Baselitz woodcut, *Eagle*, from 1981-82, in which the bird that is the heraldic symbol of Germany (and of the Nazi regime) appears upside down, apparently falling, one of many representations he has made of eagles. Baselitz began inverting his paintings in 1969, seeking not merely greater abstraction but to disrupt the viewing experience.

In the woodcut's black expanses, however, lies an explanation for his latest exhibition. "Last year I created a group of paintings which were

entirely black," he says. "I mixed red, yellow, blue, green with black to such an extent that there remained only a tiny amount of colour. And the guideline for these paintings was my *Eagle* from 1974.

"The series turned out great and everything was fine, but the public thought that this was my final work – the final work – and that this was a glimpse of something like the afterworld. They misunderstood. It was really only an experiment: how far can one push the boundaries in painting – boundaries which, for example, can make something visible or almost invisible.

"So I said, no misinterpretation, please, I'll do some self-portraits which are cheerful and optimistic. You create optimism through bright colours and through a very dynamic style, as de Kooning did."

The intense whites and pinks, he says, were not chosen randomly. "You can seduce with colour. But I use them calculatedly. When you mix complementary colours with white... you create harmony. I did this on purpose. I wasn't drunk when I did those paintings, I was very sober."

There is however an element in each, which, says Baselitz, comes not from de Kooning but "from my past", a very narrow "sub-painting" of a skull, which adds a different complexion to the mood. This skeletal framework also repeatedly traces the word "Zero" from the painter's cap. Zero is the company that supplies Baselitz's paint – they sent him the cap – but it also captures a sense of Germany's mythic past reduced to nothingness, and hints at mortality.

"I feel one shouldn't – at least not in my case – make assumptions about my state of mind through the paintings," says Baselitz. "I want to master paintings and I want to create concepts and I want to be strict about realising those concepts."

De Kooning's influence on Baselitz goes as far back as 1958. Baselitz shared a dealer with de Kooning in New York in the early Eighties, Xavier Fourcade, though the two artists never met. Fourcade "always brought de Kooning's latest paintings into my studio. Back then they cost \$300 each (about £150) and nobody wanted to buy them. And I said, 'Oh god, this is de Kooning going to pieces mentally, getting out of control, it is getting

more and more *clean* and less and less complicated' – that was my opinion back then. I have since changed it.

"Those late works, just as with Picasso's or many other artists' – show a biological weakness, maybe even a physical weakness. In de Kooning's case there is no more destruction, all his strokes are extremely deliberate and final and applied very uniquely. There is a very visible shift in his late work and one simply needs longer to understand that. I hadn't known, for example, that de Kooning was sick with Alzheimer's at the time."

There is no indication that the paintings of *Farewell Bill* will turn out to be late works of Baselitz. He appears vigorous and forceful when we talk, the provocateur still breaking through when I ask him if there are enough angry artists today. "Yes, mostly female artists," he says. Wasn't he quoted as saying that women artists couldn't paint? "That's why they're angry," he laughs, before enthusing about Cecily Brown, Joan Mitchell and Tracey Emin.

### ***He hates Günter Grass for defending East Germany out of 'pure selfishness'***

He does complain of a bad back from sitting so long, which is not surprising. His inverted paintings are not created upside down: he paints on the floor of his studio, and circles of paint pots and the occasional footprint can be seen in the works.

In another gallery room, though, there is a second set of self-portraits, painted in ink and watercolours, smaller, less explosively invigorating, much darker, in which the skull takes over. There is destruction in these images. The childlike, unfinished quality that gives Baselitz's work such force is here, too. One could almost imagine they were the work of a seven-year-old boy.

● Georg Baselitz: *Farewell Bill*, Gagosian Gallery until March 29

● *Germany Divided: Baselitz and His Generation*, British Museum, until August 31