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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Georg Baselitz: Raw Views of a Painful Past

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Georg Baselitz in his studio. Credit Martin Müller/Gagosian Gallery

LONDON — In the autumn of 1958, an East German art student ventured into an exhibition of American paintings and was staggered by what he saw. Hanging on wall after wall of a West Berlin academy were works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionists.

"I found those pictures so overwhelming, so totally unexpected, so different from the experience of my own world at the time that I felt totally desperate, because I thought I'd never stand a chance of doing well compared to those painters," Georg Baselitz recalled in an interview at the Gagosian Gallery here.

"The dimensions, to us, were just huge: an expression of freedom," Mr. Baselitz said, speaking through a translator. "Our canvases felt pathetic, tiny."

More than a half-century later, Mr. Baselitz carries that experience with him. Now 76, he is being honored with three London exhibitions: "Farewell Bill," a tribute to De Kooning is at Gagosian through March 29; "Germany Divided: Baselitz and His Generation," through Aug. 31 at the British Museum, features more than 40 of Mr. Baselitz's works on paper; and he has lent some 16th-century prints to the Royal Academy of Arts's "Renaissance Impressions: Chiaroscuro Woodcuts From the Collections of Georg Baselitz and the Albertina, Vienna," which runs from March 15 through June 8.

For much of his life, Mr. Baselitz has created work around one central theme: the pain of growing up in the ruins of Nazi Germany. He has produced raw and sometimes shocking art to express it.

His Gagosian show is full of large, jubilant canvases covered with messy swirls of bright paint that resemble 1970s de Koonings. Most are upside-down self-portraits in which the artist wears a baseball cap marked "Zero" — a reference to his brand of paint, but also, according to the catalog, to "Zero Hour," a phrase used in post-1945 Germany to indicate a clean slate.

"As a German, by definition, you're always linked to the Holocaust, linked to the Nazis," Mr. Baselitz said. He added: "I was only 7 when World War II was over. Yet people nowadays still associate my generation with the past."

Along with Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer, Mr. Baselitz is part of a group of German artists who "took it upon themselves to reinvent a broken culture," said Gordon VeneKlasen, a partner of the Michael Werner Gallery in New York, which represented Mr. Baselitz until 2008. Although Mr. Baselitz has never been an auction darling on the scale of Mr. Richter, he is an influential post-war painter. The Paris dealer Thaddaeus Ropac, who represents Mr. Baselitz in Continental Europe, said he could not imagine "any other artist who confronted Germany with its own past the way Baselitz did."

The past has never been absent from his work. Mr. Baselitz's father, a primary-school teacher who fought for Germany in the war and lost an eye, was banned from teaching in what became East Germany. Their relationship was tense. "If your father was a Nazi and a perpetrator, the problem between the two generations becomes even more serious," Mr. Baselitz said.

Expelled from his East Berlin art academy for being "sociopolitically immature," Mr. Baselitz transferred to West Berlin while the borders were still open. "I saw myself as an outsider, as somebody who had just come out of the woods," he said. "I felt this aggression: I didn't want to paint with paint, but with dirt, and to do things which were naughty and dirty."

He started to express this aggression. In 1963, he completed a painting of an ugly, masturbating male called ''Big Night Down the Drain.'' It was included in his first gallery show, which drew public attention, and was promptly confiscated (with another work) by the district attorney.

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In the late '60s, Mr. Baselitz started to develop what would become a trademark motif — depicting subjects upside down in a style that appeared both figurative and abstract.

"He found his perfect solution by inverting," said Stephen Coppel, the curator of the British Museum show. You recognized the work's subject, he added, but were also made to "look at the marks by which it was created." The British Museum show includes drawings and prints of upside-down figures, eagles and trees.

Notoriety came at the 1980 Venice Biennale, when Mr. Baselitz exhibited his first sculpture — a totemic figure with a raised arm — that some viewed as depicting Hitler. Since then, he has continued to sculpt as well as provoke.

Age has not made Mr. Baselitz less blunt. In January 2013, he told Der Spiegel that women "don't paint very well," though they excelled at disciplines such as science. The remarks caused a stir, with journalists, academics and women in the arts accusing Mr. Baselitz of sexism, accusations that have resurfaced on Twitter, along with the original interview.

Asked in the interview at the Gagosian here to comment, Mr. Baselitz replied that while "the most beautiful women are those created in art by men," female artists depicted unseemly subjects. The 17th-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi, for instance, showed men being "castrated and decapitated," he said, while contemporary artists like Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas made everyone, including women, "look extremely ugly."

"It could be that in the future things will improve," he concluded.

Norman Rosenthal — who organized a Baselitz retrospective at the Royal Academy in 2007, and ran the exhibitions program there at the time — said Mr. Baselitz was, like Pablo Picasso, someone who "doesn't care about being politically correct, cares about his own private, personal obsessions, and expresses them magnificently in painting and sculpture and printmaking."

Gagosian's London director, Stefan Ratibor, said the gallery had staged seven previous Baselitz exhibitions in New York, London and Rome.

"We wouldn't do a show on this scale if we weren't confident in his market," he said. "Of the artists we work with, he's one of the greats."